

# FROSTBIKE



The 2024 Fat Pursuit | Written by Nick Edwards.

The warm sun is shining through the gumtrees, sweat runs down my face and into my eyes as I head for the summit of Mt Donna Buang. This will be my final ride in Australia for quite some time as my two-week visit comes to a close. It has been everything I'd hoped for. Precious time spent with family, beach days with good friends, my mother's cooking and of course plenty of time spent in the saddle, 1009 km to be exact, many of them spent side by side with my dad which made them that much more special. It's hard to say goodbye but the feeling is bittersweet as I know my partner Rach will be waiting for me on the other side.



Three flights and 30 hours later, I touch down on Canadian soil. This is only temporary because in four days I will make the long drive from my hometown of Fernie, BC, down to Idaho to race the 2024 Fat Pursuit. It's a 200 km human-powered race on a network of "groomed" snowmobile trails in Island Park, Idaho. It is a backcountry event that requires experience and winter survival skills. You should expect to be challenged, humbled and rewarded in many different ways. You need to be self-sufficient and carry all your own gear, food and water even though there will be three aid stations out on course.

The Canadian winter thus far has been very mild but the forecast for the race is showing anything but. With multiple weather warnings of snowstorms and temperatures dropping as low as  $-40$  degrees Celsius, I need to rethink my approach and spend the next few days gathering everything I think might be necessary to take on what is looking more and more like a survival mission than a bike race.





It's the day before the race. At 4 a.m. my alarm rings and there is no time to snooze. The adventure begins now. A snowplow passes by while I pack the car under the light of my headlamp leaving a temporary path in its wake as the snow continues to fall. It is immediately apparent that this weather warning is not to be taken lightly, visibility is terrible as I crawl along the highway and wind gusts punch into the side of the car making me feel uneasy. I only make it as far as the Elko gas station, where I pull off and sit for half an hour contemplating turning around, before finally deciding to continue on. Things ease up a little as I pass through the small towns of northern Montana and by the time I make it to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem the sun is even trying to make an appearance.

I have been given a hot tip from a local about a warming hut which I plan to sleep in tonight located just minutes from the Sawtelle Mountain Resort which will serve as the start/finish for the race. After a quick inspection the hut looks the goods, so I make my way to the race registration and gear check but before I get there I am stopped by the flashing of red and blue misery lights. My right headlight has thrown in the towel. After establishing there are no dead bodies in the back, only a bike, I manage to avoid a ticket, the policemen deciding the race will be punishment enough.

After registration, racers gather closely outside for the pre-race meeting as the snow begins to fall once more. The organizer, Jay P, has quite a matter-of-fact way of speaking and I get the feeling this year's pursuit has a special meaning to him. Whether all parts of the trail will be groomed or not seems to be up for some debate, but we are reassured, with the general consensus being that there will be some grooming going on. There is an electric type energy when the discussion of the extremely low temps is brought up. This is accompanied by nervous laughter amongst the racers before we are reminded by Jay that this weather is no joke.

With the snow continuing to fall and only one headlight to guide me I decide to sleep in the car where it stands, which conveniently for me is just 50 meters from the start. I crawl into the back and slide into not one but two -18 sleeping bags and begin visualizing tomorrow's race. I feel confident, I feel strong, I have done the work and now it's time to reap the benefits. It takes a while but eventually my mind quietens enough to allow some much-needed sleep.



It's dark as I feel around for my keys to ignite the car heater in the hope of making getting dressed a less taxing task but the turn of the key produces nothing more than a flutter of warning lights. Things take longer when it's cold and because of this I rock up to the line only moments before the start. I'm accompanied by roughly 70 contestants that registered for the event. We do a parade lap of the resort led by Jay. The energy is high with everyone beginning what is shaping up to be an extreme adventure.



During the Fat Pursuit there is a water boil test where you must bring 4 oz of water to the boil before you can continue on. This year it came at km 0. Just as we are about to cross the start line, volunteers begin running through the pack, yelling "water boil!" "water boil!". I had a feeling it might come early so have started with hot water in my thermos and my stove easily accessible. However, by the time other racers have their water boiling I still don't have a flame. I am having trouble priming my MSR dragonfly stove and somehow manage to ingest some gas during my multiple attempts. Finally, with the crowd thinning, gas begins to puddle at the base of my stove rather than in my mouth. My first two lighters fail but my flint gets the job done. Part of my plan had been to ride with the lead group where the stoke is high and it's easier to keep the pedal to the metal. By the time I get a rolling boil and am given the okay from Rebekka Rush, I take a look around and leave just two other riders behind as I roll away.

