



MEDIA UPDATE

Thursday 25 February 2010

FINAL COUNTDOWN FOR SOLO EXPEDITION TO NORTH POLE

Western Australian polar explorer Tom Smitheringale sets off from northern Canada this week full of hope and confidence in his quest to become the third person in history to reach the North Pole solo and unsupported.

Tom is scheduled to depart from McClintock Inlet at the northernmost edge of Canada in the very early hours of Saturday (WST) to trek 800km of frozen Arctic sea on foot, alone, and dragging a 160kg sled, to the North Pole. It will take 70 days in temperatures as low as minus 50 degrees.

To get there, Tom will have to ski, climb, guard against polar bear attack, risk falling through the increasingly thin Arctic ice and swim across leads (breaks in the ice). Five people have tried the same feat in the past five years. All failed and two have died trying. In the history of arctic exploration only two men have ever reached the North Pole solo and unsupported and Tom will be the first Australian ever to make it.

After a spending a month training and acclimatising in Iqaluit, northern Canada, Tom is ready to tackle the extremes of the Arctic on his way to the Pole. He is excited about his impending expedition despite recent news of an unusually high number of breaks and fractures in the ice near his start point. The ice has been broken apart by repeated storms this winter, causing frequent fracturing and the production of open leads and very thin ice.

But Tom remains confident. "I'm feeling better than good about my preparation," Tom said yesterday from the tiny town of Resolute in the very north of Canada, a four-hour plane ride from his start point at McClintock Inlet. "It has been everything it should have been and there is no shortcut to experience and hard lessons that only come from making your own mistakes. I start with no injuries, no frostbite, in high spirits and with a heart full of hope."

Previously, Tom has completed two shorter group treks to the North Pole with Norwegian polar legend Borge Ousland, who has been an important mentor to Tom in the lead up to his One Man Epic. Borge has taught Tom all he can but said experience

and details you learn along the way cannot be taught. He will be keeping a close eye on Tom's progress.

"The first two weeks of an expedition like this is normally the hardest, and most difficult," Borge said. "Very low temperatures, extremely bad pack ice close to land, darkness, and also because it's a new environment you are not accustomed to yet.

"Surviving the first two weeks is critical. I have tried to teach him to always be ahead of yourself. Look for problems before they happen, take action before the problem gets too big. To be solo out there can be very dangerous. You have to turn yourself into an animal, get the old instinct up under your skin and balance between pushing hard to get the distance needed and pull back and say stop when that is needed to be safe.

"I think we have many of the same qualities and mindset, but what I cannot teach him is the experience and (hidden) details you pick up after years in the Arctic."

For the past few months Tom's training schedule in Fremantle, Western Australia, has included dragging a sled and tyres over sand dunes, along the beach and through the bush and spending time in a local fish freezer. He has also been drinking olive oil in an attempt to build fat to insulate him against the cold.

BACKGROUND

Born in Perth, Western Australia, to English parents, Tom finished his secondary education in England. He spent five years in the British Army, including time in the Queen's company of the Grenadier Guards (guarding Princess Di among others) before returning home to Fremantle.

Tom is passionate about the great outdoors, travelling annually to New Zealand to climb in the South Island and regularly runs guided trips in WA's Stirling Ranges. He is an accomplished adventure racer competing in many extreme multi-day events often without sleep that involve a variety of outdoor sports such as mountain biking, running/trekking, abseiling, climbing, and kayaking. When he's not pulling a sled, Tom divides his time between working as a personal trainer and preparing for his next expedition applying the lessons he has learned in almost two decades of pushing his limits.

THE CAUSE

Tom's charity partner for the One Man Epic is Burnet Institute.

"During my military service in Africa, the suffering I witnessed had a profound effect on me," Tom said. "I saw people enduring unimaginable poverty, hunger and the devastating effects of diseases like HIV and AIDS. Seeing this first hand really put into

context what I'd seen in the media. While I was in Africa, I vowed that one day I would find a way to help make a difference. Discovering that some of the leading research into these diseases is done right here in Australia at the Burnet Institute gave me added inspiration.”

The Burnet Institute focuses on curing and preventing the spread of some of the world's worst infectious diseases of global significance. Burnet has offices in Australia, Fiji, China (Tibet), Indonesia, Lao PDR, Burma, PNG, Mozambique and Thailand.

A big part of Burnet’s work focuses on the 'Big Three': HIV, Tuberculosis (TB), and malaria which cause the deaths of seven million people every year. In addition, an estimated 33 million people are living with HIV and one third of the world’s population is currently infected with TB. Burnet’s work combines world-class laboratory research and practical, frontline public health programs in some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised communities around the world.

Tom hopes that through his expedition, he can motivate others to support the Burnet Institute’s outstanding work and help improve the lives of people living with these terrible diseases.

CONTACT

For more information on One Man Epic, including images and interviews, contact Georgina Walsh, Media Manager on +61 439 952 622, email georgina@onemanepic.com or visit www.onemanepic.com

For further information on Burnet Institute, contact Tracy Parish, Event Media and Communications on +61 3 8506 2321, email tparish@burnet.edu.au or visit www.burnet.edu.au