

# Rock and Ice Ultra: A Real Gem of a Race

By Derrick Spafford

High winds and ominous clouds added to the tension and uncertainty as participants waited for the start of the 2009 BHP Billiton Rock and Ice Ultra. A total of 78 athletes were lined up on the start line, with many frantically doing last minute gear checks to make sure that they had the appropriate survival equipment needed for the duration of the race. In a harsh climate like Yellowknife, NWT in Canada's north, a careless mistake not only affects how well your race will go, but can also be downright dangerous, possibly even life threatening.

## Early beginnings

The BHP Billiton Rock and Ice Ultra is the brainchild of Race Director Scott Smith. An adventure racer himself, Smith was determined to host a unique race on the land that he loves. Smith pitched his idea of a multiday stage race and secured sponsorship from title sponsor BHP Billiton. Smith then met with Yellowknives Dene First Nation Chief Ed Sangris to design a course that would showcase this beautiful land, but also be sensitive to its heritage. Both Smith and Chief Sangris were pleased with the course that was



agreed upon, which is a combination of trails on the lakes and portages of the Akaitcho region. The stage was set, and even though the temperatures dipped down to a bitterly cold -42C during the inaugural race in 2007, the event was a tremendous success and had the ultra world buzzing with excitement. Now in its third year, the BHP Billiton Rock and Ice Ultra has grown steadily to become one of the premier events in the world for adventure seekers.

## Race disciplines

Three race distances comprise the BHP Billiton Rock and Ice Ultra: the single day 45 km Cold Foot Classic; the partially supported three day 135 km K-Rock Ultra; and the marquee event, the self supported six day 225 km Diamond Ultra. Participants can choose between competing on skis or in the snowshoe/foot division. K-Rock and Diamond Ultra participants are required to sleep out on the trail in tents at remote stage camps. K-Rock participants have their overnight gear shuttled between camps, while Diamond racers must be totally self-sufficient and pull all of their gear in a pulk (sled).

## International field

The depth of competition at the BHP Billiton Rock and Ice Ultra is remarkable, as athletes from 11 countries (including a few which do not get snow) have ventured to Canada's north. Some of the top ultrarunners, adventure racers, snowshoe runners, skiers and multisport athletes have traveled here in hopes of victory. For some, victory means first place, but for many others victory is achieved by toughing it out for the duration of the race. In a race such as this, elite athletes rub shoulders and share common grounds with the competitor who has no realistic goal of winning, but will slog through each moment with the burning desire of doing everything possible to make it to the finish line.



## The start

After months of planning and training, the 2009 race is finally underway. Racers can now just focus on getting themselves from one checkpoint to the next, and living in the moment on the trail – reverting to an almost primal existence. Within a few hours of starting the race, weather conditions take a turn for the worse with heavy snowfall combined with high winds to make visibility close to nonexistent. There are times when competitors find it impossible to see the shoreline from the middle of the lakes and must



rely solely on locating the course markings that are staked every hundred meters or so. At times, even these are obscured and it can take a few seconds to locate through the next one through the whiteout. The sense of vulnerability undoubtedly has many racers wondering what they have gotten themselves into. As the course travels past an abandoned beaten up old bus strewn in the deep snow, the sight is eerily reminiscent of the well-known bus that Christopher McCandless lived in before he died in remote Alaska.

## Day one casualties

The first day of competition is a tough one, with the weather taking the victory on the day. A combination of cold wind chill and blowing snow forced a number of competitors to drop out from the race due to hypothermia. Others drop after their bodies or pulks run



into problems during the longer-than-expected day. With the weather being so poor, athlete safety is the primary concern of the race committee. The team at Arctic Response has a fleet of volunteers on the course at all times continually checking on participants and available to evacuate them if needed.

The Powder Point Stage Camp is a welcome destination after a long day on the trail as it marks the end of the race for Cold Foot Classic Participants, where Martin Parnell and Stacey Shand won the Cold Foot Classic foot/shoe division, and Craig Scott and Catherine Mallet won in the ski category.

It also completes the first day of racing for K-Rock and Diamond Ultra competitors, and they scramble into tents to begin the routine of drying gear, consuming much-needed calories and tending to any injuries and blisters. Finally they can hunker down for a well-deserved sleep.

### **Race for the Diamonds**

One might wonder what would possess an individual to participate in the BHP Billiton Rock and Ice Ultra. Upon asking the competitors who are challenging for the win, part of the answer is quite obvious...diamonds! BHP Billiton has donated \$37,000 worth of Ekati Canadian diamonds which are awarded to the first place male and female finishers in the ski and snowshoe/foot divisions of the K-Rock and Diamond Ultras. But the carrot

of reaching the finish line of this race can be just as rewarding as the carats of diamonds. The feeling of accomplishing the monumental goal of competing against nature and themselves to finish the race is priceless. Many of the athletes throughout the race mentioned that this race can be a life-changing experience and that it really gets under their skin.