I take some deep breaths and do my best to let go of any anxiety I have just encountered. It's a long race but I do have some time to make up so decide to burn some matches early and start making my way through the group. With three feet of snow in the past three days, the trails are tough going. To overtake some riders, I have to dismount and run alongside them in the deeper snow before quickly jumping back on my bike. All this movement is accompanied by gasoline burps that continue to further dampen my experience for the first couple of hours. Things improve somewhat when we enter the trees where the trails aren't so windswept and require a little less concentration. I find some rhythm as we begin to climb and for the first time in the race, I catch myself smiling.

"That looks like fun," I think to myself the first time a sledder zips by me. I frog leap back and forth with a group of about 40 sledders for hours. Each time they pass, they take what path lay in front of me with them, churning it up and spitting it back at me. Now I catch myself muttering obscenities at the sledders under my breath. Sick of punching through the snow, I decide to lower my tires' psi, with the valve cap frozen tight I unknowingly loosen the valve core and lose all the air from my rear tire. The sledders are kind and ask if everything is ok as they pass by. Let the emotional rollercoaster begin!

Eventually the trees give way to the alpine and I see a line of people in the distance hike-a-biking their way up to the summit of Two Top. The descent serves as no great relief. It takes me everything to stay upright but sometimes that isn't enough. I take a number of falls between the summit and the first aid station which is at the turnaround point of a 10 km out-and-back section of the course. This gives me the opportunity to see the lead group in action. They pass by in tight single file. There are perhaps four or five of them motoring along and they offer me words of encouragement. It takes me another 40 minutes to arrive at Aid 1, and when I do, it's busy. I hustle to get some 2-minute noodles and a fried peanut butter jelly sandwich. I fill my water and grab a few extra goodies, thinking it might be pretty slow going between here and the second aid station at km 125, roughly 80 km from where I stand.



Photo credit: Eddie Clark Media

Not long after I get back out there I get a message from Rach. She has been keeping an eye on my spot tracker's dot and tells me I'm currently in 14th place. She's proud. My competitive nature is awake and I begin to keep track: 13th, 12th ... nature calls, back to 16th, 15th, 14th ... stop to add a layer – it goes on like this for a while and the riders around me become more familiar. There is a group of three young blokes who have obviously entered this challenge as a unit. We seem to be riding at the same pace and pass each other numerous times, always with a smile and a how ya goin? I begin referring to them inside my head as the three musketeers. "The company must be nice," I think. When the sun falls, so do the temps and I begin having to visualize each stoppage beforehand, to avoid spending any more time than necessary letting my core temperature drop. I lay down my sleeping mat and quickly take off my boots to replace my foot warmers and put on a third pair of socks. I grab the battery pack for my headlamp from my vest where I've been storing it in my best efforts to keep it warm. While I hydrate and take in some more calories, I mentally prepare myself for what I have come to call "night mode". It can get pretty lonely out there in the dark and with not a whole lot to distract you, you begin to look within.

“Night time is the right time” becomes my new mantra. It takes about 20 minutes to regain warmth from that 10-minute stoppage and now I’m wearing everything I have except my big warm cube puffer jacket which I want to keep as my backup if things go south. All the sledders have gone home and the trails harden up enough to get into a good groove. I take great joy in spotting a headlight in the distance and then hunting it down. Because none of the trails have been groomed the descents are full of rollers and I let out cries of joy as I catapult myself through the darkness.

When I first start THE “hike-a-bike” at roughly km 85 I am in good spirits and by this point probably in the top 10. You can tell by the staircase to the left of the tire tracks that nobody has been riding this section but that doesn’t stop the rider in front of me from trying. Each time he falls, I quickly make up any ground he had made on me. “Lucky I’m a good hiker,” I think as it takes me over an hour to walk 5 km. The next five are testing. I stop and throw on my puffer but other than that I just keep putting one foot in front of the other. The following 5 km takes the wind out of my sails. I begin doing the math in my head and come to the conclusion that at this pace it will take me another 9 hours to walk into Aid 2. This is worrying as my supplies of food and water are running thin, not to mention the cold.

