



**THE HARDEST ULTRAMARATHON** you've never heard of—the Iditarod Trail Invitational—traverses roughly 1,000 miles through the Alaskan wilderness in February and March. Since 2000, just 15 runners have completed the route between Wasilla and Nome, and of the five or so participants who line up each year, fewer than half finish (all entrants must first complete the 350-mile version to prove their winter survival savvy). Dragging 35- to 55-pound sleds, competitors use GPS, maps, and advice from locals to follow the sporadically marked Iditarod Trail (the same one the mushers, who start a week later, follow). They cross mountain ranges, black pine forests, the frozen Yukon River, and iced-over stretches of the Bering Sea, restocking food supplies along the way in isolated villages or from three ski plane drops. Cutoff time in Nome is 30 days. Racers must hit 20 designated checkpoints and are allowed to go off-trail to shave miles between those points. Bailing out mid-journey requires schlepping to the nearest village—which can be up to 100 miles away—and paying for a bush plane ride back to Anchorage. This year's race starts February 26. Its seven participants will average 35 to 40 miles over 12 to 14 hours each day and finish in roughly 25 days. "The type of people who enter—if you tell them something is really, *really* hard, they'll want to do it even more," co-race director Bill Merchant says. "The Iditarod Trail can be the most beautiful place in the world or the most intimidating." Turn the page and see for yourself.

# NO DOGS ALLOWED

**At the Iditarod Trail Invitational, the humans do all the work. Here's how and (best as we can tell) why.**  
By **KIT FOX** Photographs by BRIAN KALDORF

*Tim Hewitt, the ITI course record holder, demonstrates his winning setup.*





**8 / WHITE MOUNTAIN** (pop. 209)  
Mile 898  
**Rest stop**  
For eight years, resident Joanna Wassilie, 47, has offered moose soup, roasted caribou, and her famous sticky rolls to competitors. She's got a spare bed for them, too. "They're doing something awesome," she says, "something I would have liked to have done."

**7 / ELIM** (pop. 339)  
Mile 852  
**Eskimo village**  
Racers arrive here via stable ice close to shore on the bay. Tim Hewitt (below) is the only one to have cut *across* the bay, which shaved 40 miles. "You're on unmarked sea ice; it can separate and move out to sea or you could fall through it," Bill Merchant says. "That is a *sketchy* shortcut."



**6 / YUKON RIVER**  
Miles 545 to 629  
**Most mental stretch**  
More than a mile wide at spots, the river's vastness plays tricks on the mind. Ground blizzards can limit visibility from the chest down.



**START**

**1 / KNIK BAR, WASILLA** (pop. 8,704)  
Mile 0  
**Starting line**  
After a countdown chant outside Knik Bar, runners and cyclists in the 1,000-, the 350-, or the 130-mile events head north. The sled dog race starts a week later. Musher occasionally cross paths with runners on the trail; the encounters are usually friendly, though collisions have occurred. "A team of 12 dogs won't notice if they drag you along for quite a distance," says Beat Jegerlehner, a three-time ITI finisher.

**3 / RAINY PASS**  
Miles 165 to 188  
**Steepest ascent**  
Racers climb the Happy River Steps, a series of steep hills, most at nearly a 20 percent grade. The descent parallels a (mostly) frozen creek that must be crossed. At least one racer has sunk waist-deep into the frigid water.



**4 / McGRATH** (pop. 302)  
Mile 350  
**Finish point for 350-mile cyclists and racers**  
Here, the field shrinks by 80 percent. Those bound for Nome quickly refuel and leave, an agonizing task when they're surrounded by reveling finishers, says Jegerlehner. "Leaving McGrath was the scariest thing I have ever done," he says. "The hardest section is ahead."



**5 / OPHIR TO RUBY** (pop. 178)  
Miles 425 to 545  
**Least-supported stretch**  
From the abandoned gold-rush town of Ophir, it takes about three days to cross this lonely stretch of hills and black spruce forest known for high winds and frigid temps that often dip to -40°F. With no protection, the wind can feel like "a knife just stabbing you repeatedly," says Jegerlehner (in furry hood, below left).



**9 / BLOWHOLE ALLEY**  
Miles 898 to 953  
**Most dangerous stretch**  
In perfect conditions, racers see the frozen Bering Sea to their left, faraway hills to their right, and flat, exposed trail straight ahead. But this area is notorious for "blowholes," unpredictable blizzards with winds that can reach 75 mph for hours, creating whiteout conditions that obscure trail markers and threaten to blow competitors toward thin ice. The storms have such a defined edge, locals claim you can stick your hand in the billowing snow while the rest of your body remains in calm conditions. Three cabins along the route provide shelter if blowholes flare up (and if you can find them).



**10 / NOME** (pop. 3,777)  
Mile 1,000  
**The finish**  
The course ends under a wooden arch in front of a church and trading post on one of Nome's main drags, the same finish line as the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race. Typically, the last musher arrives about a week before the first ultramarathoner, which means the area is usually deserted. "The finish is fitting because it's such a solitary race," Jegerlehner says. "It's about you, your journey, and that's it."



