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World of white

The Elk Mountains Grand Traverse is no place for the faint of heart ... or a novice

By Steve Lipsher
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Crested Butte - My motto has always been: "When it's too tough for everybody else, it's just right for me."

I'm now rethinking that after finding myself lost last weekend in a whiteout on Taylor Pass, midway through a grueling 40-mile cross country ski race, my nose turning white from frostbite and every shivering muscle shrieking from exhaustion.

The Elk Mountains Grand Traverse, an annual exercise in masochism between Crested Butte and Aspen, bills itself as an "extraordinary backcountry skiing race," but that doesn't begin to sum up the insane difficulty of the event, nor the edge-of-disaster appeal to 250 participants.

"I think it's one of the most fun backcountry events out there," said Mike Kloser of Vail, who is perhaps the world's greatest adventure racer and a two-time Grand Traverse champion. "It's just a classic wintertime backcountry competition."

So what kind of advice would he give me, a novice cross country racer?

"It's important to pace yourself," Kloser said. "Start out easy and build up steam, knowing that there's a lot of race out there. You don't want to spend your energy entirely early on and be suffering for the next six to 10 hours."

Translation: Don't go out as fast as Kloser. OK, check. I got that. Gee, thanks, Mike.

Other friends who had competed previously offered various helpful tips: Put duct tape on your heels to prevent blisters; carry some special snack that would make your day in the middle of the night; and bring trash-compactor bags to wrap around your legs for the stream crossings.

Stream crossings?

Oh, yes. In some years, the East River has been such a raging torrent that racers swept away by the waist-deep snowmelt have been saved only by bank-side volunteers.

Um, *that* sounds fun.

Race director Jan Runge notes that racers in the past also have encountered temperatures of 20 below zero and icy slopes that have sent them on an unplanned "slide for life."

"It's all just a huge challenge," she said with sadistic glee.

Skiing in teams of two, the racers cross two passes higher than 12,000 feet and span a distance between mountain towns that traditionally was traversed in two or three days by only the hardest of the hard-core skiers.

I would be skiing with a friend, Danny Gnojek, who also was attempting his first Grand Traverse. Strong, even-keeled and perpetually pleasant, Danny is the ideal type of teammate for such a long race, in which little problems become big annoyances.

"You find out so much about that person out there," Runge said. "You have to deal not only with the elements and the distance and the skiing, but you have to deal with your partner."

"My goal," Danny said repeatedly on our training trips, "is just to finish."

Registration and gear check - along with a pasta feed - took half of the day Friday, during which teams each had to show the race judges that they were carrying the required minimum amount of gear intended to allow them to survive outside for 24 hours if necessary.

Light and fast was the obvious answer everyone was seeking, and I started looking with envy at the featherweight skate-skis that others apparently were comfortable using on the steep descents, through powder and rock-hard frozen crud alike.

The race traditionally begins at midnight so that participants are through Star Pass - the most avalanche-prone portion of the course - before the morning sunlight softens the snow.

Warm weather this year turned the 3-mile trail from the town of Crested Butte into an impassable swamp, so the race began instead at the ski area, with fireworks and a cheering crowd encouraging the skiers on their brisk initial climb up the ski runs.

By about 12:15, I knew it was going to be rotten day: Thinking that the cord to my headphones was pinched beneath the shoulder straps of my back, I yanked on the cord and broke it, meaning there would be no music to get me through the darkest hours.

Nonetheless, Danny and I forged ahead, skiing down the back of the ski area, crossing the East River - on a glorious ice bridge, no less - and heading up East Brush Creek amid a string of bobbing headlamps that



A solitary racer approaches Taylor Pass during last weekend's Elk Mountains Grand Traverse between Crested Butte and Aspen. (Special / Alex Fenlon)

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illuminated the lightly falling snow.

Following ski tracks through the woods, we settled into a rhythm of stride-glide-stride for the four-hour trip toward the Friends Hut.

At one point, Danny noted that we must be going the same speed as everyone else, since we hadn't seen anyone else in a while.

