

The Spell of the North
Yukon Arctic Ultra
Explore Magazine
By Bruce Masterman

It's one p.m. on Sunday, February 9, 2002, and hundreds of people have turned out in downtown Whitehorse to watch the start of the Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race. Snow-covered First Avenue bustles with activity as dozens of barking huskies and 23 anxious mushers prepare to hit the trail for the 20th running of the annual 1,600-kilometre trek to Fairbanks, Alaska. At two-minute intervals, teams of 14 dogs, each hauling sleds loaded with hundreds of pounds of gear, accelerate past the start line. Their bootie-clad paws churn up the snow while parka-clad mushers wave at the spectators who line both sides of the street.

As the last team disappears around a bend and the crowd begins to disperse, the announcer on the loudspeaker invites people to hang around for the start of a second race, a new winter race, this one involving people on bicycles and on foot. Only a few curious spectators remain, their interest perhaps fuelled by the same motivation as someone who slows to watch a car wreck. To most locals, anyone who challenges the Yukon wilderness in winter without a dog team or snowmobile is just plain nuts.

The first-ever Yukon Arctic Ultra has drawn 27 athletes from around the world. Eight of them are determined to travel a mind-blowing 480 kilometres through remote northern terrain in a maximum time of eight days. Another 19 have opted for the *easier* event, covering 160 kilometres in no more than three days. The trails awaiting them – the same ones being used by the Quest – are rugged, rollercoaster-like paths through forests, up and down ridges, and over frozen lakes and rivers. Frankly, the route *is* better suited to dogsleds than people power.

Layered in lightweight clothing, the runners pull plastic sleds stacked with 40 to 50 pounds of sleeping bags, food, clothing and other gear. Three cyclists stand astride similarly laden bicycles. As the anxious competitors shuffle toward the start line, race director Robert Pollhammer climbs a ladder and hangs his own plastic sign over the Yukon Quest banner that spans the street.

Suddenly, a woman staggers out of a nearby tavern and begins mixing with the athletes. She stumbles up to individual racers and interrogates them in a boozy slur: "Who are you? Where are you going?" Meanwhile, Pollhammer beams like a kid at Christmas, wishes the competitors well and then ponders the best way to start his race. He opts for a 30-second countdown on the public-address system. Only a few seconds into it, the tipsy local interjects with her own count, *sans* microphone but at equal volume:

"Ten, nine, eight...three, two, one. GO!" she yells.

Obediently, the racers move forward en masse, accompanied by a smattering of applause from the spectators. The competitors stroll down the street, following the urine- and poop-spotted trail over which the 300-plus racing dogs have just passed. The three cyclists strain to push their bikes through the soft snow. As far as dramatic race starts go, it's not exactly the green flag at Le Mans.

Pollhammer watches the last of his racers slowly disappear and then rolls up his plastic banner. His dream of putting on the inaugural Yukon Arctic Ultra has finally been realized. There is no turning back.

Blame it on Robert Service and Jack London. Over the decades, their odes to the Yukon and Alaska have been translated into dozens of languages and have fixed in the imaginations of millions the idea of a wild country where moose still outnumber people. Weaned on such tales, Europeans in particular (and Germans especially) have developed a moth-to-light-like attraction to North America's northern outposts, including the sprawling Yukon with its scant 32,000 people, two-thirds of whom live in the capital city of Whitehorse. They view this Great White North as the last frontier, where the men are men (and some of the women are, too), where hardy souls can still challenge themselves, and where survival is the reward for those who are prepared, fit and have a strong enough will to succeed. And they're willing to pay thousands of dollars and travel countless kilometres to sample this lifestyle for themselves.

In February 2002, a young German athlete came to Alaska to compete in the annual Iditasport, a 210-kilometre ski, bike and foot race that follows in the tracks of the Iditarod dogsled race between Anchorage and Nome. Robert Pollhammer developed infected shins early in the race but soldiered on thanks to copious doses of Ibuprofen and a determination to avoid coughing up the \$500 US evacuation fee. Afterwards, the Munich-based tourism marketing specialist figured that if he could survive that ordeal, he could do almost anything—including develop his own race in the Yukon, one even tougher than the event he had just barely finished. Thus was born the Yukon Arctic Ultra.

