



MEDIA UPDATE

Friday 26 March 2010

40TH BIRTHDAY ON TOP OF THE WORLD

Western Australian adventurer Tom Smitheringale can likely say he has celebrated his 40th birthday in a way no man before him has done – nearly halfway between 84 and 85 degrees north, alone in a tent treating himself to a clean pair of underpants and a dessert of two sachets of peanut butter. On his 40th birthday on 22 March, Tom was 23 days into a solo, unsupported expedition to the North Pole.

However, Tom's solo birthday celebration in his tent was far from lonely as he opened the many cards from friends, family and supporters from all over the world. These he had dragged roughly 180km from Ward Hunt Island as part of his 160kg sled load. But he says the smiles, laughter and motivation they granted were well worth the effort.

The journey to the Pole continues to be an up and down battle for Tom, who has affectionately been named the Ice Man by students at a couple of Perth schools.

On Sunday, frostbite weighed on his mind. "I'm a bit worried about my fingers, I think a couple of them are going to let me down," he told his Perth-based team via satellite phone last Sunday. "A couple of the tips are black which is making things harder. They get quite painful when they thaw out in the tent at night. Doing things such as putting my boots on becomes quite painful." However, over subsequent days, the frostbite had proved better than he feared.

Over the past week Tom has experienced some beautifully clear days and the ice is opening up more and more, which means the going will continue to get easier and he will be able to push further each day. His spirits remain high and he is not letting himself think about the incredible distance he still has to cover.

Despite the better conditions, Tom is battling against a polar treadmill. Southern drift sent him backwards overnight on a couple of occasions – as much as 2.5 nautical miles one night. However, he says the drift is not something to worry about, it's just part of being on the ice – negative one day, positive the next.

This week, Tom also saw his first and much-anticipated polar bear tracks. Polar bear encounters are likely to become more frequent the closer Tom gets to water. What he wasn't expecting, however, were the human tracks he also came across. He considered

following the tracks but decided against it, the prospect of seeing someone not altogether appealing.

In a special moment this week, Tom spoke via his satellite phone to the girls from Methodist Ladies' College in Perth. The group of Year 11s have been following his progress closely and their excitement exploded into giggles when the Ice Man's distant voice asked them to order him a pizza. When they asked if there was anywhere he would like to be at that moment, he said he'd like to be knocking back a beer and eating pizza at Little Creatures brewery in Fremantle, Western Australia.

Along with his family and friends, it's all the local haunts he's missing, speaking of regular cravings for North Fremantle's Flipside burgers, as well as goodies from a French patisserie in South Fremantle. But when the girls asked him what he wished for, he said all he wished for was a safe journey.

Tom continues to be motivated by his surroundings, his goal and the awareness and donations he can generate for his charity partner Burnet Institute.

"Every day you have those moments when you pinch yourself, walk around a corner and have this scene open up in front of you, stand back and go, wow that is awesome. It reminds you of how lucky you are...

"It's such a fine line, the smallest mistakes can ruin the expedition. You know it's all in the balance. I just don't want it to be taken away from me yet, I don't want to go home. But that's what makes it so special as well. For me the focus is getting through every day without making any mistakes or breaking something. To do that gives you such a great feeling of accomplishment, it's just a real celebration."

After 26 days on the ice, Tom has travelled roughly 180km towards the North Pole and is 594km from his goal.

THE MISSION

Tom is trekking 800km of frozen Arctic sea on foot, alone, dragging two sleds totalling 160kg, to the North Pole. It will take 70 days in temperatures as low as minus 50 degrees Celsius.

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.

Tom set off from Ward Hunt Island at the northern tip of Ellesmere Island in the very north of Canada on Monday 1 March at 3am Australian WST time. The original plan to

leave from McClintock Inlet had to be scrapped at the last minute due to a huge lead forming just off the coast.

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

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