



Think-BIG

by Christina Boyle Cush

With one trip to the North Pole in 2004, Ben Saunders, then 26, became the third person to reach it on a solo ski mission, set the record for the youngest to do so by more than 10 years, and secured the record for the longest solo Arctic journey by a Brit. But all the accolades weren't enough to satiate his appetite for achieving seemingly impossible goals in the world of polar exploration.

The North Pole trip and nine subsequent expeditions were experiential building blocks that prepared Saunders for his most epic and potentially deadly adventure: re-creating the 1911–1912 South Pole Terra Nova Expedition by British explorer Capt. Robert Falcon Scott. Scott's polar party of five achieved the main objective, reaching the South Pole, but perished on the return from exhaustion, starvation and unbearable cold.

Saunders, 36, and his partner dare to be the first to accomplish the longest “unsupported” completion of Scott's Terra Nova Expedition more than a century ago. *Unsupported* means the men will pull their supply sleds themselves, without the help of dogs or kites (small sails). They'll travel the frozen surfaces on skis with skins—grips on the ski bottoms—to enable them to move as though they are walking and cross-country skiing.

Accompanying Saunders is a sportsman and polar explorer he's known for more than a decade, Tarka L'Herpiniere, 32, whom he describes as “reliable, calm and logical. The worse the conditions, the more level-headed he is.”

The scale of their South Pole trek is massive. They flew to Chile in mid-October and on to Union Glacier in western Antarctica later that month. At press time, they were scheduled to fly to Scott's starting point on Cape Evans, heading on foot from there to the South Pole and back—a round trip of 1,800 miles in 110 days.

During a Skype interview a few weeks before they embarked, Saunders tells *SUCCESS* about being obsessed with Scott. An “incredible” book about him is *The Worst Journey in The World*, by Apsley Cherry-Garrard, a commander on Scott's team who wasn't on the ill-fated Antarctic trek. The story “really inspired me when I read it years ago,” Saunders says. “I love reading about explorers and adventurers. I was vaguely aware of the Scott trip as a kid. I heard about it in school and read more in my late teens.”

Now Saunders and L'Herpiniere are taking up the challenge. “We'll start with heavy sleds,” Saunders says. The pair will lighten the load as they go—depositing freeze-dried food to pick up on the return trip. Saunders worried about the first few days, the hardest period. “You're moving slowly and have so much more to do. We'll



Ben

Take a wild ride with a British endurance athlete, motivational speaker and polar explorer as he aspires to rewrite history with a South Pole trek.

ANDY WARD

be traveling up the Beardmore Glacier, one of the world's largest. It's 100 miles long, very heavy and vast. We are wearing harnesses in case we fall through the ice." The men will be roped together for safety, each carrying rescue gear such as pulleys and eye screws, in case one falls into a crevasse. "We trust each other with our lives.... We've done a lot of contingency planning to prepare for the worst-case scenario."

The bold duo left Scott's Hut, Antarctica, on Oct. 25, spring-time in Antarctica—but hardly balmy: A "warm" summer day is 22 degrees below zero. Months earlier Saunders started chronicling his preparation in a blog and on YouTube videos. He and L'Herpiniere planned to do website check-ins during their quest.

Re-creating the journey has deep personal meaning to the Scott family, whom Saunders reached out to. "Scott's grandson is our patron. That's a real honor. We contacted him and tracked him down.... He's a strong supporter."

During our interview, Saunders was concerned about tying up loose ends. "We just had a meeting with the transport company that's taking all the gear to Chile. If our skis don't show up," it's a big problem. "So much of the equipment is custom. It takes so much time and organization to source it."

To manage important details, he makes lists. "I am a real list-maker. I believe in systems. David Allen wrote *Getting Things Done*. I don't adhere to it religiously, but it's an interesting concept when managing vast amounts of input. Having some sort of audit is important."

Making lists and writing down his goals are habits Saunders started in his teens, when he evolved from casual camper to extreme endurance athlete and polar explorer. The rolling hills of the English countryside were an idyllic place for the adventurer to grow up. "I was lucky to live in Devon. I spent a lot of time outdoors. I was always out walking, swimming in rivers, climbing trees. I lived near a national park and went on lots of mini camping trips."