Despite the location, only three of the 27 athletes who have signed up for the first race are Canadian. Most of the rest are from Europe, including 11 from the United Kingdom, or the U.S. They have each paid anywhere from \$695 to \$1,235, plus travel and other expenses, to compete in a race in which a T-shirt is the only prize. In the end, they alone will be able to judge whether the German entrepreneur has succeeded in his ambitious goal: to come to Canada and create “the world's coldest and toughest human-powered ultra race.”

On the Saturday night before the race, they all gather in the banquet room of the High Country Inn in Whitehorse, where the atmosphere is one of subdued festivity. Yukon Quest officials, Arctic Ultra organizers, support staff and locals want to make sure the international clan of racers know what to expect once they're out on the isolated trail.

Martin Jones plants all 328 pounds of himself at the front of the room. His ruddy cheeks, protruding belly, grey beard and receding silver hair yanked back in a ponytail make him look like a Santa Claus who has spent 40 years minding a still in the Yukon bush. Jones's day job is public-works foreman for the village of Haines Junction. Off-hours, he hunts, fishes, traps, snowmobiles, camps and hikes. He is also trained as an advanced emergency medical technician, just one step below a paramedic.

He surveys the athletes. “It's quite the race you guys got going here,” Jones deadpans. Then he catalogues the potential hazards: Hypothermia. “That's going to be your biggest

enemy,” he says. Dehydration. Injury. “Depending on the weather, you’re looking at hours or days for medical help to get to you,” he says, “So, if you don’t want to get hurt and if you’re scared of getting hurt, stay home.” He asks how many competitors have first-aid training. Only a few hands go up. Jones winces.

Then there’s the little matter of sharing the trail with mushers and dog teams. Although competitors in the Yukon Quest will be well ahead of the Ultra racers, another 12 teams will start behind them in the Yukon Quest 250—the “Junior Quest”—a qualifying event for next year’s main event. The athletes should be extra wary of oncoming dog teams, he says, because mushers sometimes sleep standing up on the rear sled runners.

“Your biggest concern, though, is moose,” Jones continues. “They can be quite aggressive, so they’ve got the right of way. Never mind what Farley Mowat says, you don’t have to worry about wolves or coyotes.”

By February, both black and grizzly bears are deep in hibernation—or at least they should be. Jones breaks the bad news that, thanks to an unusually warm winter, disoriented bears have been spotted wandering outside their dens. His recommendation? Avoid them.

“I’m from Wales,” a voice pipes from the back. “All we have to worry about there is sheep.” Laughter breaks the tension in the room.

Jones finishes his grim litany and admits that, despite the many dangers, he wouldn’t mind giving the race a go himself. “I just wish I was 30 years younger,” he says, “and 180 pounds lighter.”

After they leave Whitehorse on Sunday afternoon, the competitors follow the trail as it drops down toward the Yukon River. They steer along its bank and plod through six inches of soft, broken snow. The runners drag their plastic sleds over the uneven terrain. Even the cyclists are forced to walk much of the way.

The current leader and pre-race favourite for the 480-kilometre Ultra is Rocky Reifenstuhl, a 50-year-old geologist from Fairbanks, Alaska. At five-foot-eight and 145 pounds, Reifenstuhl bears little resemblance to heavyweight fighter Rocky Marciano, after whom he was named by his father. “He wanted me to grow up to be a boxer,” smiles Reifenstuhl. “Instead, he got a guy with a skinny build who walks around in black bike tights.”

Over the past 20 years, the man in tights has won or placed in dozens of extreme endurance races, his first a 580-kilometre *non-stop* bicycle race from Anchorage to Fairbanks in 1984. Last year during a training ride, Reifenstuhl got clipped by an SUV and had to pedal eight kilometres to the hospital after the hit-and-run. Since then, he has competed with a metal plate in his right collarbone, held together with seven screws. Still, he keeps pushing himself in these gruelling events.

“Why not?” he shrugs. “When you complete a race like this, everything else you do will be easier. It helps put life in perspective.”

Three hours into the race, the darkness of the Yukon winter night descends, and the athletes switch on their battery-powered headlamps. At this time of year, it stays dark for 15 hours a day, so racers will see much of the course as only a spotlight patch of snow 10 feet in front of them. Within an hour, the temperature drops to -14°C . Eventually, the trail leaves the Yukon River and joins the Takhini River, where the soft snow becomes a little firmer and eases travel for both cyclists and runners.

