



South Pole 2019 - 2020 Blog No 7:

Mental wellbeing

It's like 4 seasons in a day during the last few days ... But first some good news: we crossed 85 degrees yesterday, so now we are more than halfway in all aspects – days, distance, my baby wipes, food supplies etcetera, which is great, and our focus can now switch to our end goal, reaching 90 degrees safely. This will still be a long journey, especially if the weather will be like we had during the last 3 days. We have had the amount of snow for 3 seasons, which obviously doesn't fall from a blue sky, so for hours and hours we've been walking in white outs. Next to that, the fresh snow under our skies is like glue, so we need to work hard to move and as a result of that we are sweating a lot. At some point yesterday I took off one thermo layer, so I was only wearing one T-shirt under my jacket and steam came from my body. Next to that, my face was so warm that my goggles were full of fog and I literally had zero visibility. Our original plan was to take half a day rest on the 24th to celebrate Christmas, but due to the weather on the 23rd we decided to take it that day. I used the opportunity to reorganize my sled and to treat myself on my third set of fresh underwear, after having taken a baby shower. That was nice but I noticed that I'm getting very skinny. My legs are like one big muscle covered by a thin layer of skin and I have the impression that if a doctor would want to do an X-ray of my chest, he could do that with his iPhone. This worries me a bit because we still have 3 weeks of hard work ahead of us. Because of this, I changed to bigger meals today. This means 1,5 portion in the evening (a bit more than 1000 calories) next to 500 calories of snacks, and with my oatmeal in the morning I now use 50 grams of pure butter which surprisingly doesn't taste too bad. The other good thing about the half day rest was that I had the opportunity to call Daan and I also managed to talk to Lente, which was great because the connection was much better this time. A downside though of the poor weather is that we cannot use our solar system. Of course, we can do without music, mentioning this for those who want to break their own record of staying offline for more than 30 days. Spotify is great, but a learning is that after being offline for more than 30 days, you lose your downloaded offline playlist, so for me listening to music is already reduced to once in a while borrowing music from Ryan. The reason we mainly need our solar system is to charge our GARMIN inReach, the tracker and the satellite phone, because these devices are giving us guidance and the opportunity to stay in touch with Union Glacier Base Camp and to get weather updates.

26th December: let's be honest, how many people have the opportunity to ski during Christmas on a continent where nobody lives permanently? Yes, I have been missing Daan and the kids including the extended family during these days, knowing that they did many great things together, but when I signed up for this trip more than a year ago I knew this was going to be part of the game. So, I woke up on Christmas Day with a big smile on my face and full of energy. This was also driven by the fact that I was allowed to open my Christmas card from home. Iris had written on the envelope "open on the 25th of December" and inside the card were lots of nice messages from everyone. Next to that, Ryan brought a big Toblerone chocolate bar for us and Paula brought a 10 cm tall Christmas tree with her including snowflakes made from ibuprofen tablets (that we consumed as well). It speaks for itself that despite it being Christmas we still went en-route and covered some great distance during both Christmas Day and Boxing Day (on both days we did more than 14 nautical miles, including going up in altitude with more than 200 meters). Our bodies are working really hard, already using the reserves, and we all have a lot of pain during the day. When I just mentioned the Christmas card, it reminded me of all the great support I have received so far. Daan has been forwarding me many messages which are giving me a lot of energy and also before I went on expedition, I was fortunate with so many great

support messages and calls. For example, the voice message I received from James is for sure very special. I met James in Sydney a few years ago where we had surf lessons together on Manly Beach. We became friends and our families also got along well. James is originally from the UK and was living in Australia during the same period as we did. Now, they are back in the UK, in Farnham, which is a 40-minute drive from where we live. James, his wife Sarah and their children are for me the best example of a family who have mental well-being at the level where it needs to be. James had a heart transplant in October 2018 and without going into too much detail, if there is anybody close to me who knows how to deal with challenging circumstances, then it's this inspiring family. Every time I see them, speak with them etcetera they seem to be happy and optimistic which is a real pleasure to see. His words in the voice message he sent me (to which I have been listening already a few times) are *"When it gets hard it's only the beginning. Do like my time when I was sick – just put one foot in front of the other. Lastly, close your eyes once in a while because there are only a few people that do what you are doing."* It's this kind of inspiration that helps me through the days when I feel pain in my body or when we battle through a storm. Also, as a team we are incredible. Believe me, after 10 expeditions I think I know what makes a good team and in this case, I can say I am very happy with Paula and Ryan. We discuss everything openly with each other, we have very diverse and intense conversations and probably most importantly, we support each other physically and even more so mentally. This all goes in a very natural way which is amazing. So as always, many thoughts have crossed my mind these days but as I said at the beginning: I had a special Christmas this year.

