

Oregon couple prepares for harsh 135-mile winter race

By Victoria Jacobsen
The Bulletin

BEND (AP) — Chris and Helen Scotch are not going on an Arctic expedition this winter, but if you took a peek at their packing list you might think so.

The Bend couple, both 39, will travel to Minnesota this January, each equipped with a sled loaded with an insulated sleeping bag, a camping stove, mittens and hats to go with their puffy coats and snowshoes, several days' worth of food and water and plenty of other safety gear.

Chris Scotch insists that selecting all the essentials is one of his favorite parts of the Arrowhead 135, a 135-mile race through northern Minnesota, held each year during the height of winter.

"People talk more about the gear than the times; nobody's really thinking, 'How am I going to finish in 48 hours instead of 52 hours?'" said Helen Scotch, who has completed the race three times. "It's more, how am I going to shed a few pounds off my sled this year? Should I go for waterproof shoes versus breathable shoes? If you look at any of

the (online) forums where people are chatting, it's all about gear and how to maintain yourself through that race. That's where I think the interest lies."

Chris Scotch was born in Oregon but spent much of his childhood in northern Minnesota, where he learned to enjoy camping and exploring the outdoors in the bitter cold. Although he considered competing at Arrowhead as a bicyclist during its inaugural year in 2005, he finally entered as a runner in 2011, soon after he took up ultrarunning. While fewer than 50 percent of the 150 or so competitors finish the race in a typical year, Scotch finished the race in 2011 and each year he has entered since.

This year's race, which starts near the Canadian border in International Falls on Jan. 31, will be his sixth. Helen, who started running seriously around the time she moved from Ireland to the Twin Cities in 2005, tried Arrowhead for the first time in 2014 after watching Chris compete in 2011 and 2013.

"I'm never in danger of winning a conventional trail ultra. I'm just not that fast," Chris said. "I could luck into

winning a winter ultra."

Arrowhead 135 is one of a handful of "winter ultras," or long-distance races in which participants can choose to compete on foot, bike or ski, where snow is expected and cold is a given.

Competitors are required to tow extensive gear and supplies to help them survive for several days in the elements (Chris and Helen said their sleds typically weigh 35 pounds at the beginning of the race, although lighter travelers can get the total weight under 30 pounds).

The Scotches are also race directors for a similar race, the 80- or 160-mile Tuscobia Winter Ultra through northern Wisconsin held in early January. Racers who excel at Arrowhead or Tuscobia may earn a spot at the Iditarod Trail Invitational, which follows the route of the iconic dog sled race and includes race distances up to 1,000 miles.

The Scotches explained that the strategy needed to complete — or even survive — a winter ultra is vastly different from that of a typical ultramarathon.

"You have to fix everything now — don't wait,"

Helen said at the couple's home in Bend last week.

"I think a lot of people who got into trouble, it's because they put off stopping. They think, just get to the next shelter, next checkpoint, and then I'll fix it. But really, in these races, if you're getting a little wet from sweat, or too cold, too warm, or you need food, need drink, do that now. Don't put it off. You really should remember what your body needs at all times, because things spiral out of control pretty quickly if you don't eat for a few hours."

Competitors have 60 hours to cover the 135-mile Arrowhead trail, where the temperature during the race often drops well below zero degrees ("Don't let anyone tell you there's no difference between 40 below and 45 below, because you can definitely feel it," Chris quipped). But extreme cold is not the worst-case scenario for racers.

"The worst weather would not be 45 below, it would be 25 degrees and wet snow, because one year at Arrowhead it was like that," Chris said, referring to the 2013 race, when just seven of the 42 runners who started

the race reached the finish. "It was like 6 to 8 inches of really wet, heavy snow, so it's just harder to walk in, pull the sled through, bike through. Everything is just slower and harder and wetter, and when you get wet you can get hypothermia more easily."

Hypothermia and other cold-related medical problems are real concerns for competitors in the Arrowhead and other winter ultra races. The Arrowhead event website clearly states that participants who are not careful are at risk of cold-weather injury (or getting hit by a snowmobile), and the Scotches said they have seen competitors go to the hospital with severe frostbite on their hands and feet.

"Before I did it for the first time, no, I wasn't thinking this could be a life-changing decision potentially, in terms of health, because I was so excited for the next thing," Chris said. "I was so excited about the whole ultra experience, and to be able to do a winter ultra, I wasn't worried. But I will say I was very, very lucky, because it certainly could have been a very bad idea if things didn't happen to go just right for me. So I should have been worried."



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