Rocky continues in the lead, along with his wife, Gail Koepf, an experienced endurance athlete in her own right. Smart money is on Koepf to be first to complete the Ultra's "short course" (translation: only 160K of suffering). The 52-year-old Koepf has won or placed in more than 60 long-distance races since 1989. In 2001, she set a record for women over 50 in the Equinox Marathon in Fairbanks.

At about 6:00 p.m., her husband is the first to arrive at the initial checkpoint on the bank of the Takhini River, 40 kilometres from Whitehorse. Koepf cycles in not far behind. She's in second but isn't happy. She had originally figured the 160 kilometres of trails would be ideally suited to skate skiing. But Rocky had already decided to ride his fat-wheeled mountain bike in the longer event and convinced her to join him as a cyclist. In the end, one other racer decided to cycle and nobody opted for skiing in the Ultra, likely because of fears the trail would be too torn up by huskies and sleds.

"I don't know how I let Rocky talk me into this," Koepf grumbles as she pushes her bike into the campsite. "This trail is *not* a bike trail. It would have been a good one to ski."

Luckily, Rocky is already asleep. A blazing bonfire greets Gail and the other athletes as they trickle in for the mandatory four-hour layover. After a bowl of steaming stew or chili, buns and hot chocolate, they retire to their tents and bivy sacks for a brief rest.

Most organizers of endurance races set a date and then pray that the weather gods don't play havoc with their plans. That the rains don't wash away the course. That their competitors don't keel over from heat exhaustion or hypothermia. That high winds don't blow them all back across the start line.

Robert Pollhammer, however, finds himself wishing for *worse* weather. The winter of the first-ever Yukon Arctic Ultra is unseasonably warm, with the mercury hovering around the freezing mark during the days. Both the Yukon Quest and the Arctic Ultra had planned to use the frozen Yukon River for the opening leg of their races. The mighty Yukon, however, isn't as solid as it should be at this time of year, so organizers have been forced to reroute parts of the course. Pollhammer isn't even able to tell the 300-milers the complete route they will follow until just before they start, in case it needs more rejigging.

Up in Canada's True North, it's the 10th winter in a row of higher-than-average temperatures. There's less sea ice every year barricading the once-impassable Northwest Passage, and many communities can't keep their outdoor rinks frozen long enough to play a full season of hockey. Maybe it's global warming, maybe it's just climatic cycles, but the Canadian Arctic has been getting decidedly less "ultra" every year. Which raises the question: What if you hold the world's toughest cold-weather race, and Old Man Winter doesn't show up?

The racers are starting to find out. Rob Bayman, a 34-year-old warehouse manager from England, can't believe the temperature out here. *This* is mid-February in the infamous Yukon? Bayman had competed in the Marathon des Sables, a 243-kilometre run through the Sahara Desert, and knew how to suffer through the heat. To prepare body and mind for the unpredictable cold of an arctic winter...well, he figured that required a different strategy. So in the months leading up to the Yukon Arctic Ultra, he worked out on a cross-trainer in a -20°C walk-in freezer, testing different combinations of cold-weather clothing among the TV dinners. He came to the Yukon expecting 40 below and the threat of frostbite. Now he's more worried about overheating in his freezer-tested gear.

He's not the only one whose preparations have been thrown off by the warmer-than-expected weather. The oldest competitor in the race is 55-year-old Gregory Heming, a onetime land-use consultant in Colorado who now lives down the highway from Whitehorse in Haines Junction. An avid runner and road cyclist with a PhD in "human ecology" and northern studies, Heming has been cycling 32 kilometres a day for the last two months on snowmobile trails to ready himself to bike the 160-kilometre event.

"I signed up as a way of deepening my understanding of the connection between landscape and mindscape," he says, "within the context of a contemporary world of people who often find it both distressing and difficult to walk from the far reaches of the Wal-Mart parking lot."

Soon, however, he discovers just how distressing and difficult it can be to push a bicycle through sun-warmed snow pack that's too soft to ride over. "I hope I can get on this thing soon," he mutters at his bike. He curses himself for using narrow tires against the advice of experienced wilderness marathoner Reifentstuh, who along with his wife, is coasting along on doublewide rubber that provides far better traction on the slushy snow.

