

The quest for the South Pole: The preparation phase

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Abstract

In 1911 the Norwegian Roald Amundsen reached the South Pole and beat Captain Scott in a historic race. More than eighty years later, Erling Kagge was the first person to ski solo to the same destination. In 1994, Liv Arnesen became the first woman to achieve that goal. It may be difficult to grasp the underlying motives that drive these courageous persons to undertake such challenges. Of course, the context has changed and with that the motives - from that of conquering new territory in the Amundsen days to that of a more personal venture in modern times. In this article, Liv Arnesen reveals how she was thinking just a month before she started on her solo expedition to the South Pole. An inherent love for nature coupled with the importance of physical endurance and mental toughness is underlined.

Introduction

In 1994 the Norwegian Liv Arnesen was the first woman to ski to the South Pole - solo and unsupported. In fifty days she covered a distance of 1110 km, in complete solitude, in one of the World's most remote and hostile environments. This expedition distinguishes itself as one of the most successful in modern polar history because of the absence of dramatic incidents. However, this was not the first time Liv Arnesen tested herself against the demands of nature. In 1991 she led an expedition on Greenland which was the first all-women expedition to cross the ice cap without sled dogs. However, the expedition was stopped by a Pitera; a Greenland phenomenon of strong, hurricane-like winds. This was, though, only a temporary setback. The following year she made a second attempt together with Julie Maske, and this time they succeeded. This expedition, coupled with

extensive experience from Norwegian outdoor life including several years working as a guide in Svalbard, constituted a solid foundation for her to make a solo expedition to quest for the South Pole in 1994.

Let us turn the clock back to October 1994, - approximately one month before the expedition started. It is a common saying among adventurers that the main accomplishment of major expeditions is to actually manage to organize the whole project and to collect all the sponsoring money that is needed in order to undertake an expedition of this size. An expedition to the South Pole is financially demanding with a budget of minimum of USD 250 000. Thus, being able to sell the idea is a major obstacle in the preparation phase. I conducted an interview with Liv Arnesen while she was towards the end of this phase. In hindsight, when we know that everything went extremely well, it is of great

interest to recall how she prepared and how she was thinking during the preparation phase. I also interviewed her one month after she had returned from the South Pole and got her immediate feelings and thoughts about the adventure. This will be the focus of a later article. The story she tells us is one of great determination, commitment to a dream, and love for nature.

The preparation phase

The combination of being a woman and having an attraction towards strenuous adventures is a challenge even in a country that likes to promote itself as an “equal rights” society. Polar expeditions have long traditions in Norway and some major successes have been achieved such as the first crossing of the Greenland Ice-cap by Nansen in 1888, and the race for the South Pole in 1911 in which Roald Amundsen beat Captain Scott and his men. Also, during modern times there have been several examples of expeditions that have tried, and often succeeded, in pushing the limits. However, males, with only a few exceptions, have conducted the main portion of these expeditions. So, when Liv Arnesen entered the arena she was met with distrust and suspicion. A typical comment was, “Well, do you really know how to pull a pulk that heavy?” Obviously, it was difficult to believe that a woman, although she had successfully crossed Greenland by skis, would be able to achieve the same thing as only one man (Erling Kagge) had done before her. Several leaders in large companies met her with this attitude. The fact that they doubted her ability even before she had presented former achievements felt disturbing and unfair. Finally, she had to go abroad to Italy to be able to find a large-scale sponsor. She fully confirmed what oth-

ers have claimed earlier, that it is the preparation phase that often is the toughest part of an expedition.

Physical preparation

Pulling a 110 kg pulk through sastrugis - cold and dry snow which has a high friction component is a challenge (sastrugis are snow formations up to several meters high; they are waves shaped by winds at the polar plateau). The physical preparations are extensive in order to cope with the demands. It is important to simulate in practice the same conditions that you will meet during the expedition. Thus hours and weeks were spent on carrying heavy rucksacks while skiing, or pulling trunk-tires uphill during the summer months. A sound physical preparation is one of the cornerstones of the mental preparation as well.

