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Bruised Jonrowe exits Iditarod in Rohn; mushers limping in Nikolai after snowless trail

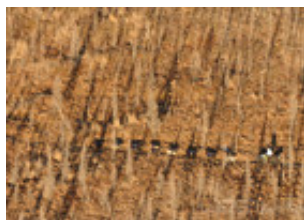
By KEVIN KLOTT

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A musher drives his dog team down the Dalzell Gorge out of the Rainy Pass checkpoint during the 2014 Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race on Monday, March 3. BOB HALLINEN — Anchorage Daily News | [Buy Photo](#)





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It's been a bumpy 24 hours on the Iditarod Trail. Here's what you need to know this morning: Fan favorite DeeDee Jonrowe is out of the race after a rough ride into Rohn. Limping race leader Martin Buser is taking his mandatory daylong break in Nikolai as other mushers, battered by the snowless trail, arrive dented and bruised. "It's a minefield out there," says former Yukon Quest champion Hugh Neff.

Our latest reports from the trail:

UPDATE 9:40 a.m. Tuesday:

From Casey Grove in NIKOLAI

More sled dog teams arrived here as dawn broke after the arrivals of Martin Buser and Nicolas Petit. Those included Hugh Neff, Aliy Zirkle, Jeff King and Aaron Burmeister. They told stories of a rough, bare trail through the Farewell Burn that banged up their sleds and their bodies.

"It's the roughest I've ever seen," said King, a 22-time race finisher and four-time winner.

King said he came upon a group of snowmachiners on the trail between Rohn and Nikolai trying to decide how they would get around a deep, wide hole. But the way the snowmachines were parked, they steered his team right into the hole, King said.

The dogs jumped over the hole, but the sled went in and slammed hard, King said.

"I thought I was screwed. I had a misshaped sled," King said.

Tossing snacks to her dogs, Zirkle described 30 miles of no snow going through the Burn. "No snow. Zip. Zero. None."

With rocks and stumps to catch on, Zirkle's brake and drag mat broke twice, she said, but she was able to fix them both times.

"You can't use your brake. You can't use your drag. So (the dogs) go too fast," Zirkle said. "I bit it a few times. More than a few times."

The bare ground was frozen so not as slow as one might think, but the obstacles were many, Zirkle said. Still, she made it through without serious injuries, at least nothing that caused her to limp around the checkpoint.

Others were not so lucky.

While Buser slept, race watchers are talking about his badly swollen ankle, which may be sprained. Buser is not alone in the injury department.

Burmeister said he crashed going down a hill 18 miles out of Rohn when his drag mat caught a stump. It

snapped a bolt on the mat, which flew up and hit his right leg, Burmeister said. The leg flew out, caught a tree and twisted backward, he said.

"It popped my knee out," he said, trying to stand on it. "It was blinding it hurt so bad. It brought me to tears. I couldn't move. I lost my breath. It was probably one of the most painful things I've ever experienced."

Fellow veteran musher Sonny Lindner gave Burmeister a wrap and they duct-taped it around his knee, Burmeister said. Without the makeshift brace, "every time I moved on it, it popped right out."

Burmeister was hoping someone could get a real brace to him from McGrath. "That would be a lifesaver. I'm desperate for it. It's really a shame. I think I got a winning team here."

Burmeister, like many others in Nikolai, worried about the field coming behind them, hoping mushers would not suffer tragedy.

Petit, whom several top mushers consider a threat to win, was one of the concerned. In the Nikolai school gym, where volunteers are serving breakfast, Petit went through a list of mushers, naming off people he hoped would scratch for their own good.

"I got one pretty busted knee and another pretty sore knee," Petit said. "I don't know when the part that hurt me happened."

As his sled jerked its way to Nikolai, Petit said, he kept banging into it. That broke his handlebar at one point, and he had to stop to fix it with two pieces of alder and duct tape.

You bumping into trees out there?" a kitchen worker asked.

"I mean, the whole forest is out there," Petit said.

"So you're hitting the whole forest?"

"It's hitting me!"

UPDATE 9:30 a.m. Tuesday:

Bruised Jonrowe, Fiedler scratch in Rohn

By Kevin Klott

Famous for taking its toll on mushers, the Dalzell Gorge this morning forced two of them to call it quits.

Iditarod veterans DeeDee Jonrowe and Linwood Fiedler both scratched in Rohn, and each cited the Dalzell Gorge as their reason for taking an early exit.