The trail for the 76-kilometre stretch to the next checkpoint, a wall-tent camp named Kynocks, eventually leaves the Takhini River and follows the Dawson Trail, an old wagon route dating back to Gold Rush days and now part of the Trans-Canada Trail. Moonlight illuminates the grey landscape as the competitors trudge up the hills and hop aboard their sleds for wild rides down.

The racers have been warned about hypothermia and dehydration, getting lost and getting injured, macho moose and insomniacal bears. But there are some obstacles they can't prepare for. On this second leg, Brit racer Eleanor Mayne, 25, and her 22-year-old brother Alastair wither under the ultimate challenge: each other. It's five in the morning, and Alastair is lobbying hard for a sleep break. His big sister balks.

"I thought an hour would be good," Alastair later tells me.

"I said, 'No,'" explains Eleanor, "so we had a big discussion."

"I wouldn't exactly say *discussion*," counters Alastair, "because there wasn't much talking going on."

Finally, Eleanor relents and permits a brief meal rest. When two other competitors show up, Alastair strikes up a conversation, but all Eleanor can manage is a cool hello. After a quick snack of noodles, Eleanor decides they must resume their trek. Alastair grumbles but gets up. A few hours later, they again stop for another meal. Alastair is suddenly overcome with nausea and keels over. Then he complains that his hands and feet are freezing. Eleanor insists that they press on and orders her brother to keep pace.

As the day wears on and they still haven't reached the Kynocks checkpoint, the pair starts to hallucinate. They see hundreds of wall tents and cabins just up ahead, beacons of warmth that never materialize. People sitting on the ground turn out to be stumps. Tree trunks transform into a white picket fence and back again. Finally, a snowmobile rumbles towards them, a mirage with a soundtrack this time. The rider steps off the machine. He's real but the bearer of some bad news: The Brit siblings are still 27 kilometres from the checkpoint. Their spirits are crushed. They thought they were within three clicks. Then they notice what look like bear tracks in the snow around them. They put their heads down and keep going, with Eleanor belting out every Beatles and Simon and Garfunkle tune she knew.

Others aren't so lucky. On this stretch, the Ultra claims its first DNF. A British competitor in the shorter race drops out after fielding an emergency call on her satellite telephone: Her brother has been hospitalized in Ireland after suffering a pulmonary embolism. She has trained for months and spent thousands of dollars to get here, but some things are more important than a race.

Another Brit, the first of the long-course competitors to withdraw, blames his defeat on wearing the wrong shoes – and Saddam Hussein. A corporal with the British forces, he had started training for the race when all hell broke loose about Iraq. Tony Blair announced England would back the U.S.-led war, and all leaves were cancelled. He assumed he was bound for war-torn Iraq not winter-bound Yukon, so he enjoyed a “pleasant” (i.e., food- and booze-filled) Christmas and New Year's. When orders suddenly changed and he received clearance for the Ultra, the corporal knew he was in for a tough go because he hadn't trained properly. His concern proved well founded. “Next year will be better,” he vows.

Even before reaching Kynocks, Gregory Heming, the 55-year-old cyclist, is struggling. His back and shoulder muscles ache from pushing his bicycle through kilometre after kilometre of snow too soft to ride. Because his gears remain inactive for so long, they freeze up on the few occasions when he *can* ride. “It's like putting 60 pounds in a wheelbarrow and pushing it through sand,” Heming says. When a guide on a snow machine checks on him at the 120-kilometre mark, the oldest racer opts to quit. “I knew I was running out of steam and I didn't want to do something dumb,” he laments. “All it takes is one dumb athlete to blow a race for a lot of people who haven't done something dumb, so I really quit for everyone else in the race.”

The 34 kilometres of trail from Kynocks to the third checkpoint at Braeburn Lodge—and the end of the 160-kilometre race—is relatively flat, with a firmer snowpack. The trail weaves in and out of the forest, and then descends down a steep slope onto frozen Braeburn Lake, just two kilometres from the lodge. I've been waiting at the lodge with Pollhammer and other race officials when a guide drives in on a snowmobile and announces the first finishers are crossing the lake.

