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THE FIRST
AMERICAN
COUPLE
TO SKI TO
THE SOUTH
POLE

EPIC JOURNEY

THE FIRST AMERICAN COUPLE TO SKI TO THE SOUTH POLE BY FRED NYSTROM

In the final issue of 2012, we introduced you to Chris and Marty Fagan, the North Bend couple who were apparently a little bored by running ultra-marathons and had just announced that they planned a new challenging adventure—to ski without support or a guide from the edge of Antarctica to the 9,301 foot high South Pole. ❄️ Only 400 people since the beginning of Antarctic exploration have made it from the coast of Antarctica to the South Pole including those using dog sleds, snowmobiles and tracked vehicles. Of those just over 100 have done it without a guide or support. ❄️ By the time we met again I expected to hear that they had reconsidered their BAG (Big Audacious Goal) and would instead be spending their winter at home with their 12 year old son Keenan. Not so! The September cover of this magazine showed them awalked for six to ten hours at a time to get used to pulling the 200 pound sleds they would be using on their expedition.





On an amazing journey, even the extreme conditions didn't dampen their spirits.

They flew out of Seattle on November 17th and I am relieved to report they survived the trip returning home on January 23rd as the first American couple to ever ski to the Pole without support or an experienced guide.

Arriving at the edge of Antarctica with 220 pounds of gear and food packed in each of their Norwegian Pulks (sleds) they found the beginning of the trip to be relatively easy. The weather was a clear and balmy -10 to -20 degrees. They set out to ski 12 to 13 miles a day. Their route would take them on a 570 mile journey with over 9,000 feet of elevation gain. To put this in perspective, imagine stepping into your cross country skis and heading south from Seattle until you reach Shasta California?

Forward progress was immediately slowed then they encountered the Sastrugi, which quickly became a barrier to their progress. Sastrugi is wind-blown snow that has frozen in waves which can be as small as four to five inches and as tall as five feet. Skiing with the Sastrugi can be relatively manageable if you are going in the same direction as the wind. The Fagan's faced the daunting task of crossing 150 miles of Sastrugi, usually

going across the grain of it.

Chris related the challenges, "We had to ski by picking out a path through, but the sleds kept slamming into the ice and nearly knocking us off our skis. One time we were partially across the Sastrugi and were quickly enveloped in a total white-out. We could not see the tips of our skis and it was so disorientating that when you looked up you quickly became noxious. We had to set up our tent by feel and hope that the white-out would have lifted by morning."

Skiing for nearly 9 to 10 hours a day was a lonely business, since they could not talk while skiing single-file. They had to fight for every mile of distance. "During the last few weeks we were constantly reassessing the mileage yet to be covered and our finite food supply", Chris recalls.

The final two weeks were the most challenging, since they were battling a sharp drop in temperature, one day it was -50 degrees with wind chill. While the Pulks weighed less, the Fagan's were becoming progressively weaker and the stress was mounting.

As they got closer to the South Pole, their GPS stopped giving accurate location information as the longitude lines converged, so they had to rely on

dead-reckoning to find their way.

One day before reaching the South Pole, Chris describes a surreal moment, "I looked up and suddenly could see the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station housing the US Scientific Base. I was so surprised that my ski tip slammed into Sastrugi and I fell over. I had not expected to see the building since it was over 16 miles away."

Once they arrived on their 48th day, they were ushered into a heated tent; they both sank into the closest chairs, "this was the first time we had been able to sit down in a real chair for 48 days" Marty recalled. A day later they boarded an old Russian Ilyushin cargo plane to begin the first part of their journey back to Seattle.

Now safely back in North Bend with the 100 degree difference in temperature since their final day at the Pole, they are giving talks about their journey. When asked about any further adventures, their answer was simple, direct and easy to understand, Marty paused and then said "Our next adventures will be with our son Keenan and we want to help him find his own way to explore this wonderful world." Now that's a goal I can understand. ❖