"Either that," I grumbled, "or we're hopelessly lost."

At the Friends Hut, volunteers checked our welfare and proffered cups of lukewarm energy drink before we headed up the steep pitch of switchbacks to Star Pass.

Above timberline, the snow came horizontally from one side and then the other, sandblasting any exposed skin and frosting to our wool caps.

At the top of the pass, which we reached about 6 a.m., hardy volunteers pointed out the descent route off a cornice and past big blocks of avalanche debris through a glorious foot of powder into the Taylor River drainage.

Snacking on energy gels and sipping water from our nearly frozen Camelbaks, we made the easy ascent along the Taylor Pass Divide as daylight broke but by that point we were growing weary of being on skis.

Little things - 3-foot humps in the trail that required a herring-bone ascent or my frozen ski binding that made putting on climbing skins a two-person task - loomed as ever-larger frustrations.

The big climbs - to the top of Taylor Pass, and then, unexpectedly, even several hundred feet higher to the top of Gold Hill - were completely demoralizing, especially since thick clouds enshrouded the snowy landscape and wind gusts reached 40 mph.

"I'm not really having any fun," I told Danny, as we searched futilely for signs of other skiers.

Some racers, like Leah Boelman of Telluride, turned back to the rescue tent at Taylor Pass to ride out the worst of the storm.

"It was rough," she said hours later at the finish line. "We had some serious cold issues - frostbite, hypothermia."

Just when things looked desperate, a break in the clouds would reveal other skiers ahead in the distance or a fresh track in the snow that Danny followed like a bloodhound on the trail of a fugitive.

"Some of our veterans say this one was the hardest ever. It was just the whiteout conditions and the wind and the cold," Runge said later.

Finally, we descended into the shelter of the trees and to the Barnard Hut, the last checkpoint, where we had a mandatory 10-minute layover - enough time to down a Coke and change to dry socks.

We slogged the 7 miles of rolling terrain along Richmond Hill and finally hit the summit of Aspen ski area for the speedy trip to the finish line.

Danny, an adept telemark skier, never had grown comfortable skiing downhill on our lightweight touring skis, so he slid on his butt for most of the steep drop down Ajax, at times keeping pace with my "survival snowplow."

Earlier, I had joked with him: "If you want to win this race, you're going to have to be a better skier."

Kloser and his teammate, Steven White, finished first, in 8 hours and 46 minutes.

We were only slightly behind them, wrapping up in 14 hours and 36 minutes - a respectable first effort, although one that any ski bum in Crested Butte could probably reel off with two weeks advance warning.

As for that personal motto, I've now got a new one, courtesy of Homer Simpson, that applies both to my newfound sense of fatigue and to literal endeavors like the Grand Traverse: "Anything that requires 12 steps is not worth doing."

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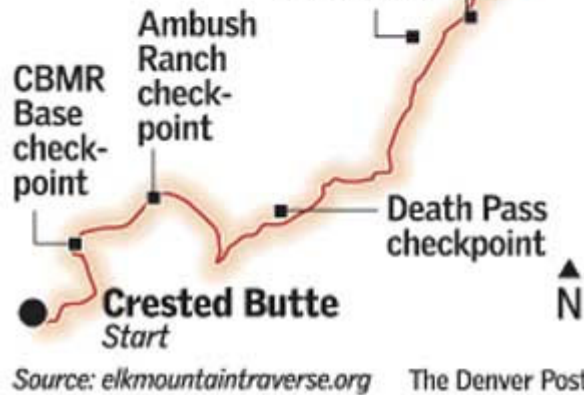
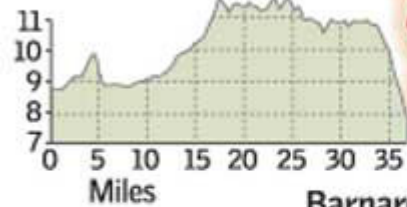
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The course

The trail taken by racers last weekend:

Course elevation profile

In thousands of feet



Source: elkmountaintraverse.org The Denver Post

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