

‘I think life is meant to be more than a string of brutally long, mundane sort of days’

# Adventurer wants to be third man to do trek

By Michael Ruffles

**T**om Smitheringale wants to be the third man to walk 800km to the north pole solo. More people have walked on the moon.

In late February, the 39-year-old personal trainer, of Fremantle, will trek out from the northern tip of Canada for the unsupported expedition to the geographic north pole. If successful, he will become the first Australian member of a limited group to have completed the journey, but it is perilous. Of the last five to try and fail, two have died.

"To put some perspective on that, over 3000 people have climbed Everest, only two people have achieved what I am attempting to do," Smitheringale says.

"More people have walked on the moon than have done this. It has been described as being 10 times more difficult than climbing Mt Everest, and it will be done in just under 70 days on the ice."

Smitheringale is due to start on February 26, at the start of spring when polar bears emerge from hibernation. Early in the trip the bears will be "very frisky and I will appear very appetising to them".

He will be hauling a sled, which will start at 180kg and get lighter as food is consumed and fuel is burned, that he will have to navigate over the undulating floating, frozen ocean. The ice will also have cracks "as wide as a footpath, or as wide as a freeway" which he will have to swim across, with a dry suit on and with the sled also sealed up and floating behind him.

Rather than being a flat surface as

people imagine, the arctic ice is rugged and wavy, like other oceans only solid. The two-part sled is articulated, giving it greater manoeuvrability. The lighter back half will be jettisoned about 20 or 30 days into the trip.

The ice also drifts on the water below, and while it can move in any direction he will focus on whether it is positive or negative compared to the destination and its speed. On a shorter trip in April, the group woke up one morning 12km closer than it had been the night before.

"That's very good, but the flip side of that is you can go backwards and you can wake up in the morning being back where you started from, psychologically that has a huge impact," he says.

"That's not something you can predict and it's not something you can control."

The isolation will be broken by daily contact with his internet manager in Exmouth, WA, who will update the One Man Epic website with all the good and bad news, and contact with schoolchildren.

Always present will be the cold, ranging between minus 25 degrees and minus 50 degrees Celsius. This is a good time of year, temperature-wise, and the recent winter means the ice will be at its hardest. However, it is still deathly cold, and Smitheringale says it is difficult to explain the pain to those who have not experienced prolonged exposure to such temperatures.

"It's a complete inundation of pain, it's a sort of suffocation of it," he says.

"Your entire compass of your consciousness is devoted exclusively



**LONG HAUL:** Tom Smitheringale training at South Beach, Fremantle and, inset left, snow-faced on a previous North Pole expedition in April. Main photo: GEORGINA WALSH

to fighting it. You don't have a family, you don't have a future or a past, you just have the next footstep. And the days feel like death and it's when you stop that you come back to life.

"People, a lot of people will focus on the physical, but this is much more a mental challenge. The hours of training in the gym or pulling the sled count for nothing if the mind isn't strong. It's a very dehumanising experience, you have to think of yourself as a machine not a man."

So what type of man would put himself through such an ordeal?

"A lot of people ask what makes a good explorer, and there are many qualities and attributes - ability, self-belief, desire, commitment, discipline, authority, will and suffering - but I think because of

what I do is so difficult in many ways those qualities can most easily be described as toughness."

Smitheringale explains that he did not respect "logical limitations" as a boy, and not having a father figure as a boy has led him to seek out the heroic in others. He joined the British Army at 21, staying for five years and at one point guarding Diana, Princess of Wales. He returned to Australia and found a corporate job, but eventually the need for activity got the better of him and he moved into adventure event management and then to personal training.

He found another heroic type in Borge Ousland, "the polar equivalent of what Lance Armstrong is to cycling", as he set about fulfilling a childhood dream. Smitheringale and

Ousland were part of a team that had two shorter trips to the north pole in April. Ousland was the first to achieve the feat Smitheringale is embarking on, and has become a mentor to the younger Australian.

There is a team helping him get to the start line, but it is self-evident he is extremely self-reliant, and it seems he always has been.

"When I'm left with my own self, that's all I've ever felt safe or confident with, and I understand that and can control it," he says.

With no wife, partner or children, he believes now is the right time.

"My mum was the first person I spoke to, when I announced that I was going to do this, and this is something that's happening with her blessing, so I have her support. She's

been through the good times and the bad, I've never raised a glass with a better friend. And she's been very supportive and she knows this is something that's been in me for a long time.

"I have to risk dying every day to have any chance of success. That would be very hard to do, I think, if I was married."

The training would be gruelling enough for most people, and there is more to it than countless hours of building up strength and stamina by dragging a sled along the sand. A tall man at 200cm, Smitheringale was a powerful 108kg before bulking up with good fats for the trip, aiming to weigh more than 130kg when he sets out. Anything above will be considered a bonus. Food, like all

aspects of the trip, has been carefully calculated to last 70 days. The bulk of the weight in his sled will be food and fuel, with 85kg of food and 42 litres of fuel at the start of the journey. Camera and communications equipment, batteries, firearms, clothing, dry gear and personal items make up the rest of the weight.

Every day he will take in 10,000 calories, or as he tells school groups, the equivalent of 25 Big Macs.

"That is made up of uninspiring, freeze-dried meals, powdered food and chocolates," he explains.

"It has a high fat content, and it must weigh under 1.2kg per meal. The incentive for me is the more I eat the faster I will go. It is anticipated I will lose up to 20kg on the ice in body weight, so I will come back like a well-carved chess piece.

"The training is some long hours, the volume of the training has increased. It's important that I'm topping up all the calories I'm using. So on a lot of these training sessions I'm taking a small hamper of food with me and drinking a lot of olive oil as well, I've got to consume good fats and that's a way of getting my calories up."

Not exactly tasty, but given his very survival depends on being in the right condition this is being lapped up without complaint. It is while speaking of this part of his diet that Smitheringale quips, "Fear is a great motivator."

That is as close as he will come to acknowledging any apprehension. Rather than being daunted at the scale of the task ahead, he is excited.

This month he starts using an industrial freezer to begin acclimatising, and in January flies to Canada for a month of intense training, getting used to the cold and final preparations.

"That month will be critical, but it's also something I'm looking forward to. It's when I will be divorced of all social ties and distractions, and I will just be able to focus completely on the expedition."

All aspects of his preparation, conditioning and equipment have been carefully planned or chosen to give him the best chance of success and survival.

Equipment has been sourced from around the world, from his socks to facemask, which has led to the odd situation of travelling to Bali to pick up his sled from a Norwegian supplier.

Much of his gear has been custom made, and he says every time a package arrives in the mail he feels like a kid at Christmas.

"I think a lot of people, really, want to do something like this. 'I think life is meant to be more than a string of brutally long, mundane sort of days.'"