**LONG WAY HOME**  
THE RACE TO THE LONELIEST FINISH LINE OF THEM ALL BEGINS IN WASILLA, ALASKA, AND RUNS WEST, ENDING IN NOME.

**Sounds Like Fun**  
How to train for the ITI

Course record holder Tim Hewitt says the methodology behind his training is painfully simple. "If I can run myself empty, I get stronger," he says. It helps that he's practiced in the art of suffering. A gymnast in college, Hewitt took up running after graduating in the early 1980s and has done more than 60 marathons and ultras, including the 135-mile Badwater Ultramarathon (twice). Starting six months before the Iditarod, Hewitt hits the mountains by his Pennsylvania home every weekend. He sometimes fills a backpack (as in the photo above) with 20 pounds of canned food to add weight, then runs and hikes trails for six to eight hours, often overnight to mimic the sleepless conditions he'll encounter in the race. After enough snow accumulates, he swaps the backpack for his sled, adding weight each week until he's used to his 40-pound racing load. The goal of these trips isn't so much to strengthen his aerobic capacity—that comes from running at least an hour a day during the week—but to get him used to physical and mental pain. That way, Hewitt says, the first week of the race is not so brutal. "Regardless of how I train, I get tougher as the race goes on."



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF TIM HEWITT (ELIM); COURTESY OF BEAT JEGERLEHNER (OPHIR TO RUBY, YUKON RIVER, WHITE MOUNTAIN, BLOWHOLE ALLEY); COURTESY OF JILL HOMER (FINISH)

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF JILL HOMER (START); COURTESY OF BEAT JEGERLEHNER (FINGER LAKE, RAINY PASS, McGRATH)



# COLD CALCULATIONS

**SO WHAT DO YOU NEED** to survive 1,000 miles in the Alaska tundra? **Tim Hewitt**, a 62-year-old lawyer from Greensburg, Pennsylvania, has a pretty good idea. Hewitt has completed the Iditarod Trail Invitational an unsurpassed nine times in the past 15 years, and he set the course record of 19 days, nine hours, 38 minutes in 2016. He's entered this year's event as a cyclist. Not surprisingly, the 40 pounds' worth of stuff that has kept him alive is durable, warm—and very light.



## SLED (SEE PAGE 77)

Hewitt's handmade sled is 24 inches wide and 48 inches long, weighs 3.5 pounds, and is made of ultra-high-density polyethylene. (He named it "Cookie" after a husky in a children's book.) He pulls it using a home-made hip-harness that's connected to the sled by a rope covered in flexible PVC pipe for protection against the elements.

## 1 / BASE LAYER

For 20 days, Hewitt's tights and long-sleeve top never come off. Once he finishes, they go straight in the trash (to his wife's relief). Over his tights go insulated and shell pants.

## 2 / NECK GAITER

"This is one of my secrets," he says. "Your neck is where your core heat is going to escape from because all the blood that goes to your brain goes through your neck. If you add clothing there, your whole body will warm up." So when his feet get cold, the gaiter goes on. On his head go a cap, up to two balaclavas (including one that's windproof), a headlamp, sunglasses, goggles, and lip balm.

## 3 / FOOD AND DRINK

In 2010, Hewitt pulled all his supplies for the entire trek (as opposed to having drop bags along the route). His sled weighed 110 pounds, 20 of which was crunchy peanut butter. In a typical day, he torches nearly 15,000 calories, and consumes at least 8,000. He also carries drink mixes, freeze-dried meals, jerky, bars, beans, nuts, candy, gum, and chocolate.

## 4 / FOAM SLEEPING PAD

Sleeping atop his sled saves Hewitt time pitching a tent, and the pad is a necessary buffer. He'll park the sled perpendicular to the wind and sleep in three- to four-hour increments. If it's too cold, he'll continue moving to keep his core temp up. Perpetually exhausted, he's been known to fall asleep standing upright.

## 5 / DOWN PARKA

Because down makes him sweat, Hewitt wears this only when he's not moving or needs to raise his body temperature. Upon waking, he'll often throw on the parka and run with his sled until he's warm enough to get fully dressed and packed up. "I

put my freezing shoes on and don't try to lace them, I don't try to organize anything, I just get moving," he says. He typically wears some combination of a lighter-weight jacket, fleece, and/or vest.

## 6 / GPS

Natural barriers like creeks and hills cause the trail to meander, which can make using a GPS frustrating. Hewitt often relies more on personal experience and advice from locals. But when he got stuck in a blowhole at night, it was his GPS that got him out.

## 7 / SNOWSHOES AND POLES

Both help him navigate snow up to six feet deep.

## 8 / DOWN SLEEPING BAG

Hewitt's bag is functional to -60°F, but that doesn't mean he's toasty when it gets that cold. It just means he "won't die." Most mornings, Hewitt has to shake off the ice that forms when his body heat permeates the outer shell of the bag.