At 2:40 p.m. on Monday, just 24 hours and 10 minutes after starting in Whitehorse, Gail Koepf and Rocky Reifentstuhl join hands for the last few feet of trail before entering the Braeburn Lodge parking lot. It's the end of the trail for Koepf, while Reifentstuhl is

just warming up for the next 320 kilometres. They both look like they've shared a leisurely ride to the corner store, and it seems the dispute over their choice of locomotion has been left behind on the trail. I ask Koepf if she's tempted to tackle the longer race with her husband.

"No way," she says. "I'm done." The message is unsaid yet obvious. Winning this race is enough. She'll let Rocky win his.

A few Quest support team members raking up husky straw beds from the night before shake their heads at the curious sight of the cyclists. One man dozing on a straw bale in the sun raises his head just long enough to register the spectacle before closing his eyes again. Maybe it was only a dream.

Four hours behind the cyclists, the first runner sprints into Braeburn to finish the 160-kilometre event. Andrew Matulionis, a pharmacist from Montana, has travelled the equivalent of nearly four marathons—over very tough terrain—in less than 29 hours. The night before, one of the Junior Quest dog teams raced up behind him so fast that he couldn't react. The two lead dogs split apart and entangled him in their harnesses. Later, a dazzling spectral curtain of jade-green light closed on the northern sky, "It was just so awesome and immense," he recalls, "looking up at the Northern Lights and realizing how small and insignificant I was." His lowest point came between two and five in the morning, when he lapsed into a period of hallucinations: farm animals, wall tents, even a drive-in theatre.

Over the next several hours, more competitors straggle into Braeburn Lodge. Young waitresses serve meals more suited to lumberjacks and giants, and the racers tuck into frisbee-sized cinnamon buns and hamburgers made with a pound of meat between a loaf of bread. Just after six in the morning, a British racer, blonde beard tinged with frost, stumbles into the lodge, plunks himself down at a table and peers across at the equally bleary-eyed race director. "I'm never doing this again!" he declares to Pollhammer. "If I ever try to sign up again, you're not allowed to accept my registration." Then he buries his beard in a cinnamon bun.

Freezer trainer Rob Bayman arrives. He claims that his unusual preparation helped toughen him for the Yukon winter after all, even though it only dropped to -13°C between Kynocks and Braeburn. The six-day Marathon des Sables, he insists, was a "walk in the park" compared with his 49 hours on the Yukon trail.

Five hours later, Eleanor and Alistair, the battling Brits, appear. Soon afterwards, diners and racers are jolted from their meals by excruciating shrieks from the men's washroom. Somebody goes to check who's being axe-murdered in there. It's just Alastair cutting away his thermal underwear, the fabric fused with dried blood to his chafed-raw inner thigh.

The 72-hour deadline for the 100-mile event is now ticking down to its final two hours, and there's just one racer left on the trail. Suddenly, the door of the lodge bursts open. A diminutive woman with short black hair enters the dining room.

"You made it!" Pollhammer exclaims

"Did you think I wouldn't?" she snaps.

Jacque Kaufmann, a feisty five-foot-nothing 51-year-old from Colorado, has run marathons since 1981. She prefers to race alone and take all the time that's allotted for each event, U2 looping through her Walkman, so she can savour the terrain and the solitude. Last winter, she ran the 563-kilometre Iditasport Extreme in Alaska.

How does the 160-kilometre Arctic Ultra compare?

“Piece of cake,” she shrugs before dipping into a huge bowl of vegetable soup.

Four middle-aged snowmobilers in ballcaps enter the restaurant and cast puzzled looks at the athletes. One man asks where everyone is from.

“Ten different countries,” Pollhammer replies.

“Ten different countries!” the man says. “I thought you were from Whitehorse and were just bored.”

Kaufmann looks up from her soup. “If you’re bored in Whitehorse,” she says, “you wouldn’t come to Braeburn, believe me.”

Everyone laughs.

Then there are six. And two-thirds of the race still to go.

The finishers of the shorter race are shuttled in rented four-by-fours back to Whitehorse. There’s a party planned for Wednesday night in the pub at the High Country Inn. Pollhammer can’t join their celebrations, not yet at least. “I’d love to be there, toasting your accomplishments,” he tells them. “But I can’t be drinking beer in Whitehorse when I still have athletes out risking their lives in the middle of the wilderness.”