During that same period, he went from average school team-sport participant to mountain-biking maniac. "Mountain biking captured my imagination. I saved money and went in on a bike with my parents. Biking was freeing and adventurous. I could explore." To improve his biking stamina, Saunders bought cheap dumbbells and worked out in his bedroom. Then he started endurance biking.

When he wasn't biking, he was reading. The book *Unlimited Power* by Tony Robbins influenced him as a teen. "I had a weekend job in a bike shop. The owner had a nice sports car that he parked outside. On my lunch break, I'd press my face up at the window.



TARKA L'HERPINIERE



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SAM CHRISTMAS

From left: Ben Saunders trains in crevasse rescue; fellow Scott expedition explorer Tarka L'Herpiniere; training for the Scott trek in Surrey in 2012.

I saw this book on the passenger seat. I was impressed with the owner of the store. He had good character and was a good businessman. I bought the book," Saunders says. "In high school, I was not encouraged to dream big or set sights that high.... That book got me thinking differently."

In 1997, after graduating, he spent a year working at an outdoor adventure school in Scotland that's run by John Ridgway, "an amazing character who wrote a few books. He'd done extraordinary challenges and expedition trips, like crossing the Atlantic in a rowboat in 1956." Ridgway became the young explorer's first real mentor.

To push himself, Saunders attended the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst from 1998 to 1999. Although he didn't earn a degree, he developed a thirst for useful knowledge. He started seeking out more people who were leaders in their fields—people whose positive examples were motivational.

In 2000 Saunders wrote to British explorer Pen Hadow, who ultimately became his "polar mentor" for advice on expedition planning. They bonded and eventually attempted a North Pole expedition in 2001. The two left from the north coast of Siberia, unsupported and on foot. They pulled heavy sleds across the frozen surface of the Arctic Ocean for 59 days, covering about 400 miles.

For company, they had a polar bear. "Pen was in front, navigating, and I was following his sled tracks.... My goggles and fur-lined hood limited my vision, but I remember a strange feeling that something wasn't quite right," Saunders recalls. "I stopped, turned around and found myself looking at a polar bear.

"I screamed to Pen. He stopped, and our polar bear sprang into action. Bears have only average eyesight, so I tried to make myself look big by removing my skis and holding them above my head in a cross shape. Pen loaded the shotgun we had brought along to frighten bears off by firing over their heads. Both shells were duds. The next two were the same. Finally, five shells down, I wondered if I could fend off the bear with the pointed ends of my poles, when BANG, the gun went off. I don't know who was more shocked, me or Pen. Certainly not the bear. He stared at us, looked a bit bored, sniffed the air a few times and then walked off."

Although Hadow and Saunders escaped the bear, one of Saunders' toes was frostbitten and the weather was brutal, so they aborted the trip. It's a fiasco that still bothers Saunders. "It didn't go as planned. There were a load of challenges and a steep learning

curve. It took me awhile to recover, physically and emotionally, and to realize that I'd gained an enormous amount of experience. Because [at first] I saw it as an abject failure."

How an explorer rebounds from a disaster determines his or her future in the field. Saunders' passion for the extreme Arctic environment and his personal resilience prevailed, with many successful adventures starting in 2003 (see box on next page).

Soon he began wondering whether he could turn his passion for adventure into a career...

Saunders hoped to book speaking engagements as one avenue of support, and he was broke when he landed his first gig. Eventually the outdoorsman gave paid talks at schools and nonprofit organizations. He progressed quickly, giving his first TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) talk in 2005. And in November 2012 he spoke at a TEDSalon in London.



Find out what Ben Saunders does between polar treks @ SUCCESS.com/Ben-at-Home

Along the way, Saunders went from doing the "soul-destroying work" of fundraising for trips to becoming more of a solid business brand. This was uncharted territory, so he sought advice from Jerry Colonna, a famously successful Silicon Valley venture capitalist who is now a life and business coach. "I talk to Jerry weekly. Having someone you can bounce ideas off is key."

Before financial support was secured for Saunders' Scott Expedition, a key staff member worked without pay for a time. But as he built his brand, corporate sponsorships rolled in from the likes of Land Rover, Intel and more. Saunders feels very obligated to his backers and sponsors for paying him to pursue his passion. "I still pinch myself that I do something professionally that I love." He says it's harder to cope with the business side of his career than surviving in the frozen wilderness.

