

The last degree

PART 1 OF 3

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90 kilometres from the North Pole

Fred tried in vain to sleep, to ignore the fact that it was bright outside in the middle of the night. Lying in his sleeping bag, in a two-man tent perched atop the polar ice cap, he focused his eyes on the GPS device in his hand.

"Right now we're moving .7 kilometres an hour due south," he said evenly.

Fred Losani's expression often seemed to convey both intensity and mirth, and something of an unhinged quality. He waited for it, for his tent mate and longtime friend Steve Stipsits to process the information, and the implications -- that, even as they lay in the tent, or as they skied hard all day, the vast sheet of thawing ice underneath them moved south, by the minute pushing them away from their destination.

Stipsits nervously did the math: 0.7 km/h, 24 hours a day, assuming constant drift, means the ice will move 17 kilometres a day -- nearly as fast as they could ski. They would run out of time, and food, well before they could possibly achieve their goal of reaching the North Pole.

Their group was near the top of the world -- near, but so far away, and moving further away even as they stood still.

Stipsits felt panic, imagined his wife and three young daughters cosy back home in Hamilton. What was he even doing here? Here he was with Fred in this cramped tent, having to pee in a bottle kept in his sleeping bag so as not to freeze in the act outside, in this -- this frozen jail, he fumed -- and on top of it all, even if they skied their hearts out ...

The whole group was tired, hungry and cold. He was not the only one on the expedition thinking it: We are not going to make it.

Three months earlier

Hamilton

Losani entered the warmth of the Edgewater Manor in Stoney Creek, while outside, snow fell on nearby Lake Ontario. It was Jan. 6, and the restaurant was hosting a fundraising event. Losani was not big on small talk at such affairs, but he had committed to be there.

For 12 years he had run his father's home-building company along with his brother, Lino. His father, John, had immigrated to Canada from Italy in 1960 with two young kids and 75 bucks in his pocket, and started from scratch.

Losani did not have a similar hand dealt to him, did not have the same mountain to climb as did his father. And so it was as though he sought other kinds of challenges -- extreme skiing, where he and Stipsits hopped from helicopters into deep powder atop impossibly steep peaks. He went shark diving in Nassau, and, to inject some excitement, 33 metres down, among about 20 darting sharks, Losani took off his mask and bit his buddy on the calf.

BUT IN JANUARY 2006, Losani was 43 and had not put anything on the line for a long time. The home-building business was lucrative, he had three healthy kids, a nice house atop the escarpment with a view of the lake, he enjoyed fine wine and food. Life was good -- maybe too good. Maybe not the best thing for the soul, he thought.

In the Edgewater he spotted his friend, Peter Turkstra.

"Fred, how are you?" Turkstra said, then added, "You want to come to the North Pole?"

Losani paused.

"You're one of the only guys I know crazy enough to do it," Turkstra continued.

"Sure."



SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Driving home that night, Losani cracked open his cell and called Stipsits. Like Losani, Stipsits had years before taken over a home-building company his father founded after moving to Canada from Europe.

"You'll never guess where you're going," Losani said.

"OK, so tell me."

"The North Pole."

"You gotta be kidding. Who goes to the North Pole?"

Losani knew Stipsits would be up for it. And in seconds, he was on board, the concept too exciting to resist -- a chance to be among the relative few to set foot on the northern end of Earth's axis of rotation.

"Sounds great. Awesome."

But after the initial excitement passed, indecision crept in. Over the next couple of weeks they all mulled it over. Stipsits, for one, loved skiing, had done the Alps in his native Austria. But like the others he had never winter camped before, the warm fire of a ski chalet had always been nice and close.

Most alarming, Stipsits learned that the greatest danger of a North Pole trek was being attacked by a polar bear. He talked to his wife, Elizabeth. She was worried, and so was he. He read that polar bears are "stealth hunters; the victim is often unaware of the bear's presence until the attack is under way."

On the other hand, there was another factor pushing him to go for it. Almost as soon as Turkstra had told Losani of the trip, he had also suggested they turn it into a fundraising trip for needy kids in Hamilton.

Charity ran in Turkstra's blood. His grandfather had a towering reputation in Hamilton for his philanthropy, which was rooted in his Christianity; he had helped found Redeemer College. And Turkstra's father, Carl, gave generously to inner-city causes, poverty, the arts.

Turkstra had never similarly put himself out there in a major way in fundraising. But now, at 41, he had an opportunity to shake up midlife on a daunting adventure, and help kids at the same time.

Turkstra was in with both skis, and so were five others: Paul Hubner, Losani, Scott Shawyer, Stipsits and Ted Wilkes. They would be joined by Doug Stoup, a California-based adventurer, who would act as their guide.

They each paid their own way, the cost of the adventure was extreme in itself: \$20,000 each. But the much larger number was what they hoped to raise for inner-city kids in need: half-a-million dollars.

As for polar bears, Stoup said he had not seen them venture north of 86 degrees north latitude. They would start their ski to the pole further north -- at 89 degrees, or one degree (just over 100 kilometres) from the pole. Sounds good, thought Stipsits, except for the fact that polar bears can run 100 kilometres a day. Who's to say they might not stray a few degrees north?

They had less than two months to get in shape for the trip. That meant hitting the gym hard, burning off their good living. Up north each man would have to pull a sled weighed down by 45 kilograms of gear and supplies.

One afternoon in Hamilton, as a snow storm raged, Turkstra got a message from his office. It was Ernie Schramayr, a personal trainer and former CFLer whom Turkstra had hired. Schramayr wanted to do a workout at the Chedoke stairs. Turkstra looked out the window. Now? How about using the treadmill?

"You did say you were going to the North Pole," Schramayr quipped.

THE GROUP FLEW out of Toronto for Germany on April 6, then connected on a flight to Norway, before flying four hours further north, the view spectacular, snow-covered mountain peaks, fjords that looked from the air like dark blue glass; and then took off over the Norwegian Sea to an archipelago of islands called Svalbard, landing at Longyearbyen, a settlement of about 2,000 people and considered the most northerly permanent town in the world.

When they landed, they were at 78 degrees north latitude. It was a desolate place, surrounded by mountains, a scattering of small buildings, a few power lines and lots of snowmobiles.

They tested their sleds, and Stoup had them fill two massive Ziploc bags full of food for the ski including chocolate, nuts, trail mix, beef jerky and granola.

The group ate pizza at a cafe for their last real dinner. They had to be up the next day at 4 a.m. for a six-hour flight to Barneo, a temporary ice camp atop the Arctic Ocean jointly run by the French and Russians. It is rebuilt each year and sits on shifting ice at approximately 89 degrees north latitude.

They were pumped, but apprehensive. The charity drive had upped the ante. It was not just an extreme vacation, it was a public adventure, with everyone back home watching. Kids in their classrooms followed their progress every day in The Hamilton Spectator.

They had to make it.

That final night at dinner a couple of men entered the cafe who had just returned from the Barneo ice camp. The words they spoke struck fear in their hearts.

"It's crawling with polar bears up there."

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