

ROCK AND ICE ULTRA

....cold weather racing at it's most extreme!

Every sporting event has its unique challenges in addition to the physical exertion. In the Rock and Ice Ultra, it is dealing with the extreme cold and dry climate. During the 2007 Rock and Ice, much of the field dropped out before the end of the first day, many with mild hypothermia. These athletes were not underdressed; rather, their clothing got damp from sweat.

During a cold-weather event, perspiration management is as critical as hydration and food intake. When exercising in cold weather, there is a point within your clothing where the temperature drops below zero. At that point, perspiration migrating through your clothing will condense into ice. This will cause your clothing to lose its insulation, and, during a multi-day event, it also means that they will have to be dried. Believe me, you don't want to add to your chore list at the end of the day. Fortunately, there are a number of simple strategies to manage perspiration.

The first strategy is the simplest. **Avoid sweating.** Monitor your sweating like you monitor your heart rate and your hydration level. If you notice yourself sweating, dial down the pace and lose a layer. If you walk rather than run up the hills, and keep your skin cool, your sweat output will be kept to a minimum.

If you are racing the Cold Foot Classic, another option, if you can arrange it, is to have a friend at a checkpoint with a change of clothes ready. Works great, but not always practical.

The final strategy is to vent, rather than wick. Many garments claim to 'wick' perspiration away from your skin. Wicking may remove sweat from your skin, but it's still in your clothing, where it will eventually freeze anyway. Rather, wear loose clothing which will allow air to circulate through your clothes. This will vent sweat straight into the atmosphere. As soon as you warm up, do what you can to increase air circulation; untuck your shirt and open up zippers. You'll arrive dry and warm at the end of the day.

So what to wear?

Of course, everyone is different, and the ideal clothing depends on factors such as your own metabolism, your planned level of exertion, and the weather. The only way to nail this down is to experiment for yourself. But I hope this offers a good starting point:

Upperbody

Skip the base layer; it inhibits venting. Go straight for a loose-fitting fleece or wool layer directly over skin. Over that, have a light windbreaker, which keeps weight down and will dry quickly. Microfiber fleece is a comfortable material as a wind breaker, but I find it heavy and it accumulates sweat. Keep a second, loose fitting insulating in your pack for emergencies, and remember to remove your windbreaker whenever possible, to avoid sweat build-up. Skiing hard, I found the fleece and occasional use of a thin windbreaker sufficient for the -20 to -35 temperature range experienced during the first Rock and Ice.

Legs

Legs don't tend to sweat as much, so there's a little more flexibility here. Any thick long-underwear with a windbreaker over top will work fine. Insulated lycra pants also work well (with a second windbreaking layer on top once the temperature drops below -20 C or so).

Hands

I tend to have cold hands that can sweat a lot, so I prefer two layers of mittens. To manage sweat here, try a thin mitt with a second outer mitt which can be easily removed as soon as hands start to sweat. I used simple fleece mitts for both layers, but any breathable material would be fine. A second inner mitt in reserve is a good idea for when the frost does eventually build up on your mitt.

Feet

Again, sweat management is the order of the day, this time with the objective of keeping your boots dry over a multi-day event. I like to use a thin performance wool sock, with a plastic bag over my sock to keep the sweat in my socks and out of the boots. If you have fresh bags and fresh socks for each day of the Rock and Ice, there will be no need to dry clothing in the evenings, and your boots will be dry every morning.

Backpacks

Backpacks are tricky in the cold, as they tend compromise the flow of air around your back, leading to sweating. The best strategy here is to keeping straps loose, and put as much weight as you can over your hips rather than your shoulders.

Food on the Go in the Cold

There were some tragic scenes at the first Rock and Ice, as athletes discovered that energy bars freeze solid. Very solid. Whatever food you bring with you, make sure it is edible when frozen. Over-baked cookies or the Nature Valley granola bars work well, as they are dry and difficult to choke down regardless of temperature. If you do use energy bars or some other food that freezes, be sure to have it in bite-sized chunks before the event, which can be thawed in your mouth.

It is essential that your food be instantly accessible on the go. If you have to take your pack off to get to your snacks, you probably won't eat as often as you should. This could either be a pocket, or a pouch on the side of your pack.

Water

A thermos is a must during the Rock and Ice...and leave your water bottle at home. Water bottles can freeze surprisingly quickly, and drinking cold water will leave you chilled. My preference is to keep a thermos of luke-warm sport drink. It is easy to drink quickly, and you'll be thankful for the warm fluid. Warm water will not always be available on the trail during the Rock and Ice, but a thermos will prevent cold water from freezing outright. Monitor your fluid intake carefully during the Rock and Ice. The sensation of thirst seems to be delayed in the cold, and although you will be surrounded by snow and ice, Yellowknife air is very dry.

Skis and Wax

Remember that the Rock and Ice trail will not be groomed, and the surface can be soft. Most skiers used touring skis during the first Rock and Ice, of about 55 mm wide. The wide skis track straight out of the groomed trail, and provide flotation and ankle support. Some participants also used racing skis. If you go this route, I would recommend skis with a lot of curve (are wider at the ends than in the middle), as these will be easier to handle on the ungroomed trail.

Expect dry and crystalline snow conditions. In Yellowknife snow, regular kick wax can wear through very quickly. All skiers have their preferences, but I had good results with Grip Tape by Start. It keeps it's kick over a very wide range of temperatures, and it lasts. Aside from a few patch-jobs, I had the same strips on my skis from January through to the end of the season, and that included the 140 km K-Rock event. Not having to re-wax every night was a huge advantage.