So much thought goes into the details. If I want to stop to have a drink from my thermos and down a gel, I make sure I do it at the base of a climb to give myself a better chance of warming up. I am now continually moving my fingers and toes. My balaclava is frozen stiff like a chopping board and because of this I begin to worry about the coverage of my nose. I think of all the climbers with frostbite I have seen in the numerous mountaineering films I’ve watched. From this point on I make a conscious effort to breathe in through my nose, reducing the risk of getting liquid in my lungs, then breathing out in an upward direction in an attempt to warm my nose.

I pass a rider setting up his bivvy. I can’t bear the thought of setting up shop for the night. I can’t imagine being warm enough in my sleeping kit and knowing that if I’m not, then the time spent faffing around would be too hard to come back from. Just as I have accepted the fact that I will be walking until mid-morning, three lights pop over a hill behind me and begin descending – on their bikes! After walking for the past 5 hours I had forgotten that this was even an option. I go to throw my leg over my bike but nothing happens – is my hip frozen? I lower my bike to the ground and go to step over it, and when I do, my frozen ass hairs are torn from my butt cheeks, just like the Velcro wallet I had back in the 90’s. This brings me some comic relief as I raise the bike between my legs. It takes a while but I get my balance back.

I’m back on my bike and although I have been thinking of quitting for some time, right now in this moment of joy I begin to believe again. My legs feel decent and I begin to push. I break the elastic with the three musketeers and I’m alone, grinding away with no one watching, feeling pretty damn alive. Like everything, this doesn’t last forever. My legs get tired and I resort to walking most of the hills. This is not because of the condition of the trail, but fatigue. With 20 km to the aid station, I’m now fresh out of food and water. The only silver lining to this is that there are no more reasons to stop moving. This is good because now, in the wee hours of the morning, with no cloud cover it is taking me half an hour to warm up again after a 30-second break. I pass the odd racer bivvied up on the side of the trail, then all of a sudden I’m passing one every couple of minutes. I even stop and ask a few if they are okay before realizing I’m talking to an adolescent pine tree. “This is nothing new to me,” I think as I swerve around the dead cats that are littered along my path.

I see what looks like a man walking around with a flashlight on top of a hill in the distance. I pray to the universe that it's an organizer who's come out to meet me to tell me I'm off course, and to give me a ride out of here to somewhere warm. In actual fact, it is the safety light from Edyn's bike. I recognise it from the homemade bright pink and blue pogies. He is the first rider I've seen for hours that I am certain is not a figment of my imagination. Just moments later, as if the universe is answering my prayer, some sort of UFO approaches me head on. "Are you ok? Do you need anything?" asks one of the volunteer snowcat drivers. It feels as if I'm outside myself watching on, as I listen to my response. "I'm a bit cold, but otherwise I'm great!" Before I continue on, I tell them of Edyn's whereabouts. As it turns out he has had a mechanical and has to take a ride out of there.

Moments later, the universe gives me another chance. A second cat driver seems to be collecting a bike. I assume it has been left by a competitor who has made the smart decision to call it quits. "You ok, man?" he asks. "I'm cold. I'm ok. How are you?" "Me?!" the man replies with a chuckle, "Great! Toasty! It's 80 degrees Fahrenheit in this thing". "Way to rub it in," I think to myself as I begin to turn the pedals again. Before I take off, I turn back and ask if there is a fire at the aid station. He assures me there will be. This little bit of assurance is enough to convince me to keep going, plus with this many people around I feel a sense of safety and as if the aid must be nearby.

I don't make it much further before I buckle. Now, riding through the coldest section of the course, the temperatures continue to plummet and I am cold to my core. Panic begins to set in. I seriously consider testing out my spot tracker's SOS button, but at a glance I see that it is now lifeless. No flashing lights, frozen, dead. Without it, no one will know where I am. To change the batteries, I would need the dexterity of my bare fingers. This just isn't an option and who knows, maybe it doesn't work. More panic.