Rocky Reifenstuhl is still doing his Energizer bunny routine and has resumed his two-wheeled assault on the trail. He is followed in various intervals by the five remaining foot racers. Four checkpoints lie between Braeburn and the finish line at Pelly Crossing, a First Nations town on the Klondike Highway, midway between Whitehorse and Dawson City. The trail between Braeburn and the town of Carmacks, a distance of 130 kilometres, has so little snow cover that the Yukon Quest organizers were forced to bypass this section and truck the mushers and their dog teams around it. Not so the Ultra athletes. As they move along the trail, tufts of grass, rocks and stumps tug at the runners’ sleds and Reifenstuhl’s wheels. The athletes are now using more energy and need to rest more, stopping frequently beside the trail to set up sleeping bags and mats directly on the snow.

Ultramarathons and adventure races aren’t the most spectator-friendly events at the best of times. The remote, often unnavigable terrain and limited resources of the Arctic Ultra pose even more challenges. Unlike the Eco-Challenge or other high-profile races, there are no helicopters to carry us over the course, no camera crews to follow the leaders. To keep track of the last six racers, Pollhammer and I must rely on the jungle telegraph of the North – and news delivered by the snowmobile guides hired to monitor the racers. We play a frustrating waiting game, never knowing exactly where the runners are on the trail, and with no way of getting there if we did. We wait for them at various checkpoints, hoping they don’t arrive while we’re sleeping or driving or sitting at a different checkpoint. I regularly muse that, as a spectator sport, this event sucks.

On Thursday afternoon, Pollhammer, myself and the one other writer covering the race are travelling in two vehicles when we encounter Rocky Reifenstuhl slowly biking up a snow-blanketed hill on a narrow country road not far from the race’s finish. Clad in windproof bib tights, two turtlenecks and a jacket, he has been stopping regularly to increase tire pressure as the trail hardens, decrease as it softens. Just a few hours from the

end of the race, Reifentstuhl is breathing hard and exhaling steam. He has been cycling for 12 hours straight and will gain 2,000 feet elevation before the day's over. It's 15 below.

"How's it going?" I pant, tripping in my heavy snow boots as I try to keep up.

"This is the hardest friggin' race I've ever been in," Reifentstuhl pants back.

I suggest we record his final several kilometres as he climbs out of the Pelly River valley to reach the only pavement of the race—and the finish line. He agrees, and I clip a microphone to his coat and slip my microcassette recorder into his shirt pocket. Later, back in the warmth of my hotel room, I play back the tape and listen to the man that other competitors have dubbed "The Robot" give colour commentary for his own race:

"It's been pretty much a cruel and unusual race. Not a lot of snow. Incredibly rough trail. Extremely technical. My breathing's a little short right now. I'm pretty toast...It's going to be nice to quit pedalling. I'm going to wake up in the morning and my legs will probably still be going in circles."

Suddenly, it sounds like the bike is going very fast, snow crunching under accelerating wheels. Rocky's voice becomes frantic: "I'm going down a steep hill now. My speedometer says I'm going 20, 25 miles an hour. It's pretty scary. Don't want to crash. Go 300 miles and crash five miles from the finish would be pretty stupid."

He makes it safely to the bottom, and at 4:45 p.m., Rocky the Robot rolls into the gas station-restaurant at Pelly Crossing to claim victory as the first person ever to complete the 480-kilometre Yukon Arctic Ultra. His wife is already there and gives him a hug. Then they both head off, looking for a hot meal and a comfortable bed—not yet dreaming of their next race

Meanwhile, the long course has been taking its toll on the runners. At the Carmacks checkpoint, the leader of the pack reluctantly drops out. Brit racer Andrew Barnett had an **11**-hour advantage on the rest of the racers, but by Carmacks he can't take another step due to the excruciating pain in his legs. He's later diagnosed with stress fractures in both shins. Three other racers—two Frenchman and a Hungarian, all experienced ultramarathoners—push on, staying together as temperatures take a turn for the colder and drop below -30°C .