The men will need their sharpest wits to combat the harsh conditions. To prepare, significant research was conducted with the Scott Polar Research Institute at the University of Cambridge and with Charles Swithinbank, an 87-year-old scientist who has seen more of Antarctica than any other living person.

The physical homework was grueling, Saunders says, "like training for the Olympics." He and L'Herpiniere often worked twice



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From left: Saunders lifts logs in 2011 training; Saunders at the North Pole in 2011; Saunders on a break from training in Surrey.

a day with Andy McKenzie, a former military strength and conditioning coach. The 5-foot-9 Saunders normally weighs 172 pounds, but he worked to pack on 22 pounds before leaving. “I’ll lose about 2.5 pounds a week, even though we are eating 6,000 calories a day,” Saunders explains. “It’s metabolically demanding.”

Their daily South Pole routine includes sleeping eight hours in their tent, lighting the stove, making and drinking a hot protein shake, prepping to-go vacuum flasks of warm energy drinks, packing their tent, and pulling sleds for 90-minute intervals (eating during breaks) for up to 10 hours. Everything the men haul on their sleds is mission-critical, but the portable solar panels are modern marvels. These devices allow Saunders and L’Herpinere to cook freeze-dried food, power their laptops and communicate with the on-call medical team.

Although physical needs are a huge focus, maintaining an even keel emotionally will also be important. “Tarka and I appreciate the paradox we are in: We will be in enormous wilderness, but we’ll spend a lot of time in a cramped space,” Saunders says. “You have to be open with the other person if you are not happy about something.”

For comfort, Saunders and L’Herpinere packed a few photographs and mementos; they have Kindles for reading. “I’ll miss hot water, clean sheets, taking a shower, home-cooked food,” Saunders, who is single, said before the trip. “I’ll appreciate green stuff... trees, plants and flowers” after returning home. (Saunders adds that L’Herpinere is married but “his wife is cool with the Antarctic trip”—she walked the Great Wall of China with him for six months.)

To keep calm, a vital trait in extreme conditions, Saunders said he didn’t necessarily plan to pray but wasn’t ruling it out. “Jerry is a Buddhist. He’s encouraged me to meditate, but it hasn’t become routine. In some way, it’s a meditative process to be out in the Antarctic.”

What’s next for this über-globe-trotting athlete, explorer and motivational speaker? Will this journey satisfy Saunders’ itch to explore?

“I’m not sure, really,” he admits. “This Scott Expedition will be the biggest thing I’ve attempted. The person who finishes that journey will be a happy guy. I hope to reach a lot of people and get them thinking differently about being more adventurous. Everyone has their own South Pole and goals and challenges.”

He does expect that his immediate post-Scott life will be relatively tame. “I have a few ideas bubbling—writing a book,

The Ben Chronicles

Ben Saunders says he has “always been a goal-setter.” Since the 2001 North Pole debacle, he braved extreme weather as he built up to retracing the Scott Expedition.

- **2003:** Saunders took his first solo trip, a short expedition (compared to the 400-mile 2001 adventure) on the ice at the North Pole. He says this was an important confidence-builder.
- **2004:** Saunders is super-proud of this record-breaking solo ski trip from Russia to the North Pole. “I didn’t see anyone for nearly three months.”
- **2005, 2006:** Saunders takes two trips on skis with skins to Greenland, challenges that focused on speed.
- **2008, 2010, 2011:** Saunders makes expeditions to the North Pole from the Canadian side, focusing on speed and testing his equipment.
- **2012, 2013:** Greenland expeditions (with fellow adventurer Tarka L’Herpinere in 2013) served as training for the Scott Expedition to Antarctica.

public speaking. I’m looking forward to relatively normal things like marathons and a triathlon. I haven’t had time to do those.”

And for the not-so-near future, starting a family is on the list. Right now the significant ladies in his life are his mom and his 4-year old Labradoodle, Molly. “Perhaps I’ll be settling down and all that stuff. My mom doesn’t get on me [about getting married and having a family because] my brother has kids, so she’s a grandma. Hopefully I won’t have a baby that I’m pulling on a sled in Antarctica.” **S**

Christina Boyle Cush is an active mom of three who has white-water rafted the Snake River in Wyoming and hiked up Mount Targhee in Idaho. Her last SUCCESS article was “Bold Strokes” in the September issue.