Thoughts of the things that matter most become more clear than ever before. I think of Rachel and how selfish it is for me to gamble with my life when I have made the promise to come home safe. I think of my family and how grateful I am to have been taken in by such loving parents. I think how much pain it would cause my mother if I didn't make it out of this stupid bike race alive.

Fight or flight. Sink or swim.

Time to get the fuck out of here! My legs are as heavy as lead, but that doesn't seem to matter anymore as I pedal through the forest. When the trail isn't rideable, I run. Eventually, I see a car in the distance but I try to keep a lid on my excitement as it is more than likely just another hallucination. Then another car and another. I'm close. It's as if my body knows I'm going to be safe, and so it begins to shut down. I know I am close but it feels just out of reach. I'm so confused, walking back and forth, not really knowing where I am or where to go. At this point I let out a few cries for help. With no one to hear them, they just trail off into the darkness.

Next thing I know I am entering the Harriman State Park and I am met by a photographer named Eddie who has some words of encouragement that I can't remember. "I don't know how I got here," is the only reply I can muster. He points me in the direction of a warm fire and food. I roll into the aid station to the sound of cowbells and volunteers cheering. I am completely delirious.

Photo credit: Eddie Clark Media



It feels as if their excitement quickly turns to concern as they usher me into the warming yurt. I take a seat next to the wood stove. The company is very comforting. I begin to feel a little lighter as I am helped out of my wet layers and start replenishing my body with everything that's on offer: pancakes, bacon, sausages, hot chocolate and coke. I start to assess the damage. I am told that my nose is ok. I take a look at my hands, nothing too out of the ordinary. Time to check the feet. I'm nervous as I take off my socks because I'm scared of what I might see. One of the volunteers offers to take a look and I am given the all clear. This brings more relief. The calories are starting to do their thing. Now that I can string a sentence together, I start chatting with the generous souls around me, gathering information as I go. As day breaks outside I am told that it is  $-37$  degrees Celsius. I am just the fifth person to make it to this checkpoint, and so far, nobody has decided to continue on. Deep down inside I feel a tiny competitive spark. Another volunteer and two-time racer, Nick, reminds me that the next section is a loop and I will never be too far from help. Now a small flame flickers within. It's around this time I catch a glimpse of my feet out of the corner of my eye. The flame that was beginning to burn inside is violently stomped out. My heart jumps into my throat and I feel as if I am drowning in anxiety. My toes are purple, all of them. Dark purple.

Nick loads my bike into the back of his truck and drives me back to the Sawtelle Mountain Resort. The decision has been made for me. My race is over.

Jay is kind enough to let me lie in his bed where I manage to fall asleep for the first time in over 24 hours. My toes continuously change color for the rest of the day and by night most of them have returned to a more acceptable color with the exception of the fifth toe on my right foot, which is now black with a waxy texture.

I make a couple of trips to the ER before a friend puts me in touch with a frostbite expert who is surprised that I wasn't given the drug Ilprost during the first 48 hour window to open my blood vessels, allowing blood to flow more freely to my toes. Without it, I am told I just have to wait and see what happens. In the following weeks, I worry more about the complete loss of feeling in a number of toes on my left foot than I do about my black pinky. It was a little touch-and-go there for a moment, but the human body is amazing and I am told I will keep all my toes. My pinky gets covered in blood blisters before shedding all its dead tissue the way a snake sheds its skin, leaving behind what looks like a brand new baby toe. The sensation in my left foot is returning ever so slowly and I have faith that it will continue to do so.

To me, these experiences are a little like life, jam packed into the duration of a race. I experience such a range of emotions. Pure joy, anxiety, depression, empathy. You have to adapt. You are repeatedly beaten down and must continue to rise up, overcoming adversity. It wasn't the day I had dreamed of, but still, like every other experience in my life, I am grateful. Grateful to have the opportunity to peel back the ego and expose my raw self, seeing what I'm made of. Grateful for a new perspective and grateful for this time spent recovering in solitude giving me a chance to reflect before I return to a life in society where things sometimes aren't so clear. This race has left me hungry, not just to take my biking to the next level, but my life too.

My hat goes off to the five contestants that were able to pursue their way to the finish line.



A special thanks to Gearhub Sports for their support, making it possible to continue riding all year round and take part in events such as this one. For more adventures follow me on instagram: @nmeinsta



