



South Pole 2019 - 2020 Blog No 8:
A big push before the grand finale

It's the first day of 2020 and I am sure that many people at home are recovering from a hangover which, I must admit, I would love to have too. But for us New Year's Eve consisted of a small celebration at 7pm (Finland NY) with 3 tiny candles shaped like champagne bottles, and at 9pm (UK NY) a phone call with Daan and the kids. After that, I zipped up my sleeping bag for a good rest after a tough day on the ice. We are now facing the last big challenge across 1,5 degrees. Not that it will be easy from the 88-degree point to the finish, but from there it will be flatter and straight forward. The current situation is that we need to climb 900m with a lot of sastrugi [*Sastrugi, or zastrugi, are sharp irregular grooves or ridges formed on a snow surface by wind erosion, saltation of snow particles, and deposition, and found in polar and open sites such as frozen lakes in cold temperate regions*]. The consequence is that you go up and down many times, which means that you can easily multiply the 900m a few times. Today, for example, during the first pitch that I was leading we went all the way down. At first, it felt really strange because we did not have any visibility, so with every step down it felt like "am I really going in the right direction?" But regularly checking the compass, our only reference in this kind of weather, gave me the confidence to continue. The next pitch it was the opposite. We had steep climbs and had to drag our sleds across the bumpy surface. I have to say that I felt much stronger today than the last few days. Yes, the pain is still there, but I found a good rhythm uphill, so before I knew my 2x70 minutes of leading the pitch had passed by. Besides the changes in terrain, we all noticed that the temperature during the last two days had dropped significantly. The combination with no sunshine anymore was making everything less comfortable, even inside the tent. This evening, I had my dinner whilst lying in my sleeping bag! My estimation is that we will complete this section just before we'll have our next rest day, so besides focusing on reaching 87 degrees tomorrow, my next point on the horizon is Monday the 6th of Jan.

HUMP AHEAD! Many times today I have been thinking back at our time in Singapore. The last road to our house at Green Leave Grove had several speed humps and Lente and Iris (at that time around 2 and 4 years old) were always screaming from the back seat "*daddy, hump ahead, drive faster*". The girls would fly out of their seats, bumping with their heads against the roof of our Toyota Fortuner and then they landed back again in their car seats, immediately asking for another hump. Today the humps were much bigger, and for sure I didn't go as fast as I did with the Fortuner in Singapore. Besides the Singapore memory, I really enjoyed today. Yes, at the moment the terrain is very challenging, but the beauty is, like with many other elements of this expedition, difficult to describe. We have all seen sand or ice sculptures before, and the artists always do an amazing job. But what happens when nature is the artist? Over many, many years the wind, snow and ice have created sculptures that are sometimes so beautiful that you want to pause for a while to admire the beauty of it. When we have a break this is possible, but most of the times I need to enjoy them in passing by – even taking a picture isn't such a simple act. An iPhone doesn't like today's temperature (-35 degrees Celsius) and most of the times, even when the battery is fully charged, it asks to be recharged within 5 seconds after switching it on. I also have the big Nikon camera with me, which is working in these weather conditions. However, I carry the battery on my chest the whole day to keep it warm and I've put the camera in the sled, so before I can take a picture I need to dig into all my layers of clothes to get the battery, take off my gloves (which, believe me, with minus 35 degrees is far from pleasant) and make the camera ready. The good thing is that Ryan and I do this in turns, so today I stopped several times and made some great shots. Then, I need to catch up with the others, which most of the times takes me half an hour. So, as I said – I had a great day. The weather changed from sunshine to complete whiteouts, and the

temperatures have dropped significantly, but probably because of all the distractions my day went relatively smoothly and the result is that we crossed 87 degrees, which is again a big milestone towards our goal.

Happy birthday Iris. It's already the 4th of January and it's my turn to have a tent to myself the coming 5 days. To be honest, it's mostly to have it to yourself for sleeping, because usually we stop around 6 pm to put up our camp, then we take off all our wet clothes and change into dry and comfortable clothes for relaxing. We then have snacks and hot drinks together, so by the time I am on my own it's already 8pm. I have my dinner and soon after nine o'clock I close my eyes. Yesterday morning, before we started our day, I spoke to Iris on the phone. It's weird to realize that she has already turned 10. The phone call was great and Daan is doing an amazing job with all the birthdays and activities during the Christmas break. Ski-wise, the last two days have been very diverse. Again, all sorts of weather conditions and the sastrugi are for sure not over yet. Because of this we are going a bit slower, or better said – slower than I had calculated. For sure one question that has been going through my mind is why I always want to be in control? I don't have the answer yet, but it might be that I often push myself beyond my limits and comfort zone, and control mechanisms like templates, structure etcetera keep me going, until that falls away. I am not sure yet, but I still have some time to think about it the coming weeks. Coming back to being 'slower' – I now focus on reaching 88 degrees and from there to the next one. In the end the expedition might take us 50, 51, 52 or more days, which is all good. The only thing is that I need to inform the kids that I will be coming home a few days later, which I am not looking forward to...

A day on the edge – I have been sharing many numbers and pieces of information and I'm trying to explain this in nautical miles and then convert it to kilometers or British miles, what a 'degree' is and how many we need to do. I also shared a few times the temperature in Celsius, but not in Fahrenheit. The main reason for that is that I don't know how to convert from Celsius to Fahrenheit and Google is not working here as you know. But today it is easy because what I do know is that minus 40 degrees Celsius and minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit are the same, and what I also know is that this temperature is far from pleasant! From the minute I woke up it was crazily cold. I had my breakfast in my sleeping bag with many layers of clothes on. The wind made the challenge complete during the day. I have to say, as long as I kept moving I managed to stay warm, but during the breaks or when I quickly changed from mittens [*very big gloves with the thumb in one compartment and the fingers in another compartment*] to normal gloves, in order to drink and eat, it was a nightmare to stay warm. Within 5 seconds my hands were freezing cold and to get them warm again took ages. Still, we managed to ski 8 hours and we are getting closer to 88 degrees, which feels great.

