

“If you can dream it, do it”

Personal discovery and the value of teamwork

Robert Swan, the first man to reach both Poles on foot, knows that the difference between realizing a lifelong dream and perishing in a sub-zero nightmare can be as simple as one false step.

“IT WAS IN 1986, during my first expedition to Antarctica,” recalls Swan. “A slip of my crumpled boot tore the ligaments in my knee and the entire weight of the 120-kilogram sledge carrying all my equipment and food slammed into my body. I lay there in the snow, paralyzed by jolts of pain. The seconds ticked by in slow motion; all around me was white nothingness. My companions, Roger and Gareth, became dots on the horizon, leaving only thin trails from the runners of their sledges.”

Before setting out on the forced march to the South Pole, Swan and two other members of the team had made a pact. They knew they could only survive if they averaged 20 kilometers per day. An injured person would be given 24 hours to recover; after that, he would be left behind.

“I knew that if the knee was bad, I was a dead man. I was afraid to test it,” Swan says. “But with the minus 30 (Celsius) cold seeping into my clothing, I didn’t have a choice. Using my ski sticks as crutches, I lifted myself up. And, thank God, the knee held. With tears of relief and fear, I began to pull the sledge, despite the excruciating pain.”

Swan and his two companions arrived at the South Pole on January 11, 1986, 70 days and 1,600 kilometers after leaving their base camp at McMurdo Sound. In order to duplicate the conditions encountered by Antarctic explorers before them, they navigated using only a sextant, the Sun and a watch. They did not carry telephones, radios or any other communications devices.

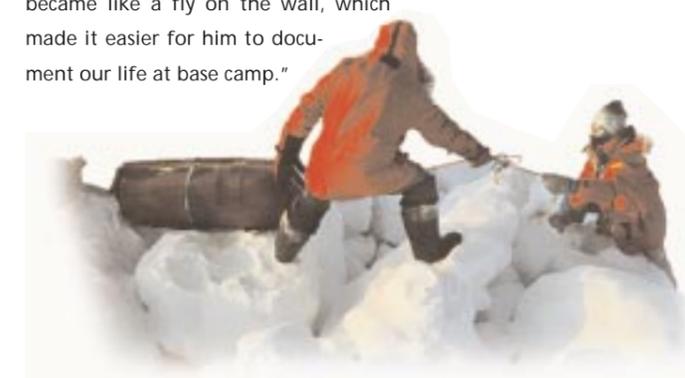
INSPIRED BY HISTORY. At the age of 11, Swan saw a black-and-white movie on television about the adventures of Robert Falcon Scott, who tried to make it to the South Pole on foot in 1912 and paid with his life. Scott’s courage so inspired Swan that he was determined to accomplish the feat himself. After finishing university, he began trying to raise money for the first expedition, working as tree surgeon, gardener, hotel cleaner, taxi driver – anything to keep the dream alive.

“At 21, I was full of youthful exuberance and thought I could do it by myself,” recounts Swan. “And then, I realized that it was physically impossible for one person to reach the Pole alone. I didn’t have the expertise, the experience or the money. The only way was to get the right team together.”

TEAMWORK: STRENGTH THROUGH DIVERSITY. What makes a good team? Swan believes there are three essential principles. The first of these is diversity. “A team should consist of diverse individuals,” he says, “each mastering different skills. It’s arrogant to believe everyone should be like you. We should learn to celebrate each other’s differences. They are a source of strength.”

Swan’s description of his handpicked team for his first expedition to the Antarctic illustrates this point.

“John, the cameraman, didn’t say anything – ever,” Swan says. “When you are with someone in a hut for nine months waiting for the Antarctic summer, that can be irritating. But after a while, he became like a fly on the wall, which made it easier for him to document our life at base camp.”



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"Gareth was our obsessive organizer," Swan chuckles. "He kept exhaustive lists of everything and knew every piece of equipment. He was a perfectionist, which can also be irritating, but we would have been lost without him on the march."

"Then there's me, who can't spell the word *detail*," Swan says about himself. "And I'm too optimistic – unrealistic, really. That definitely gets on people's nerves. But I can raise money, and I seemed to have some effect on motivating people."

"Roger," Swan explains, "was the leader during the 70-day march and is one of the finest mountaineers in the world. He also happens



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to be one of world's greatest pessimists. You could be absolutely sure he had thought of every worst-case scenario and planned for it."

"And finally," he says, "there's Michael, the doctor, who kept us in good health at base camp. But like any scientist, he could also be a nuisance, sticking needles into us to extract blood and injecting us with medicines to test our reactions under extreme conditions."

HONESTY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING. Swan's second principle of building a successful team is being honest with oneself and the other members of the team – even if this is, at times, painful.

"When you spend nine-and-a-half months in base camp with a small group of people," Swan says, "you strip away all the superficial layers and you get right down to the naked souls. What you see in others and in yourself is not always pleasant," he reflects. "I had thought of myself as a brave, sharing person. But when faced with those extreme conditions, I was weak and monstrously selfish at times."

Self-appraisal, he says, is an important step in team building, "If you are honest with yourself, you can be much more realistic in

seeing other people's strengths and weaknesses," Swan says.

"After it was all over," he adds, "everyone in our team had enormous res-

pect for each other. Another principle that Swan believes is essential to good teamwork is proper listening. "Most people don't really listen," he says. "They nod their heads and look interested. But instead of keeping an open mind, they are thinking about what they want to say next. When you spend that much time in a hut together, cut off from the rest of the world, you learn the value of listening."

FUTURE HEROES AND HEROINES. Does Swan think the hardship he went through was worth it? "It was worth it because we did it," he replies. "We brought together a group of strong individuals,



we threw away the rule-book and we made a little piece of history. And then we built on that experience." In 1989, Swan

reached the North Pole on foot with another team, becoming the first man to succeed at this task in both the Arctic and Antarctic.

Swan made some disturbing observations during his adventures about man's impact on the environment. "In the Antarctic, we had the best dark glasses and protective creams money could buy. Nevertheless, we suffered from snow blindness and terrible sunburns. I searched the literature and found nothing like this recorded from previous expeditions. Then I discovered it was caused by the hole in the ozone layer, which is at its worst over the South Pole."

Swan sees his next challenge as nothing less than helping to safeguard the Earth for future generations. "The melting polar ice caps, the increasing severity of floods, hurricanes and other weather catastrophes are clear warning signs of what happens when the natural balance is altered," he says. "Future heroes and heroines will be the people who make a difference in preserving our fragile planet."

Ares-Serono is a founding member of "Mission Antarctica," a program established by Robert Swan to preserve the pristine environment of the South Pole. (see website: www.robertswan.org)

1986 ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION FACTS

Team members

Robert Swan, Roger Mear, Gareth Wood, Michael Stroud (base camp), John Tolson (base camp)

Route of the expedition "In the Footsteps of Scott"

From McMurdo Sound on coast of Antarctica (south of New Zealand) to the South Pole – 1,600 kilometers or 883 miles. Duration: base camp – 9 1/2 months; South Pole march – 70 days

Starting load for each person

170 kilos of food and equipment, pulled on individual sledges

Weather conditions

Avg. temperature of minus 25° C, wind speed at a max. of 80 knots

Common medical problems/injuries

Average weight loss of 25 kilos per person, torn muscles and ligaments, snow blindness, frostbite, sunburn

Cost of expedition/main sponsors

GBP 3.5 million /Barclay's Bank, Shell (UK), Burberry's

