

Chapter 1

PREPARATION BEGINS

The most daunting part of an Antarctic expedition is coming to terms with the training required to get fit enough for the physical challenges ahead. I despise the gym and have more of a 'let's sit in the shade and have a cold beer' attitude to training. So after several weeks of putting it off – rationalising the delay by telling myself, 'It's still five months away; I'll start next week' – I finally bite the bullet and book into a gym class with a personal trainer. To avoid running into anyone I know, I pick a gym several suburbs away. I choose a group session so I can hide in the corner when it becomes apparent that I am hopelessly out of condition.

The gym is new but has a low ceiling, poor ventilation and smells like my old school sports bag circa 1983. Just to get things going, the trainer, Chad, puts me on a machine that I am reliably informed is a cross-trainer; it has a running motion but without the impact. It also has upright handles that swing with the running action. I'm thinking, 'How easy is this?' Left right, left right – now I am building momentum, really getting the hang of it. How good?

'Hey Jason, what are you doing?' calls Chad. 'You're going backwards! You need to go forwards.' I am absolutely devastated at being exposed as the amateur I am. It doesn't bode well for my chances of travelling more than 200 kilometres across the snow and ice of Antarctica. Oh well, how much worse can it get?

After that setback, I find my feet and power ahead for ten minutes before being moved onto the bike. I feel a surge of pride as I manage to go forwards without assistance on my first try. My confidence is at an all-time high. Chad suggests a move to the weights. As I wrestle my weight-lifting demons, Chad asks me to lie down on a narrow bench. So far, so good. He then asks me to do five reps. I have no idea what this means, but I begin – or rather attempt – to lift the weights on the bar above my eyes. The bar shakes and wobbles around, as do my eyes, legs and arms. In fact the only part of me that doesn't shake is the middle of my back, which is pressed into the bench so firmly that movement is impossible.

Chad, seeing my distress, grabs the bar and eases it back into its cradle above my face. 'Bit heavy?' he asks politely.

'Impossibly heavy,' I gasp.

'OK, let me take some weight off for you.' The relief is enormous, without doubt the best thing that has happened to me all morning. I take a deep breath and prepare to try again.

As Chad adjusts the weights for my next attempt, I take several deep breaths. My psychological preparation has begun. Okay this time ... this time you can do it ... this time ... Arrgh! It's still too heavy. I can only manage one rep (which I have discovered stands for 'repetition') before Chad saves me from dropping the weight bar across my throat. 'Jason, I'll have to take some more weight off.' Chad kindly removes some more weights. On my third attempt, and with a greatly reduced weight, I focus on the bar and turn to Superman for inspiration: Up, up and away! The bar lifts up, once, twice, three times. I am unable to do any more.

The bar is pressing on my throat and slowly crushing my Adam's apple. My eyes dart around looking for Chad to help me remove the bar from my throat, but he is nowhere to be found. My head turns to the side, first the left and then the right, to assess the weights hanging at each end of the bar that is pinned to my throat. To my embarrassment there are no weights. I am lifting the bar only! A quick scan of the gym confirms that no one has witnessed my pathetic effort. There is nothing to do but laugh. Welcome to the wonderful world of weight-lifting.

After a few more visits to the gym, I am confident enough to move to a gym closer to home, my fear of discovery having evaporated. The new gym will be my second home for three days a week for the next four months.





Rocky Valley Lake

After much discussion with Caroline about the type of trainer that I will need, we decide that a lean, ultra-fit fitness fanatic is the way to go. How wrong we are. My trainer for four months is to be Nick, who does not come close to fitting any of my original criteria for an ideal trainer. I quickly discover that laughter and entertainment are clearly the most important factors in getting through an hour-long session in the gym. We laugh our way through every hour, and the sessions pass in no time.

Before long, the laughter of the gym is replaced by the horror of the Victorian high country. Our first training weekend takes place at the Victorian ski resort of Falls Creek during the first weekend of September 2005. This is the first time that I have camped out and been trekking in the snow since my 1994 expedition to Mount McKinley, Alaska. It's a strange thing to be back in this unforgiving environment after such a long absence. I go thinking that I know it all, that I have all the skills, and consequently give my preparation very little time and almost no thought. My bags are packed hastily, but I have most of the things I'll need – after all, I have done this all before.