It's the 7th of January and yes, the sun is on the horizon. So far, January has not been in our favor when it comes to the weather and yesterday was no different. The whole day we had no visibility, it was white everywhere. The easiest would probably have been to say '*let's take a break*'. One of my learnings however during this expedition is that circumstances don't change, so we need to adapt to the circumstances, because if we don't, we will never get there. We all took the lead during a few pitches and each of us banged into snow walls, fell on the ground, flipped over some humps of ice or in my case, I just suddenly dropped down by a meter. Surprisingly, we didn't get injured and around 6 pm we put up our camp, which was a challenge in itself to find a spot as flat as possible.

It's now Tuesday morning and I can feel the tent is heated by the sun. It's our last rest morning before the final push to the end. This afternoon, we will ski for four hours and tomorrow we will cross the 88-degree point. Hopefully, the weather will stay like this and if the map is correct, there will be less sastrugi from here to the Pole. For sure, I am not celebrating yet, because still many things can happen with a bit more than two degrees (245km) and 10 days to go. Hopefully, after tomorrow, the number of days to go will be single digit, which would be a huge milestone after 42 days being on the ice.

Is quitting an option? When it was the summit day during my Everest expedition back in 2016, I had a moment like this, 1.5 hours before I would reach the summit. I had left camp 4 and had been climbing for 6 hours, when we were suddenly confronted early in the morning with terrible weather. The lashes of my left eye were frozen because of the snow that was blowing in my face. On top of that, two pairs of goggles were covered with ice on both sides and I could barely see. I decided to say to my Sherpa "it's time to turn around...". The deal with Daan and the kids has always been that the main goal is to come home safely, and that reaching the summit, or in this case the Pole, is the cherry on the cake. In the end I did make it to the summit of Everest, but this 'agreement' did make me seriously consider turning around at the time. Since our rest morning we covered quite some distance and the visibility had been good as well, but it also came with a price. Yesterday morning, during pitch one, I had tears in my eyes because of severe pains. My shoulders are very painful throughout the day, but I try to put that aside and stretch them a lot whilst walking at the same time. The biggest issue now is between my ribs on the left side. As mentioned before, I am quite skinny now, and for seconds, I feel spikes of pain, like a needle sticking inside my chest, and this repeats itself many times. I've been suffering from this already for weeks, mostly during the first 2 hours of the day, but yesterday it was so intense that I became really concerned about what it was or what could happen. Is it just exhaustion or more? Like every evening, we evaluated the day as a team and in this case, we mostly talked about my situation. Paula, who has a medical background advised me to take some tablets against the pain. Thanks to that I had a good night and more importantly, for the first time since weeks I felt some improvement today.

Speaking about improvement – today we finished at 88.20 degrees, which means 100 nautical miles to go (185km). From tomorrow onwards we will increase our daily ski-time from 8 hours to 9 hours. Including breaks, putting down the camp and building it up again this means we'll be 11,5 hours out in the snow. The reason we will increase our ski-time is that we want to complete the trip within a week from now, so ideally on the 16th of January. It has not so much to do with this specific date, but we need to be cautious with the food supplies we have left. We have food supplies until the 19th, but if we need to go slower due to the weather that wouldn't be cooperating or due to other unforeseen circumstances, we might have a challenge. Of course, we are also all looking forward to "getting there", so with a 'small' extra push we hope to make the plan possible. So, from tomorrow onwards, I'll set the alarm clock at 6:10. Not that this is needed, as most mornings I wake up around 5am. I hope that the tablets I'm taking tonight will again have a positive impact on how I will feel tomorrow.

Today, we skied for 9 hours and covered 14.4 nautical miles, which is great and on schedule. During this (long) day I was actually thinking about the passion of a guide, in our case Ryan. Yes, of course Paula and I paid a serious amount of money for this expedition, but knowing the costs of all the logistics, I know that not a huge amount will be left for him. Even more so if you take into account the amount of work and hours that Ryan is putting into this trip. He's more than two months away from home, 'working' seven (very long) days a week and spending a lot of time preparing the expedition beforehand and sorting out everything after the expedition. So, altogether, this expedition is the equivalent of five or maybe even 6 months of 'normal' work. I have a lot of respect for guides who support others to fulfil their dream. Our day, by the way, was a bit of everything. Long, sunny, cloudy and cold. Regarding the cold, it's interesting to know that on days like this the difference between my body temperature and the outdoor temperature is 75 degrees Celsius. So, without doing anything you are already burning a lot of calories to maintain the right body temperature. For this reason, I pee after every second break because your body will also keep your pee at this temperature, which is 'wasted' energy. So, the more liquid in your body, the more calories you burn with temperatures like this. Another effect of the cold is that the air I exhale, freezes directly on my face mask or on the edges of my jacket, which gives funny pictures I must say: icicles under my goggles and all over the fur on my hat, which we hang to dry in the tent as soon as we arrive.

Daan sent me a text that more than 6000 euro has already been donated for the Make A Wish Foundation. I am sure this will help fulfilling wishes for many children who are very sick, and I would like to take this opportunity to say a big thank you to everyone who has donated. If you haven't donated yet and would like to do so, here is the link:

<https://makeawishnederland.org/actie/1343/expeditie-naar-de-zuidpool>