Barnett's training partner, Martin Like, can't quite believe the news that his friend has DNF'ed. At just five-foot six-inches and 177 pounds, Like has dubbed himself the "Little Fat Welshman." Throughout the race, he has been suffering from a sore left foot, which has troubled him since competing in the 168-kilometre Jordan Desert Cup earlier in the year. He can barely keep down the necessary painkillers, vomiting repeatedly after swigging from his coffee-tinged water flask. At Carmacks, though, he discovers a pub, knocks back two pints of draught and some fried chicken. *This* makes him feel a little better.

For two more days, he straggles on, alone. He knows he has no hope of winning. When he can't force himself to move, he unrolls his sleeping bag on the frozen Pelly River. The creaking of the ice doesn't exactly promote pleasant dreams.

In the meantime, Robert Pollhammer, like a worried father, heads out in search of his last few racers. The route markers have been mysteriously disappearing from the trail between the passing of the Yukon Quest mushers and the arrival of the Ultra competitors.

Rocky Reifenstuhl overshot one checkpoint earlier. Pollhammer is concerned that his runners may veer off-route, too. At the Pelly Farms checkpoint, he changes into trekking gear and heads down the trail in the opposite direction. He hikes for 14 kilometres through the still, cold night, and finally gets a taste of what his competitors have been experiencing.

“You walk along like you’re on raw eggs, never knowing what’s around the next corner, wondering what will happen next,” he says afterwards. “I’d almost forgotten what it is like to be out there in the middle of the night, alone. Your feet, your walking pole, the rucksack—everything makes noises and you start to hear things. A little way along, I saw wolf tracks on the trail. Although I know wolves won’t attack humans, I was scared I would meet up with him around the next corner.”

It is early morning on Saturday, February 15th when Pollhammer finally hears singing and sees three headlamps bobbing through the dark. The trio of runners, tired but in high spirits, greets him. One of the Frenchmen collapses onto his sled and begins snoring. When he wakes from his catnap, all four head on to Pelly Farms, **arriving at 4 a.m.** After a few hours’ rest, they race for the Pelly Crossing finish, crossing the finish line together at 10 a.m. on Sunday, February 16th.

Only Martin Like is left, still 48 kilometres away from the end. He sets out from Pelly Farm? in darkness. For the first time in a week, his foot feels fine. Soon, however, the trail begins to climb and climb and climb—1,950 feet of elevation gain. Just as the Little Fat Welshman is seriously flagging, a truck carrying his friend Andrew Barnett and Robert Pollhammer pulls up. The race director pours a cup of stiff black coffee, the first of many he’ll offer over the next several hours to coax the last racer to the finish. “Martin is doing fine but he can’t stand the nights and the dark anymore,” Pollhammer **later** reports. “After last night, I completely understand that. It’s a lot harder to do such a distance by yourself.” After a 90-minute bivy, Like starts the long descent to Pelly Crossing. After crossing the bridge, he sprints the last few hundred feet.

Finally, 480 kilometres and 14 pounds, seven days, 21 hours and five minutes later, his race is over. Like has beaten the 192-hour time limit by less than three hours. There is little fanfare as he arrives. Most of the racers are already back in Whitehorse. Pelly Crossing isn’t even the original finish line, so few villagers know that the first Yukon Arctic Ultra has officially been declared complete, right here at their local gas station. Of the eight racers who started the 480-kilometre event, five finish and three do not. Of 19 in the shorter race, there are only two DNFs.

The competitors have little tangible to show for their efforts except the gift T-shirt, their aching and blistered bodies, and a credit-card bill. After weeks of equally sleepless preparations, Robert Pollhammer will return to Germany and try to pay off the debt he has incurred organizing the race. Stuffed in his luggage is a plaque that was presented to him at the opening ceremonies. It has been inscribed with words from Robert Service’s poem “The Spell of the Yukon”:

*The winter! The brightness that blinds you,
The white land locked tight as a drum,
The cold fear that follows and finds you,
The silence that bludgeons you dumb.
The snows that are older than history,
The woods where the weird shadows slant*

*The stillness, the moonlight, the mystery,
I've bade 'em good-bye—but I can't.*

Few can. Pollhammer will be back, in Whitehorse on Valentine's Day, for round two of the Yukon Arctic Ultra. Seven of last year's competitors—some who finished, some who couldn't—have already signed up again for the race. More newcomers will follow. The unpredictable empty spaces of Canada's legendary northern territory will be waiting for them all.