

Top of the World

Local team set to raise \$500K for child poverty during 11-day trek

By PAUL LEGALL

The Hamilton Spectator (Apr 11, 2006)

Paul Hubner will be following his own footsteps, as well as the great polar explorers of old, when he starts his dash for the top of the world today.

The 45-year-old president of Stoney Creek-based Baffin Inc. has outfitted some of the world's top adventurers. His boots have left a trail to the south pole, the base camp of Mount Everest and the high arctic.

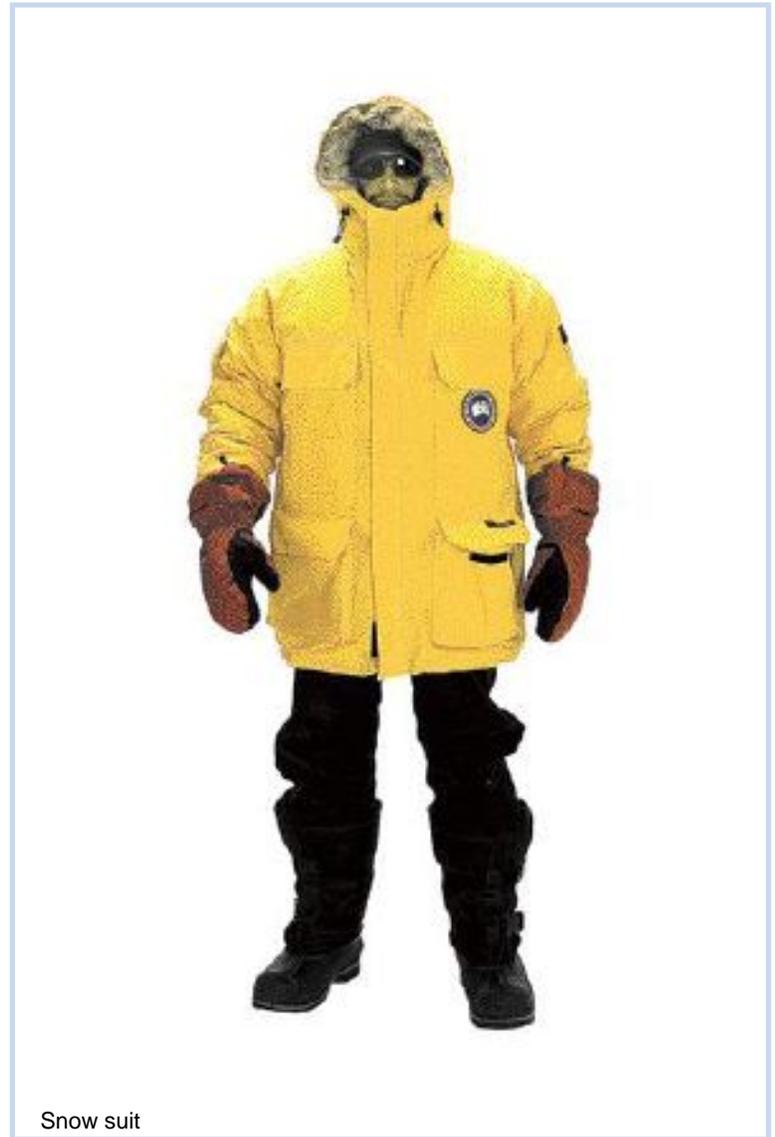
And today he's part of a Hamilton-area team that will make an 11-day run from the tip of Norway all the way to the geographic North Pole. That team, led by American extreme adventurer Doug Stoup, hopes to realize a dream of standing on top of the world. But along the way, the group will also raise close to \$500,000 to fight child poverty in Hamilton.

"There are kids in our area who go to school hungry, they may not have warm clothing, and many of our area schools are underfunded and overcrowded, meaning they don't have resources to provide music and after-school programs that are so important to a child's development," the trekkers said in a statement.

"We believe our fundraising efforts will make a difference."

Most of the money will go to nutrition and music programs in central Hamilton schools and the rest for food banks, shelters and other poverty-related programs.

What started as an adventure for four successful businessmen quickly turned into a fundraiser. And they have committed to raise the money from the



people they work with in the building and construction trades. They aren't appealing to the public for any cash.

The Hamilton portion of the team is Hubner, Turkstra Lumber president Peter Turkstra and Losani Homes CEO Fred Losani. Burlington is contributing Branthaven Homes owner Steve Stipsits and Scott Shawyer, 35, CEO of an engineering company. A seventh member, American Ted Wilkes, will also make the trip.

They'll be following Stoup, who has established himself as one of the world's top adventurers with forays into the Antarctic and Mount Everest.

The seeds of the trip were sown seven years ago when Hubner was promoting his boots (good to -73 Celsius) at a Utah trade show. He met Stoup and struck up a friendship that has endured ever since.

A mountaineer, snowboarder and former professional soccer player, Stoup, 42, has since worn Baffin boots on expeditions at both ends of the world, including his 62-day ski trek to the South Pole in 2000-01.

When the Hamilton group began thinking about a once-in-a-lifetime adventure, Stoup was the logical choice.

For the next week, Stoup will lead the team to an elusive point at the top of the world known as the geographic north pole. They are romancing the Arctic Grail, which has fascinated dreamers, drifters and fortune seekers for centuries.

