

36 – Ray Zahab: My trek to the South Pole

A month ago today I stood there: 90 degrees south, the top of the bottom of the world, the Geographic South Pole. And I stood there beside two very good friends of mine, Richard Weber and Kevin Vallely. Together we had just broken the world speed record for a trek to the South Pole. It took us 33 days, 23 hours and 55 minutes to get there. We shaved five days off the previous best time. And in the process, I became the first person in history to make the entire 650-mile journey, from Hercules Inlet to South Pole, **solely** on feet, without skis.

Now, many of you are probably saying, "Wait a sec, is this tough to do?" (Laughter) Imagine, if you will, dragging a sled, as you just saw in that video clip, with 170 pounds of gear, in it everything you need to survive on your Antarctic trek. It's going to be 40 below, every single day. You'll be in a massive headwind. And at some point you're going to have to cross these cracks in the ice, these crevasses. Some of them have a very precarious thin footbridge underneath them that could give way at a moment's notice, taking your sled, you, into the abyss, never to be seen again. The punchline to your journey? Look at the horizon. Yes, it's uphill the entire way, because the South Pole is at 10,000 feet, and you're starting at sea level.

Our journey, in fact, did not begin at Hercules Inlet, where frozen ocean meets the land of Antarctica. It began a little less than two years ago. A couple of **buddies** of mine and I had finished a 111-day run across the entire Sahara desert. And while we were there we learned the seriousness of the water crisis in Northern Africa. We also learned that many of the issues facing the people of Northern Africa affected young people the most. I came home to my wife after 111 days of running in the sand, and I said, "You know, there's no doubt if this bozo can get across the desert, we are capable of doing anything we set our minds to." But if I'm going to continue doing these adventures, there has to be a reason for me to do them beyond just getting there.

Around that time I met an extraordinary human being, Peter Thum, who inspired me with his actions. He's trying to find and solve water issues, the crisis around the world. His dedication inspired me to come up with this **expedition**: a run to the South Pole where, with an interactive website, I will be able to bring young people, students and teachers from around the world **on board** the expedition with me, as active members. So we would have a live website, that every single day of the 33 days, we would be blogging, telling stories of, you know, **depleted** ozone forcing us to cover our faces, or we will burn. Crossing miles and miles of sastrugi -- frozen ice snowdrifts that could be hip-deep. I'm telling you, crossing these things with 170-pound sled, that sled may as well have weighed 1,700 pounds, because that's what it felt like.

We were blogging to this live website daily to these students that were tracking us as well, about 10-hour trekking days, 15-hour trekking days, sometimes 20 hours of trekking daily to meet our goal. We'd catch **cat-naps** at 40 below on our sled,

incidentally. In turn, students, people from around the world, would ask us questions. Young people would ask the most amazing questions.

One of my favorite: It's 40 below, you've got to go to the bathroom, where are you going to go and how are you going to do it? I'm not going to answer that. But I will answer some of the more popular questions.

Where do you sleep? We slept in a tent that was very low to the ground, because the winds on Antarctica were so extreme, it would blow anything else away.

What do you eat? One of my favorite dishes on expedition: butter and bacon. It's about a million calories. We were burning about 8,500 a day, so we needed it.

How many batteries do you carry for all the equipment that you have? Virtually none. All of our equipment, including film equipment, was charged by the sun.

And do you **get along**? I certainly hope so, because at some point or another on this expedition, one of your teammates is going to have to take a very big needle, and put it in an infected **blister**, and drain it for you.

But seriously, seriously, we did get along, because we had a common goal of wanting to inspire these young people. They were our teammates! They were inspiring us. The stories we were hearing got us to the South Pole. The website worked brilliantly as a two-way street of communication. Young people in northern Canada, kids in an elementary school, dragging sleds across the school-yard, pretending they were Richard, Ray and Kevin. Amazing.

We arrived at the South Pole. We huddled into that tent, 45 below that day, I'll never forget it. We looked at each other with these looks of **disbelief** at what we had just completed. And I remember looking at the guys thinking, "What do I take from this journey?" You know? Seriously. That I'm this **uber**-endurance guy?

As I stand here today talking to you guys, I've been running for the grand sum of five years. And a year before that I was a pack-a-day smoker, living a very sedentary lifestyle. What I take from this journey, from my journeys, is that, in fact, within every fiber of my belief standing here, I know that we can make the impossible possible. I'm learning this at 40. Can you imagine? Seriously, can you imagine? I'm learning this at 40 years of age. Imagine being 13 years old, hearing those words, and believing it. Thank you very much. Thank you.