### **K-Rock Finish**

The snow in the first two days of competition was deep and slow for the most part. Skiers struggled to get good glide, while foot racers fought for purchase in the soft snow and were forced to run in snowshoes for most of the course. Day 3 brought renewed hope for faster conditions on the more heavily-travelled snowmobile trails. Snowshoe/foot competitors finally found that they were able to take their snowshoes off at the end and run free without the added weight on their feet. The final six kilometers of Day 3 completed the 135 km loop and finished with a fast sprint along the ice highway. This marked the end of the race for K-Rock competitors, while Diamond racers still had three days to go. The winners of the K-Rock Ultra were Dennis Colburn and Sara Montgomery in the foot/snowshoe race and Thomsen D'hont and Shawne Kokelj in the ski division.

### **Logistics**

Organizing the BHP Billiton Rock and Ice Ultra is a massive undertaking. In the first few years of the race, race director Scott Smith had a limited number of volunteers available to assist, so he had to be everywhere on the course and seemed to somehow do most of it on his own. The growth of the race has come with the need for more help. The community of Yellowknife has come to his rescue with a large number of volunteers, some who take unpaid holidays, to help out with the race. This has helped to accommodate the increase in participants in the multi-day races. However Smith is still a master of multi-tasking and has his hands into each area of the race almost like a maestro directing his symphony.

### **Camping in comfort**

As much as the thought of camping on the trail and sleeping directly on the snow may not sound like the most comfortable accommodation, the stage camps that greet each competitor after a long day of racing are really quite cozy. Expedition tents and teepees are constructed to accommodate up to eight racers in comfort, while a stove helps competitors to stay warm, dry out gear and boil water for meals.

### **Breathtaking Beauty and Aurora Borealis**

Racing over the frozen lakes and trails, competitors can find themselves marveling at the pristine surroundings and enjoying the experience instead of always thinking about how difficult the long hours of competition can be. To be moved to this level is the sign of a great race. After completing five days of racing in the Diamond Ultra, competitors receive a break from outdoor camping and are treated to a meal and evening of relaxation



at the Trout Rock Lodge. This remote lodge welcomes visitors year round to experience Canada's north. It's ironic that one of the best outdoor experiences of the race occurred while competitors were sleeping under a roof. Just before midnight, Scott Smith announced to the entire camp that they should come outside to experience the magic of the northern lights. The dancing green whirls lit up the sky, and it was worth crawling out of a toasty warm sleeping bag to view.

### **Sprint to the Finish**

The morning of Day 6 had plenty of drama building. Two of the four remaining races were still close and would offer an exciting finish that wouldn't be decided until the end. National class skiers Mike Argue and Phil Villeneuve had waged an epic battle in the ski race and it looked like Day 6 was going to be just as exciting to see who would finally win. Greg McHale looked like he was going to have an easier time with things as he had built up a huge lead and could coast in and savor his second consecutive foot/snowshoe victory. Greg's wife, Denise McHale waged a great battle over the course of the six days with fellow ultrarunner and adventure racer Jen Segger. Denise worked hard to gain a few valuable minutes each day as the pesky Segger gamely fought right to the end while nursing a sore Achilles tendon. Liza Pye continued to ski hard in the women's race and needed to finish to secure her diamond. Both McHales eventually prevailed in the foot/snowshoe category, picking up a matching set of diamonds to take back home. Pye was all smiles as she crossed the finish line for her victory.

As for the closest race of the competition, local skier Mike Argue eventually showed that home court advantage and youth would win over experience this time, as he eventually pulled away from seasoned veteran Villeneuve and won by a margin of just three minutes after six days of hard racing. Villeneuve seemed as though he was already planning his strategy for 2010 just moments after completing the race, as he vowed to train harder for next year.

### **Emotions**

As for the remaining competitors, they continued to cross the finish line for the next several hours. The look of exhaustion mixed with elation to have completed such an incredible adventure and race was clearly indicated across their faces. Having fought many inner personal demons and possible self doubts about being able to complete such a race, you could tell that they were different people from the ones who started the race a mere six days earlier.

For more information on the BHP Billiton Rock and Ice Ultra, please visit [www.rockandiceultra.com](http://www.rockandiceultra.com). Registration is now open for 2010.

# GO HIGHER

## WITH TUBBS MOUNTAINEER SERIES



[WWW.TUBBSSNOWSHOES.COM](http://WWW.TUBBSSNOWSHOES.COM)

**FREE GET OUT AND EXPLORE  
GIFT PACKAGE WITH PURCHASE!**

- Princeton Tec® Aurora Headlamp
- Highgear® Adventure Plus Tool
- American Hiking Society Membership Offer



- Viper™/Python crampons aggressively grip in ascent, descent and sidehill traverse.
- Proprietary ArcTec+™ decking is puncture resistant to -40F and sleek 7075 aluminum frame is light and strong.
- New ActiveLift™ heel lift reduces fatigue during climbs.

