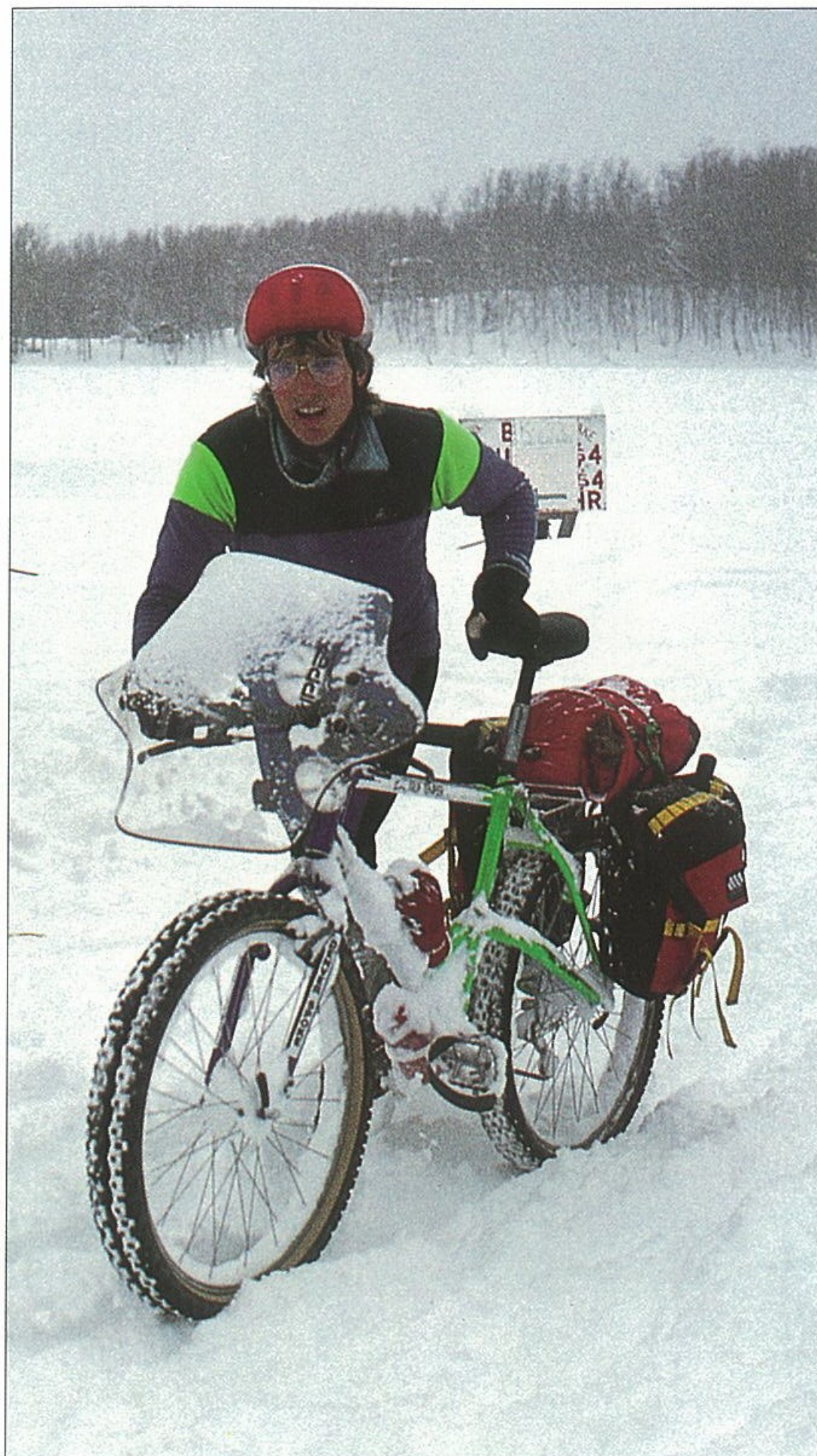


Ultra-Enduros

Ultra-enduro mountain-bike events represent the extreme of what is possible on a bike. Ever since the bicycle was invented, cyclists have been using it as a tool for testing the limits of human endurance. In 1875 in Birmingham, England, bewhiskered pioneers pedaled "ordinaries" around a track nonstop for 12 hours, to see how far and how fast they could travel. These days their spandex-clad equivalents on mountain bikes keep up the tradition outdoors on an even more epic scale — such as discovering how many peaks can be ascended in 24 hours, racing snowbound over 200 miles (322 km) in Alaska in deepest winter, crossing the Sahara in the Paris-Dakar marathon, or taking on the challenge of beating a racehorse in the Welsh mountains. The off-the-wall element in these endurance events is more immediate, going back to the mid-1970s when the mountain bike was still evolving and pioneers enjoyed seeing how fast they could hurl their clunkers down the Repack, a steep hairpin track that dropped 1,300 ft (397 m) in less than 2 miles (3.2 km). Today's ultra racers have a similar thirst for crazed adventure as they apply their skills in the plethora of hair-raising races that are forever springing up, offering low prize money, considerable notoriety, and the chance to discover how long you can survive on a bike.



THE COLDEST BIKE RACE IN THE WORLD

Alaska's nonstop Iditabike contest (above) each February makes unusual demands on both competitors and machinery. One of its innovations is double-width wheels, made by lacing 2 rims to a hub. These dual tires deliver extra traction in weather conditions that can vary from 40°F above (4.4°C) and deep slush to blizzards at 40°F below (-40°C). The course, based on the Iditarod dogsled race, is 210 miles (338 km) of snow-packed trail and frozen rivers through the Alaskan tundra. Contestants need expeditionary skills to keep on course at night and have to pay an evacuation deposit in case they require airlifting out. Conditions were so bad in 1990 that the race was stopped after competitors had only been able to push for the first 52 miles (84 km).

MAN VS SNOW

In the hope of finding snow compact enough to ride, a contestant (left) in Alaska's Iditabike race tows his bike disassembled on a sled.