## 9 / TRAIL SHOES

Hewitt wears two pairs of Drymax socks and insulated sole inserts, so

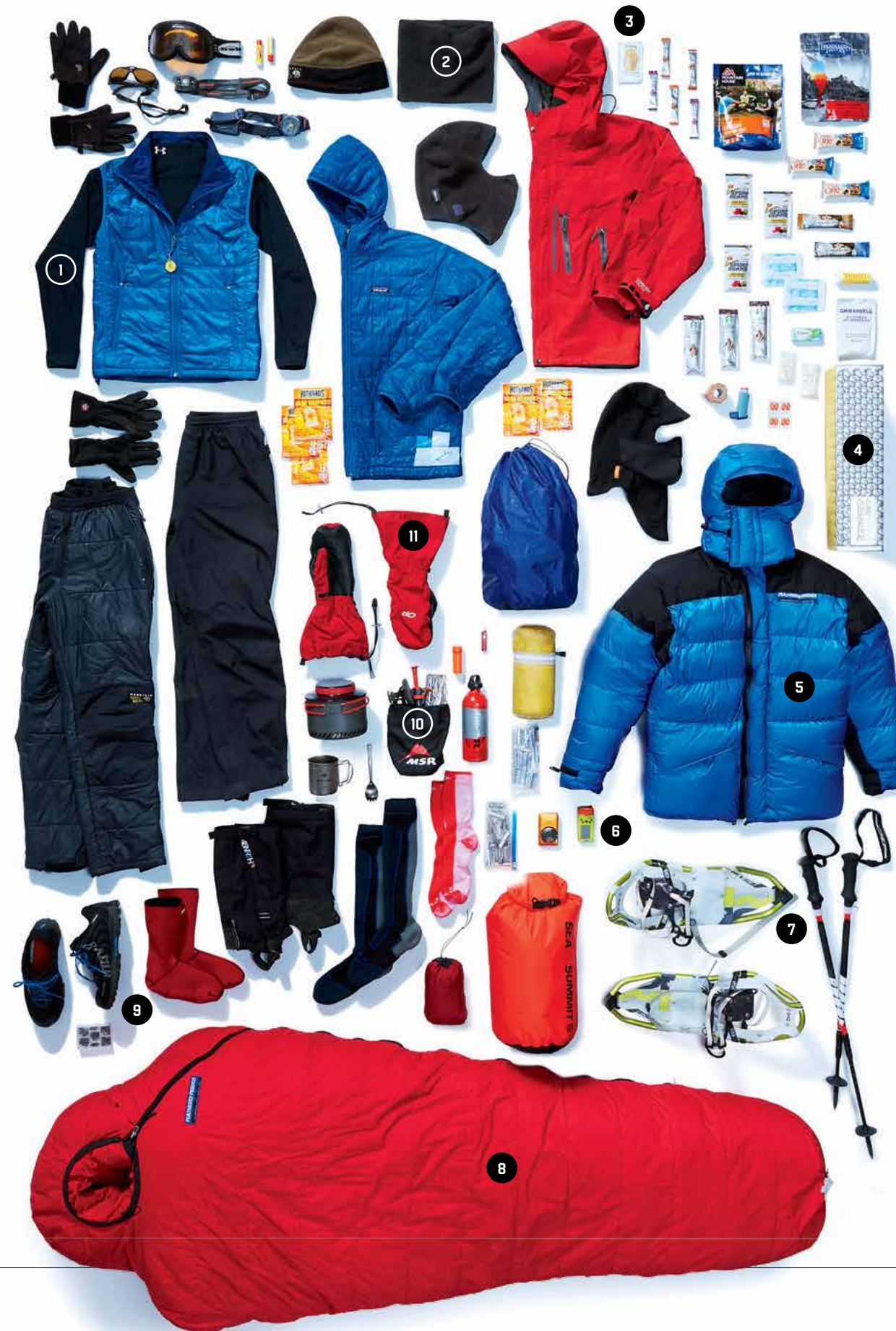
his Montrail trail shoes are one size bigger than his running shoes. He wears gaiters over his shoes to keep the snow out, and on the bottom of each sole, he installs 10 carbide screws for traction. One year, he sliced a quarter-inch layer of skin from one of his toes after it turned black with frostbite midrace. Now more sensitive to falling temps, that toe signals that his body is about to get (really) cold.

## 10 / CAMP STOVE

It takes Hewitt 30 minutes to melt enough snow to create 100 ounces of water, which lasts him 24 hours. His kitchen also includes a titanium pot and lid (and spork), an insulated mug, white gas, an insulated water bottle holder, and three packs of wind- and waterproof matches.

## 11 / MITTS

To regulate his temperature, Hewitt constantly removes one or both of his outer mitts in a process he calls "heat dumping." The liner stays on—a lesson he learned after losing "a good amount" of skin after his bare hand brushed a metal gas can. ❄️



MAKEUP BY SHANA LOHR; STYLING BY DEREK SVITKO