Jonrowe, a 60-year-old Willow musher who scratched for just the third time since she started racing the Iditarod in 1980, said in an Iditarod press release that she was "beat up physically in the Dalzell Gorge."

The press release indicated the Gorge was more unforgiving to the 60-year-old Fiedler. It said the Willow musher cited "physical injury from driving the Dalzell Gorge." This is Fiedler's fourth scratch in his last seven Iditarods.

UPDATE 8:30 a.m. Tuesday:

Snowless, bumpy Farewell Burn takes toll on Buser

By Kevin Klott

War stories of the snowless Farewell Burn are bound to surface this morning as mushers make their way into Nikolai, the first pit stop on the northern side of the Alaska Range.

Race leader Martin Buser is nursing a sprained ankle, according to lditarod.com, after his battle with frozen speed bumps, rocks and dirt for the last 70 miles. Despite the injury, he managed to build a 4 hour 27 minute lead over Girdwood's Nicolas Petit.

But a veteran pack of mushers led by Tok's Hugh Neff has arrived and looks to shake up the standings.

The group, which is composed of Neff, Aliy Zirkle of Two Rivers, Jeff King of Denali Park, Aaron Burmeister of Nenana, Sonny Lindner of Two Rivers and Mike Williams Jr. of Akiak, showed up in Nikolai within an hour of one another.

According to the GPS tracking devices, Paul Gebhardt leads the next pack of mushers bound for Nikolai this morning. The Kasilof musher was roughly 20 miles outside Nikolai when Williams checked in.

It was unclear this morning how badly Buser is hurt and whether the injury is serious enough to slow the surging race leader. Video posted by Iditarod Insider shows the musher removing his left sock to reveal a ring of purple bruises around the ankle early this morning shortly after arriving at the village checkpoint.

UPDATE 6:30 a.m. Tuesday:

Buser, Petit put snowless, grueling Farewell Burn behind them

By Kevin Klott

Nearly 70 miles of driving over gravel, rocks and frozen tussocks came to a welcome end early Tuesday morning for Iditarod leader Martin Buser.

The four-time winner of the 1,000-mile sled dog race said good riddance to the snowless Farewell Burn when he pulled into the tiny village of Nikolai on the northern side of the Alaska Range at 1:09 a.m. with all 16 of his dogs.

He completed the 70-mile run from Rohn to Nikolai in a grueling 11 hours and 24 minutes. By comparison, in a good snow year like last year, Aaron Burmeister, who was the first into Nikolai, posted a run time of 9 hours, 28 minutes.

Despite the terrain, which Buser described as "the most difficult [I've] ever seen," it's no surprise the Big Lake musher is keeping it all together.

"He's got a tough sled and he's a good driver," said Rohn Buser, Martin's son, who is sitting out this year's race.

Rohn's old man is so good that the 55-year-old, who hasn't won the Iditarod since 2002, has comfortably positioned himself ahead of the pack with possibly the worst trail conditions behind him.

Nearly five hours after parking in Nikolai, Buser made room for Girdwood musher Nicolas Petit, who checked in at 5:36 a.m. Petit, running his fourth Iditarod and trying to improve on last year's impressive sixth-place finish, completed the Rohn-to-Nikolai run 44 minutes faster than Buser did.

Chasing Buser and Petit are a string of veteran dog drivers that includes Hugh Neff, Aliy Zirkle, Aaron Burmeister, Jeff King, Michael Williams Jr. and Sonny Lindner.

On Saturday in Anchorage, King tried to think back to the most recent Iditarod when the Farewell Burn was snowless.

"I know there was a year when the burn was worse than it is now," he said. "It was one of the years that (Lance) Mackey won. The tussocks were so bad. It was the bowling ball-sized tussocks on the trail."

King was likely referring to the 2007 race, when Mackey, in search of his first Iditarod championship, famously lost one of his runners in the Dalzell Gorge and still maneuvered his sled across the snowless Burn.

As King recalled, it was one of the first years the Iditarod trail crew pulled a groomer behind one of its snowmachines. King said it did more harm than good.

"Some of those tussocks were cut off like a guillotine," the Denali Park musher said. "You may not see it in the photos, but those bowling balls are gone now. They've been beaten away and pounded down. They're just not there.

King, a four-time Iditarod winner, compared what humans have done to the Iditarod Trail to what the bison have done to the Buffalo Tunnels, a troublesome stretch of trail that begins after mushers leave Rohn.

"We have now walked and beaten (the Iditarod Trail) down so much that the bumps are mostly gone," King said.

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