



RICHARD WEBER

# Skiing to the Poles

*The critical role of skis in 130 years of Arctic exploration and adventure.*

**BY JEFF BLUMENFELD**

GORDON WILTSIE



Above: Lunch break during Will Steger's Trans-Antarctica Expedition. Top of page: Tessum Weber, Richard Weber's son, crosses an ice bridge en route to the North Pole in 2010.

In Part I of this two-part article, which appeared in the November-December issue of *Skiing History*, author Jeff Blumenfeld explained how skis played a critical role in the Arctic and polar expeditions of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Part II looks at the role of skis in modern-day expeditions by explorers like Paul Schurke, Will Steger and Richard Weber.

Blumenfeld, an ISHA director, runs Blumenfeld and Associates PR and ExpeditionNews.com in Boulder, Colorado. He is the recipient of the 2017 Bob Gillen Memorial Award from the North American Snowsports Journalists Association, was nominated a Fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, and is chair of the Rocky Mountain chapter of *The Explorers Club*.

In 1986, a 41-year-old Minnesotan named Will Steger launched his 56-day Steger North Pole Expedition, financed by cash and gear from over 60 companies. The expedition would become the first confirmed, non-mechanized and externally unsupported dogsled and ski journey to the North Pole—suggesting that Robert E. Peary and Frederick Cook could indeed have reached the pole in 1909 using the same basic equipment.

Fast forward to spring 1989, when Steger's former co-leader to the North Pole, Paul Schurke, led his own expedition across the



COURTESY PAUL SCHURKE

Paul Schurke (left) and Will Steger (right) were co-leaders on the 1986 North Pole expedition. It was the first confirmed, non-mechanized and externally unsupported dogsled and ski journey to the North Pole—suggesting that Robert E. Peary and Frederick Cook could have reached the Pole in 1909 using the same basic equipment.

Bering Strait, from Anaydr in the former Soviet Far East to Kotzebue in northwest Alaska. It was a project that President George H.W. Bush and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev credited with easing Cold War tensions.

Using dogs, skis and traditional 30-foot vessels called umiaks, 12 Soviet and American adventurers, including three Eskimos and three Chukchis, visited a string of remote Siberian villages, crossed the International Date Line, and continued the journey to native towns in Alaska. (I promoted the Bering Bridge Expedition on behalf of its major sponsor, Du Pont, and have remained in touch with Schurke since those days.)

Schurke recently told *Skiing History*, “Our expedition used extra wide backcountry skis—16 pairs of Fischer Europa 99s with metal edges and 16 pairs of Exel Arctic fiberglass ski poles, which often doubled as tent poles, antenna masts and trail markers.” Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen used a similar tactic, employing special ski poles that also served as ice axes, tent poles and kayak frames. [Editor’s note: With a 55mm waist, the Fischer Europa 99s were

“extra wide” compared to track skis, not to other touring skis of the era.] When asked about the use of polar skis for exploration, Schurke was effusive:

“Mechanical bindings are too prone to ice-up and breakage. The Berwin strap-on bindings, made of Zytel nylon and invented in my hometown of Ely, Minnesota, accommodated any size snowboot.” The Bering Bridge boots were made by Red Wing Shoe Company, containing waterproof leather from S.B. Foot Tanning Company, both in Red Wing, Minnesota, according to Schurke’s book, *Bering Bridge: The Soviet-American Expedition From Siberia to Alaska* (Pfeifer-Hamilton, 1989).

“Simplicity is the name of the game for foolproof gear used for polar travel,” writes Schurke. “With my Berwins, I dispensed with the heel strap and set the front strap for a step-in/step-out fit. That way I could be in and out of my skis in a flash all day long to clamber over pressure ridges, scout routes through a shear zone, or pull sleds over fissures.”

Stability of sea ice is a constant concern for polar explorers. Because of its elasticity, even sea ice four inches thick is unsafe to walk on,

while freshwater ice only half as thick will support a human being. According to *Arctic Dreams* by Barry Lopez (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1986), scarcely a substance on earth is so tractable, so unexpectedly complicated, so deceptively passive, as though “walking over the back of some enormous and methodical beast.”

Schurke continues, “If I happen to slip into the drink while skiing over a hidden snow bridge, I could kick my skis off instantly to pull myself out. Berwins may have been a tad clunky to ski in, but we weren’t trying to set any ground speed records. Plus, they allowed us to wear the biggest, badass, warmest boots we wanted and were never prone to icing up and locking to our footwear.”

## STEGER: ACROSS ANTARCTICA THE LONG WAY

In 1990, Will Steger continued pioneering polar exploration with skis and dogsleds, this time 3,741 miles and seven months across Antarctica the long way, traveling from the Antarctica Peninsula past the South Pole to the Soviet scientific research base at Mirnyy. It would become history’s longest-ever non-mechanized traverse of Antarctica.

It is a commonly held misunderstanding that dogsledders simply hitch rides on their dogsleds as they glide across the ice. In fact, pulling a man’s weight on an already loaded sled is an almost inexcusable waste of valuable dog energy, according to an educational guide to Steger’s Trans-Antarctica Expedition published in 1989 (Meredith Publishing Services).