We arrive at the top car park at Falls Creek, aptly named Windy Corner, at dusk and begin to unload all our equipment. The amount of equipment required for such a trip always surprises me: equipment for cooking, for hiking, for skiing, for camping, for climbing, for photography, for carrying equipment ... Packing equipment for carrying equipment? It sounds so simple, yet oddly enough I have not considered this essential part of equipment. We load up our packs and sledges for the 'short haul to camp one'. Now, when I hear 'short haul', my mind starts to focus on, well, a short haul. I pack carelessly, with more than a hint of 'she'll be right, mate'.

There are three separate bags on my sledge, as well as some cooking equipment hooked onto the bags. The bags are unevenly weighted and loosely strapped on with some woefully inadequate thin cord. And then there are the skis and ski bindings that I have borrowed from Graeme Joy, who was the first Australian to reach the North Pole and kayak the east coast of Greenland, and who accompanied me on the Mount McKinley climb. Not that there is a problem with Graeme or his equipment. The problem is all mine. I have neglected to adjust his bindings for my boots. What an idiot! It is getting dark as the call is made to leave the car park and head off on our first trek as a team.

The first half hour passes without incident. We are on skis, hauling our sledges across ground that is either flat or slightly downward-sloping. How good is this? We reach the dam wall for the Rocky Valley Lake, which has a road running along the top of it. Sadly the snow has melted and we are forced to take off our skis and carry them. We also carry our sledges 300 metres to where the snow resumes again on the other side. It is my general belief that, when I am called upon to carry a load, one big weight carried once is vastly preferable to two lighter loads hauled twice. So off I trudge. This 300-metre haul is awkward at best. Lifting and carrying a fully loaded sledge is a very different experience from that of pulling it over slick snow and ice.









Eventually I make it to the end of the dam wall. By now sweat is pouring off me, and my poorly packed sledge has deteriorated to the extent that it needs a total repack and I need to have a serious think about how to move on from here.

It is now dark, -5°C and getting colder; my sledge is a disaster, and my trekking team mates are so far ahead that I can no longer see them. My entire body is steaming with sweat; my ski bindings and boots keep detaching, and I have no tool to tighten the bindings. Just to add insult to self-inflicted injury, it starts to snow, and my headlamp is – naturally – at the bottom of one of my three bags, but I have no idea which one. My frustration with my own lack of preparation is palpable. I unpack all the bags to find my headlamp and am somewhat surprised to find that the battery has not gone flat. It works. I don't!

After 20 minutes of mucking about and constant cursing, I get going again. While I have managed to repack everything, my sledge is still unstable and poorly organised, and my boots insist on slipping the bindings every time I put the slightest pressure on the ski edge. Over the next 500 metres, my skis pop off another three times. Furious at my gross incompetence, I decide that the skis will have to come off and be strapped to the sledge to avoid any further frustration. Ha!

The skis are tied down on the top of the sledge; the sledge is balanced as best as it can be, and off I go. After hauling the sledge another 200 metres, it starts to tip over again. I walk back to examine it, rebalance the top-heavy load with the problematic skis and continue to haul the accursed sledge over the dark, frozen track that winds its way along the shores of the Rocky Valley Lake. It is now more than two hours since we left the Windy Corner car park. After a dozen unwanted releases of the skis from the bindings followed by twenty sledge tip-overs, I am ready to explode with frustration or to curl up into a ball, surrendering to tears and inevitable death.

I have not seen Jason or Peter for more than an hour. Have they pulled off into the darkness without leaving a marker for me to follow? Have I been so preoccupied with my own woes that I missed the camp? Who knows? This is the peculiar thing about mountaineering and trekking. You work and move as a team but when things become a little difficult for whatever reason it becomes every man for himself. In my experience there is little waiting around and pandering to the slow and disorganised. You just catch up later. One thing that I do know is that the skis have to come off the sledge and will now have to be carried on my backpack as I cannot get them to balance with the tools available. I am on my hands and knees in the pitch black as snow falls around me; my headlamp is fading as I lash my skis to my backpack. My hands are beginning to freeze. I am not having fun yet.