Mental preparation

The South Pole has always been in Liv Arnesen’s mind. In early childhood she was inspired by reading stories written by the polar heroes Fritjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen. Her father was very interested in polar history and Liv followed in his footsteps, while her mother has always been very fit and fond of physical activity. Thus she is part of a long tradition, founded by her family, of spending a lot of time outdoors in all kinds of weather. Skiing solo to the South Pole was not an act of impulse, rather it was a result of a dream that has grown from a vague day dream in early childhood to a clear and definite ambition years later.

The greatest achievement is, according to Liv, to put your dream in to reality. Most human beings have a dream, but only a few are able to try and materialize it. Other motives such as public recog-

nition are secondary at best. This may be what separates Liv from her male companions. For her it was not a big issue to be the first women to ski solo to the South Pole. In fact she was unable to find a person who was as keen as she was at the point when she started to plan the expedition. After a while she realized it was sponsor gimmick that she was doing it alone. While her male counterparts have been promoted as being adventurous and challenge seeking, Liv, being a woman, has experienced less publicity and less recognition. “I probably tear down the myths of the great polar heroes” she reflected. It is as though even in the nineties people wonder, “How can it be such an achievement when even a woman can do it?”

There are two main dangers when you set off to the South Pole. One is the extreme cold with temperatures often down to -40 degrees Celsius during the “summer” period. “I am prepared to meet extreme cold and bad weather conditions”, Liv said, “and when I do I will camp early so that I don’t lose all my energy. One of the worst things you can do is to wait too long before you camp”. The second danger is the crevasses. Being alone, the chances that you will be able to rescue yourself if you fall into a crevasse are small. In order to avoid the crevasses, she has studied all the satellite photos that are available, and she is also confident that she will follow her own intuition. If she feels that she should avoid an area because of some uncertain reason, she will change her course immediately. She will trust her first hunch. “The older I get, the more I trust my intuition. I never ignore it anymore”.

Coping with stress

One of the main success factors on an

expedition is, according to Liv Arnesen, a will to sustain discomfort. Expedition life often includes long hours with physical struggle and also long days stranded in the tent, waiting for better weather conditions. Patience is a key word and ability to cope with monotony. In order to avoid the latter, Liv will bring with her her poetry. The idea is that when she reaches the end of the day, she will try to focus on and memorize poetry instead of letting the mind wander. From earlier experiences she knows that if you are not able to direct your thoughts when you are fatigued, you easily end up humming the same tune over and over again until it drives you crazy. Thus, the rhythm of poetry is far more attractive than a casual song.

She is also prepared to retreat if the conditions become too difficult to handle. She will not push the limits any further than she believes she can handle. But she is confident she has the necessary skills needed for a successful expedition. “I have experienced quite a few situations earlier, and I have never panicked, always stayed calm and managed to think clearly”, Liv said. Even when an avalanche caught her, she managed to focus on holding her ski pole high up in the air so that the others in the group more easily could find her. This ability to stay calm and focused in critical moments is a major strength of hers.

So, why do it? As mentioned, a main motive is to follow a dream and be committed to that dream - much in line with what Orlick (2000) claims high achievers need to have. But another strong motive is the simple joy of being in nature and recharging one’s energy. Contrary to some of her male counterparts who often have focused on the

strenuous parts of expedition life, Liv has spoken warmly about her love for the outdoors and being close to nature. She intensely looks forward to encounter what nature has to offer on the way. The final goal, the South Pole, is rarely mentioned during the interview, except when she is directly asked about it. It is as if the process of reaching the Pole is at least as important as reaching the Pole itself. Her final words were, “ Actually, now I just want to be on my way – I look forward to it! How will it be to spend 60 days with only myself as company? Will

I enjoy every day?”

Postscript

A dramatic incident happened just shortly before Liv set off to the Arctic. One of her best friends was brutally murdered. Life suddenly took a new direction. It would be a different trip. A stressful preparation phase became even more stressful, and the only longing she had was to be alone with her grief and be alone in nature.

References

Orlick, T. (2000). *In pursuit of excellence*. Human Kinetics, Leisure Press, Champaign: IL.