The men skied alongside their sleds, averaging three miles per hour to cover at least 25 miles per day. Traveling in pairs, one man remained tethered to the back handle of the sled, while the other led. For the grueling Trans-Antarctica Expedition, which achieved worldwide fame thanks to four primetime hours of coverage on ABC-TV and a spread in *National Geographic* (November 1990), the team took waxless Fischer cross-country skis with two bindings—on cold days, when

the men wore broad mukluks, they used wide, plastic Berwin bindings. On days warm enough to accommodate lighter, specially designed ski boots, the men relied upon Salomon SNS touring bindings. Exel provided the Nordic poles.

Steger, now a prominent spokesperson for the preservation of the Arctic, says that “Skis and dogs are the magic ingredient for long-distance polar travel. The dogs pull the gear on sleds, while the team member uses skis to efficiently glide across snow conditions that would otherwise be exhausting to plod through, if not impossible to navigate.”

### WEBER: ROUNDTrip TO THE NORTH POLE

In the history of polar exploration, no one, to date, has duplicated the 1995 feat of Canadian Arctic explorer Richard Weber—a veteran of more than 60 Arctic expeditions, including Will Steger’s 1986 North Pole Expedition—and Russian Dr. Mikhail Malakhov. Together, in 122 days, the two adventurers were the first since 1909 to reach the North Pole and return to land, at Ward Hunt Island in Canada, without support or resupply.

No food caches were hidden midway, there was no resupply from the air, and no “reverse resupply”—the process whereby dogs or teammates are extracted by aircraft, as was the case with Steger’s 1986 North Pole Expedition. In fact, the Weber Malakhov Expedition had no sled dogs, resorting instead to man-hauling the entire journey on skis.

“Going on an expedition to the North Pole, then taking a plane out is like climbing Mount Everest and getting helicoptered off the top,” Weber told me when I covered his feat in *Expedition News*.

It could not have been accomplished without skis. In this case, Fischer Europa 99 skis, tailor-made Sorel mukluks, and prototype ski bindings made for the Canadian military that were never sold commercially. Weber says, “Skis require less energy, they slide or at least can be shuffled across the snow. They can be used to bridge gaps

and cross thin ice, and they can be used as tent frames. However, efficiency diminishes greatly if the user doesn’t know how to ski. It requires an expert cross-country skier to cross a field of broken ice on skis pulling a sled. Most people are better off on snowshoes.”

### NORTH POLE: SKI DAYS ARE NUMBERED

The use of skis for polar exploration is still being celebrated, as is evidenced by the Google Doodle celebrating Nansen’s 156<sup>th</sup> birthday and posted on October 10, 2017. It was seen by millions of computer users in the northern hemisphere. However, at least in regards to the North Pole, human- and dog-powered surface exploration is nearing an end.

Polar adventurer, expedition guide and educator Eric Larsen, of Boulder, Colorado, is one of only a few Americans to have skied to both the North and South Poles. In 2014, he and a teammate skied, snowshoed and swam from Canadian soil to the North Pole, possibly the last expedition of its kind due to disappearing sea ice. The Arctic is heating up, making traditional polar travel nearly impossible.

“The story of what is happening in the Arctic is really the story of what is happening to our planet,” he writes in his book co-written with Hudson Lindenberger, *On Thin Ice: An Epic Final Quest Into the Melting Arctic* (Falcon Guides, 2016).

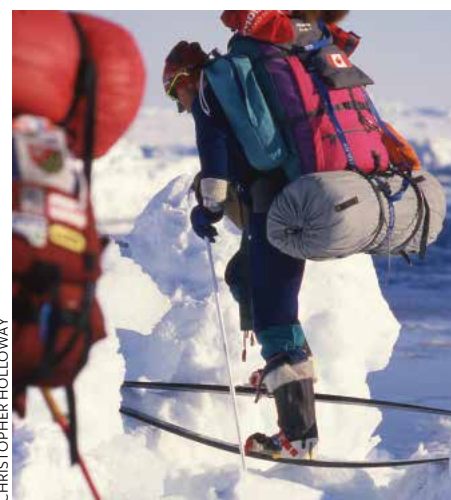
“The difference in the quality of ice compared to my last expedition here (in 2010) was shocking.” Later he adds, “It’s like someone pulled the plug, and all of the ice that was previously held together was now spreading apart.”

That’s not the case, of course, on the frozen continent of Antarctica. Explorer Richard Weber said in an email recently, “The surface in Antarctica is good for skiing. No open water, no thin ice, no bears, lots of light, warmer temperatures,



KEVIN VALLEY

From 1978 to 2006, Canadian explorer Richard Weber organized and led more than 45 Arctic expeditions. He’s shown here at the South Pole marker in 2008.



CHRISTOPHER HOLLOWAY

Weber uses skis to safely cross a narrow crack during his 1988 Soviet-Canadian Polar Bridge Expedition, a ski trek from Siberia to Canada via the North Pole.

strong sun. I used much lighter skis and I waxed in Antarctica. The skis glide better and with less energy.”

The intangible desire to explore and challenge the boundaries of what we know and where we have been has provided benefits to our society for centuries. If not at the North Pole, you can be sure skis will still be found in Antarctica, and wherever else there’s a patch of snow or ice to cross, and someplace to explore on the other side. ❄️