I face a new challenge. Hauling the backpack, which now weighs over 50 kilos, onto my back with skis attached is most difficult, and requires me to bend down on one knee, sling it over one shoulder and then slide my opposite arm into the shoulder strap on the other side. My first three attempts see me fall on my face, driving the headlamp firmly into my forehead and causing some minor laceration. Now, rolling over, I am unsure whether to laugh or cry; I choose the former. Laughing at your own stupidity is helpful in that it focuses your attention on the fact that all of your problems are avoidable and that with proper planning and preparation this will never happen again.

Planning and preparation – this is a lesson that I believed I had learnt well on my first expedition in the Andes. So I am more than a little disappointed with myself that I have been forced to relearn it. I stagger into camp exhausted – four hours after leaving Windy Corner. The only good thing about being late into camp is that the others have already set it up and I can jump straight into the tent and a warm sleeping bag.

The next morning we pack up camp and I spend some time reorganising my clearly inadequate packing system for the day ahead. We have a relatively uneventful day, trekking up to the summit of Mount Nelse, an awesome peak thrusting 1884 metres into the crisp mountain air. To tell the truth, Mount Nelse is more of a hummock than a mountain, but as its name insists, it is nonetheless a mountain. On conquering Mount Nelse and adding it to my growing list of local summits – Mount Feathertop, Mount Dandenong, Mount Martha, Arthur's Seat (north face), Mount Buller and Mount Macedon – we rest for lunch. That afternoon, we undertake further training and run through all of our trekking gear, which is time well spent.



Crevasse rescue training

To observe Peter Hillary and Jason Veale living and working together is a source of joy and amusement. Peter Hillary is from mountaineering royalty. An accomplished climber, he has twice reached the summit of Everest, climbed on K2, climbed and guided expeditions on numerous peaks in the Himalayas, trekked to the South Pole and visited the North Pole with none other than Neil Armstrong, Steve Fossett and his father, Sir Edmund Hillary. He has also given countless lectures and motivational talks around the world on his adventures and what it is to live the life of an adventurer.

Peter is very reasoned and measured, a deep thinker from the ‘measure twice, cut once’ school of life. Jason Veale, on the other hand, is from the ‘don’t measure, just cut’ school. Since meeting in 1981, Jason has been one of my dearest and closest friends, but his experience of mountaineering is mostly via the Discovery Channel. He also has a reputation for heavy-handedness when operating any kind of technical equipment. Jason’s father, Warner Veale, has a large box full of electronic gadgets – watches, calculators, radios and so on – that Jason has broken, and Warner keeps this box as a reminder of the amusing and sometimes destructive youth his son enjoyed. ‘Oh Jason, do you remember the time when you broke [insert item here]?’ And so another story begins.

Day two on the mountain sees us doing some emergency-rescue training and general rope work. One of the first lessons is in how to attach an ascender to a rope (an ascender being a modern mountaineering tool for gripping onto a fixed rope with a handle to assist in hauling oneself up). We are also instructed how to attach a prusik to a rope in order to pull ourselves out of a crevasse (a prusik being the old and very difficult-to-use predecessor of the ascender, made by the climber out of rope, it is essentially a sling with a sliding friction knot).

As Jason has never done this before, most of the teaching is directed at him. I stand back, watch and wait. Peter has set up a rope slung over a high tree branch to simulate the situation in which one of us has fallen into a crevasse. All Jason needs to do is clip onto the rope and haul himself up into the tree. Unfortunately for Jason, Peter thinks it a good idea to try the dreaded prusik first, to provide a challenge. I struggle to hide my delight as I take up a prime position to witness the self-rescue attempt.

