

## 90 degrees

### Journey to the South Pole, Part 3 of 3

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65 kilometres from the North Pole

The group awoke early Saturday morning camped beside a 15-metre gap of open water. It was Day 5 of their ski to the Pole. As always it was damp, and the wind chill was -21 C, their water bottles had frozen overnight inside the tents.

It wasn't a particularly cold year in the Arctic, but at 88 per cent humidity, it was always wet. Every night they tucked their sweaty clothes inside their sleeping bags to dry them out, stuffed socks and shirts under their armpits, between their legs, anywhere it was warm and dry relative to the air.

That morning, the GPS said they had drifted in reverse less than four kilometres -- an improvement over the trend so far.

ON SUNDAY, Day 6, 48 kilometres remained to the pole. They skied 17 kilometres that day, even while encountering more than 200 open-water leads and more ice fields. Optimism grew.

On Monday, April 17, Day 7, they skied nine hours, covering 21 kilometres, the drift no longer a factor, and the terrain flatter. As always, during breaks they had snacks, drank water, and, exhausted, said little. They just stood and stared, icicles forming on the beards they had grown, taking in the endless vista of snow and ice and a sky glowing with silver light.

Then it was back on track, the travel monotonous, yet by this point also spiritual. To Fred Losani, the solitude was the best part. Regular life is always so busy. But on the precipice of the North Pole you are spent physically, with nothing to see but a frozen desert, silence but for skis cutting through snow, your mind filled with nothing but white space. None of them had ever experienced anything like it before.

They continued to watch for polar bears, although no tracks had been detected. In fact, while not ready to discount the threat altogether, it became clear that the men in Barneo who had warned the Pole was "crawling with polar bears" had been putting them on.

That night they stopped 10 kilometres from the Pole. The next day, Day 8, Tuesday, April 18, it got colder, a wind chill of -28 C. They hit more fields of ice ridges and leads. But just after noon, the end was in reach. What would the Pole look like, they wondered? What if it was open water, and they couldn't stand on the magical spot?

They inched closer, checking the GPS. Stoup led them in one direction, then another, the six men zigzagged behind. Then he handed the GPS to Scott Shawyer, who was the engineer in the group. They stopped, stepped out of their ski bindings, walked side-by-side, counting aloud with each stride: 89.994, 89.995.

"Nine-ninety-six, nine-ninety-seven, nine-ninety-eight, nine-ninety-nine."

One more step.

The GPS showed 89:999. It wasn't capable of displaying the actual number where they now stood.

90 degrees.

The top of the world.

The North Pole.

Euphoria, giddy, jumping up and down, high-fives, hugs all around. And then perfect quiet, nobody saying a word.

It was a simple spot, covered in powder snow about 200 metres from a field of rubble ice sparkling in the sunlight.

Each man had planned a ritual. Steve Stipsits stepped back into his skis, skied a circle around the group. "I have just circumnavigated the globe and skied through every time zone in record time," he shouted. Then he used a hunting knife to chip away pieces of ice to keep.



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One of the guys tried to shoot the rifle in celebration --except it didn't fire, it was frozen. All their fears of a polar bear, and if one had actually attacked, the rifle would have been useless.

Stoup addressed each member, telling them how proud he was. They set up tents, and, finally, called for a helicopter in Barneo to come pick them up -- the call they had been tempted to make when things looked bleak.

They took turns on the satellite phone for media interviews. The word back in Hamilton was that the fundraising campaign was approaching its \$500,000 goal.

Later, the thropping of blades sounded in the distance and they packed up their tents for the last time. The hour-long ride back to the Barneo ice camp in the sunshine took them back over terrain they had just vanquished, offering a chance to reflect on what they had achieved.

They had to spend two days in Barneo before the next flight came in, all of them pumped from the experience. Fred Losani bought a bottle of vodka from a Russian staffer in the camp.

"I won't go into the gory details," Turkstra wrote in his diary. "But this is what I can tell you: Russians can drink and love to join in ... and trying to play euchre while drinking vodka is hopeless."

TALK SOON turned to the next adventure. Would there be one? Stipsits said he never wanted to winter camp again. And other regular trips had been planned, golf getaways where no one would have to boil snow every morning -- and no place with the word "pole" in it.

They flew back to Norway, connected to Munich. The last stage was the transatlantic flight to Canada.

"In twelve hours I see my family," Turkstra wrote. "I can't wait."

About a year later Fred Losani took a trip to Monaco, and while there he visited Casino Royale in Monte Carlo. There was an exhibition documenting the North Pole expedition of Monaco's Prince Albert. It described how difficult the trek had been.

Losani smirked. He had seen the prince's support crew in action on the polar ice cap. Dogsled team? Advance camps? Air support?

"And he had Annabelle Bond with him," Losani cracked. "My tentmate was Steve Stipsits. No comparison!"

Losani was up for a new adventure, and eventually plans back in Hamilton gathered momentum. For their next, and perhaps last, extreme journey they decided to go south -- way south, to ski the last degree to the South Pole. If any place on Earth could be tougher to handle than the Arctic, it was Antarctica, 9,000 feet above sea level, and a deathly cold average winter temperature of -60 C. It is said that in 1914, explorer Ernest Shackleton placed an ad looking to recruit men for an excursion to Antarctica. It read: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success."

For the Hamilton group, fundraising for inner-city kids to support nutrition and arts programs would again be the driving force behind. Turkstra, Losani and Stipsits were on board, this time with newcomer Mark MacLennan. Once more they hired Doug Stoup as guide. The trip cost, again paid from their own pockets, was about three times the price tag of the North Pole adventure.

The thought had occurred to Stipsits: with expenses like that, in theory each of them could instead cut a cheque for charity and forgo the frost. But he realized that the impact of the ventures on fundraising far exceeded anything they could donate on their own.

"Through these stunts we have connected people with causes," Stipsits said. "Corporate sponsors have gone on to support kids in need on an ongoing basis. There is a ripple effect caused by raising awareness."

The South Pole presents a whole new set of challenges, and, while they do not remotely approach the perils of Shackleton's day, if the katabatic Antarctic winds blow hard, they could get bogged down in their tents for days.

No matter how the new trip goes, though, the fundraising program is well in place. And they will always have the memory of their triumphant moment at the top of the world in 2006.

Stipsits keeps more than a memory -- he has a souvenir. It is the ice he carved up at 90 degrees. He keeps it in a bullet-shaped stainless-steel Thermos, in a freezer, where it will stay, for now.

And then?

"Someday I'm going to have a very special martini."

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