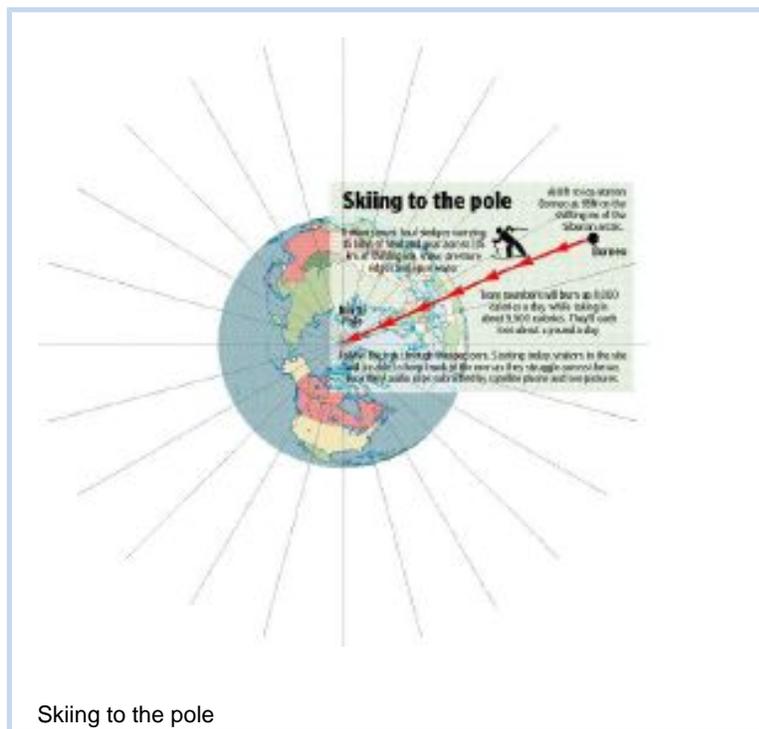
Stoup is also using the trek as a kind of classroom at the top of the world. As a committed environmentalist, he wants to alert the world about the impact of global warming on the fragile polar ecology. And children in 101 Hamilton classrooms will be studying right along with him.

The Spectator's Newspaper In Education has developed a curriculum for grades 4-8 that will follow the team as it makes its way to the top of the world. Children in 61 public and 40 Catholic school classrooms will use regular Spectator coverage of the trek to supplement their learning on the arctic. That will range from the history of exploration to the environment, nutrition and the poverty issues the team plans to address.

And students will be in direct touch with Stoup and his team through thespec.com. Starting today, visitors to the site will be able to keep track of the men as they struggle across the ice, hear daily audio clips submitted by satellite phone and see pictures. Participating classrooms will also be able to ask questions of the adventurers that tie directly to the material they're studying.

From the town of Longyearbyen, Norway, the group will be airlifted today to a shifting patch of ice on the Siberian arctic known as ice-station Borneo. It's situated at 89 degrees north and will serve as base camp for the expedition. From there, the trekkers -- wearing oversized cross-country skis -- will drag carbon-fibre sledges packed with more than 45 kilograms of gear and supplies over the pack ice to cover the final degree or about 100 kilometres to the top of the world.

With special harnesses, they'll pull their loads over pressure ridges formed when layers of ice collide, fold and pile up. They'll also cross thin patches that wouldn't support their weight without skis and try to avoid snow-covered gaps in the pack ice known as "Venus fly traps."



The polar ice is constantly shifting and breaking and leaving expanses of open water. In some cases, they'll have to lash their sledges together to form a makeshift raft, jump in the water in dry suits and swim to the next floe pulling the load. During most of the trek, they can expect temperatures in the -20 to -30 C range.

They'll be bunking down two to a tent and eating freeze-dried high-energy food hydrated with melted snow. As the seventh man in the group, Stoup will be rotating among the three tents.

At night, the trekkers will be entertained by the dance of the Northern Lights overhead and the constant rumble of the pack ice under them.

The Hamilton trekkers are all successful in their professional careers. They've been involved in high-risk outdoor activities such as wilderness camping and canoeing, helicopter skiing off mountains and scuba diving.

To get ready for the arctic trek, they've improved their cardiovascular fitness and dragged heavy tires over gravel roads to simulate sledge pulling. But they've never been in the arctic or experienced cold-weather survival. Yet, they feel superior clothing, footwear and equipment will enable them to survive the most hostile conditions.

"There's no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing," said Hubner last week.

For Losani, the polar expedition is the realization of a childhood dream. A bit of a daredevil, he's proven his pluck by scuba diving in shark-infested waters and skiing down mountains after being deposited on the summit by helicopter.

"It's the mental challenge that excites us. I'm sure we'll do very well," he said.

An avid outdoorsman as well as house builder, Stipsits feels he toughened his survival instincts by mountain skiing in British Columbia.

"There was the mental challenge of going up the mountain, which would take a couple of hours to hike, before going down in about a minute," he explained.

He steeled his nerves on slopes of almost 60 degrees which seemed like free falling down an elevator shaft.

"It looked vertical to me. You gotta gather your confidence and you know you can do it," he added.

"I'm looking to the sheer thrill of standing on the geographic North Pole."

After dragging his heavy tire for a 14-kilometre trek through the Dundas Valley, Turkstra feels he's physically and mentally ready to challenge the arctic. But even if he reaches the top of the world, he would only reluctantly call himself an adventurer and never an explorer.

"Doug made it clear. He considers himself an extreme adventurer, not an explorer. We had a lot of time to prepare for this, train and get the right equipment," he said.

Adventurers follow somebody else's footsteps, often with a Global Positioning System (GPS) in hand. Explorers roamed the globe when it was still possible to walk off the map.

Turkstra and his crew won't have to worry about the return trip. Wherever they end up, a helicopter will find them and take them back to base camp.

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