Jason looks very professional as he slips into his harness and hooks into the various ropes. As he leaves the ground, his harness tightens around his testicles, causing more than a little anguish. At Peter’s suggestion, he rearranges himself before continuing. But now frustration takes hold as Jason is unable to operate a prusik. Jason can go neither up nor down, and Peter and I stand below giving advice. The prusiks are driving Jason mad. After several expletives, Peter finally lowers Jason from his suspended perch, exhausted after hanging by the rope for more than twenty minutes in his futile attempt to ascend.

Peter offers Jason the use of his ascender, which he gratefully accepts. This ascender has been with Peter for more than twenty years; it has been up Everest with him and is a prized piece of equipment. This time Jason climbs the rope with relative ease – up and down, up and down.



Ascender training





Summit of Mt Nelse in low cloud



On conquering the rope, Jason lowers himself down – almost to the ground. He accidentally locks up the ascender on the rope and is unable to move up or down. The pressure on Jason's testicles increases again and he becomes restless. Peter instructs Jason not to force the ascender's release button and says that he will lower him down. As the pressure on his testicles becomes greater and Jason's frustration grows to boiling point, I sense that something amusing is about to happen.

As Peter begins the process of lowering him, Jason reaches for a karabiner (a solid metal clip device with spring-loaded gate latch used for clipping on and off ropes, harnesses and so on). As he moves the karabiner towards the jammed ascender button, Peter reminds

him again not to force the ascender under any circumstance. Ignoring Peter, Jason hooks the karabiner around the ascender button and pulls on it, gently at first, then with a little more vigour. Finally, at some point, moderate pulling gives way to forceful yanking, and as Jason applies maximum force to the button, it flies off at right angles, accompanied by a dramatic popping sound.

At this point I am falling about with laughter, unable to control myself. Some minutes later I look up to find one P. Hillary glaring at me accusingly. Quickly I attempt to give Peter a condensed rundown on Jason's heavy hand. Both Jason and I are fighting losing battles to keep straight faces, with Jason quietly whispering to me, 'Shut up. Will you just shut up? Oh my God, can you believe what I have done?'

Then something catches my eye in the snow. It is the small aluminium button, which has been sheared off at the base. 'Is this it?' I ask as the other two come in for closer inspection. 'It appears to have been sheared off with brute force,' I suggest. 'You bloody idiot,' Jason whispers angrily to me as Peter takes the button for further inspection. Shocked by Jason's rash destruction of his equipment, Peter can only offer, 'You just have to be so careful with the equipment. You cannot force these things.' This only adds to Jason's guilt and my giggling. Several minutes later, Peter repeats in bewilderment, 'It has just been sheared off ...'

That night we sit in the tent as I cook dinner. When Peter enquires what we will be eating for our evening meal, I respond, 'katabatic hoosh!' This leaves Peter in stitches. Katabatic refers to the fierce polar wind that blows away from the South Pole, moving down the polar plateau that is produced by the cooling of the air at higher altitudes (the South Pole is almost 3000 metres above sea level). The katabatic rolls away from the South Pole in a doughnut-like formation before it becomes relatively warm and rolls back down, eventually reaching the South Pole again. These winds are constant – and notoriously brutal. We love the word *katabatic*! *Hoosh* is the name given to the fatty soup that Antarctic explorers of the Heroic Age (1895–1922) have traditionally eaten as their staple. At the beginning of each trip, the hoosh will usually contain mainly pemmican (dried lean beef pounded into a paste, mixed with melted fats and pressed into small blocks) and dry biscuits. Later, as the expedition wears on and the supplies run low, the hoosh would typically consist of water, seal meat and blubber, penguin and any other bits that might be available, including old pieces of leather or the sledging dogs. The dinner pot that night contained a fine katabatic hoosh of noodles, onion, minced beef, garlic, peas, oil and tomatoes.

All three of us are reasonably well read (and Peter especially so) on the Heroic Age of exploration in Antarctica, and have a particular interest in the expeditions led by Amundsen, Scott, Mawson and Shackleton. We discuss the problem that having two Jasons on the trip might pose in terms of clarity of communication. It is suggested that we adopt names of Antarctic explorers from the Heroic Age.



Sun setting behind Mt Nelse