He is picking up the phone... *"Hallo papa"* (hello daddy). It's December 28th and Tom is turning five today. If I think back at his voice this morning when we had the call, I am smiling again. It has been more than 5 weeks since the last time I heard his voice. He sounded so wise and he was sharing a lot about what was happening at home. Coincidentally, 4 weeks before Tom was born, I was also on Antarctica, climbing Mount Vinson, so it feels extra special today to think about him. As most people know this is not the only birthday this week. Daan and Lente had their birthdays yesterday on the 27th, so I have been speaking with them as well, and Iris turns 10 on the 3rd of January. Lente turned 12 and is really becoming a teenager. She made a huge developmental step since we arrived in the UK, which is great to see. Daan is still young and great looking, so I am a happy man.

The last two days we had, like on all other days, some challenges, but that's part of life on Antarctica, so we deal with them and keep on moving. Today, we crossed 86 degrees so we have done 6 degrees and have 4 more to go to reach 90.

You probably noticed that I mentioned mental well-being a few times in this blog, which is a bit on purpose. During all the days and hours whilst skiing, I have been thinking a lot and I have been looking back on my expeditions and other achievements in life. My conclusion is that mental well-being is the key ingredient for success. Yes of course, I need to be 100% physically fit to deal with the challenges I am confronted with, here or for example on Everest, but if I am mentally not in balance I would not be able to accomplish what I am about to do. The funny thing is that one day before I left on this expedition, I had a chat with Geoff McDonald. Geoff also worked for Unilever, like me, and was even Daan's line manager for a couple of years, but I never met him back then. He invited me to a nice Italian restaurant in Cobham, only half an hour drive from our house in Kingston. Geoff is self-employed and most of his work is related to the topic of mental well-being. Helping people how to deal with this, advising and giving workshops at companies about the opportunity there is if employees are mentally well, owner of 'Minds at Work' and also organizing programs at inspiring locations like the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. Participants with a diverse background have the opportunity to enjoy nature, hike and learn about their own wellbeing and with that, they hopefully will become change agents for mental wellbeing. This intro is probably already longer than our whole conversation because within half an hour, after sharing our backgrounds, we shook hands and agreed to work together on a trip in 2020.

Today, we are having half a day rest which is more than welcome after a week of dragging ourselves and mostly our skies and sleds through the snow. As mentioned before, our bodies are really suffering, so I am very happy to be on my mattress as I am writing the last part of my blog in 2019. I am sure this will be a strange New Year's Eve knowing that it will be light outside the whole evening. I think we will celebrate it already at 9pm knowing that this will be midnight in the UK. For me, 2019 had many facets, like great business opportunities with Beyond Summits, a nice balance with friends and family during our time in Poland, followed by an unexpected move to the UK. This was for sure exciting but we (and I for sure) had a bumpy start. Thinking about this, I have to admit that big changes are always a challenge for me. Yes, I am very strong at organizing everything and making sure everything is up and running as quickly as possible, but after that, I always need much more time to find my rhythm than the rest. This is for sure driven by the fact that I want to be in control and making new friends and finding your way in a new country takes time. Now I am working from home I find this even more difficult than when I was with Unilever. So, in many ways I am looking forward to 2020, starting with hopefully an amazing finish mid-January of my South Pole expedition and then, as a family continue settling more and more whilst exploring the UK. I think tomorrow evening we will be at 86.38 which means that we will need to do another 3.22 degrees (373km) in the new year before I am allowed to drink my champagne.

To all of you – a happy new year and get the most out of it!