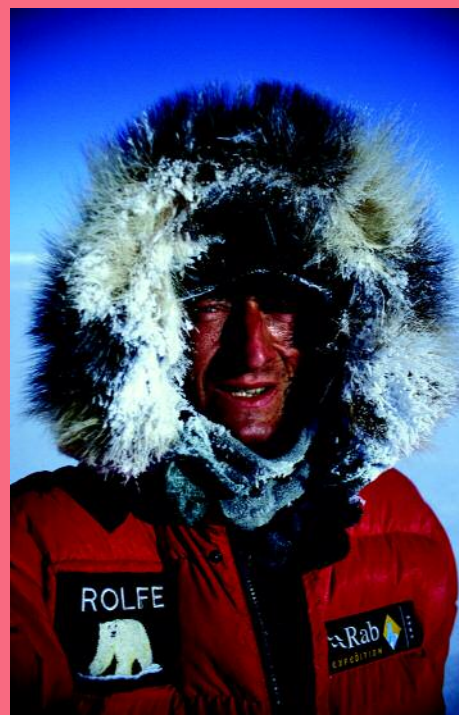


The sessions from hell



I don't ever take this fitness for granted and work hard to maintain it. Ultimately this disciplined edge to push that little bit further enables me and the dogs to perform to the best of our abilities.

GARY ROLFE is one of the few men in history to consistently and successfully make solo expeditions on the Arctic Ocean with huskies. He is currently in the Canadian Arctic and shares with us an insight into why his running is so important in his training for long haul polar expeditions

"Every now and then someone very different from each generation appears who is capable of pulling off the unexpected. I believe Gary is one such person." Sir Ranulph Fiennes

In the Arctic, the human race will always play second fiddle. Nature, especially the crushing brutal cold, reigns here with majestic and supreme power.

Forty below zero temperatures during the nine-month winters aren't uncommon and the cold can strip you of the critical elements needed just to survive as a human being.

Thoughts plead for warmth, shelter and food. Without one or the other, life is intolerable. Without all three life will cease.



Photos courtesy of Gary Rolfe

On top of this I watch out for changing ice conditions, threatening wolf packs, plus polar bears that can weigh in at over half a tonne and consider human beings as potential food.

For me a high level of fitness is paramount in order to cope.

The only effective way to keep warm in extreme cold is by increasing muscular activity, either by shivering or by exercise. I favour exercise. I don't depend on the dogs to carry me.

For up to 12 hours a day I ski with free-heel bindings alongside my dogs and sled to stave off hypothermia. This method was first perfected nearly 100 years ago by the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen before leading the first men to reach the South Pole.

My decisions aren't only made for myself but also for my dogs. They rely on me to make successful decisions throughout every single day and night on the sea ice. This leaves them to do what they love to do, and that's to pull hard.

Consequently I'm at the mercy of my skills, a panic-free mind and my fitness. I train hard, very hard.

From my mid-teens I developed an appetite for endurance training. The fitter I am mentally, the more focused I can remain on the physical demands involved in long haul polar journeys. Importantly the well being of the dogs is maintained.

They never have to worry about being fed or fear falling through ice because they know I'll be there for them. This bond, established from thousands of previous training miles spent together, maintains an invisible thread throughout our days and nights on the ice together.

Out of an expedition environment my training is on-going. The Arctic summers are brief but intense. During the three months of 24-hour sunlight with temperatures of 30° Celsius or above, I can't replicate the cold but I train twice a day, everyday.



A week averages 110 miles running with the dogs until the lakes and river systems freeze.

The ice thickens enough to be criss-crossed by snow-mobles and vehicles that carve and then leave behind useful running routes. With sessions from hell, I deal with sleep deprivation, anxiety and fatigue and top it all off with weight training every other day. It conditions discipline, physiological benefit and iron will. I train on 4,500 calories a day.

I combine multiple layers of Merino wool-base garments with Rab Vapour-Rise layers.

This system breathes then wicks away moisture from my body. It protects me from sweat freezing, a potential killer.

Considering the strain my body goes through I remain injury free. I don't put it down to luck. I've never scrimped on training in anything less than top end trainers combined with Sorbothane impact absorbing innersoles. Also, I use these innersoles inside traditional Inuit footwear, called mukluks, when I ski.

On expeditions I maintain energy levels to refuel a staggering calorific output and hydrate myself to replenish lost sugars and salts while on the move.

Weight for weight my food per day weighs 950g with a value of around 5,200 calories, slightly less than one of the dog's daily rations. This equals the calorific expenditure to running a marathon a day. I snack at intervals on complex energy Powerbars where 70% of the energy is delivered as carbohydrate. Also, I use special mixed powders of fructose and protein. Morning and night I sprinkle this concoction over pasta or oats with dried fruit because the whole idea is to provide instant and long-lasting quality energy to maintain critical body weight and replenish tired muscles. It's light on my stomach too.

My weight training schedules reflect typical daily scenarios on the ice. It's conditioning, if you like, for handling and picking up the dogs out of various situations.

Sometimes we journey up through chaotic sea ice piled higher than a house and at that point the skis come off and the pushing and pulling starts. Sometimes we lighten and relay the whole sled's payload up over the ice until the ice flattens. This can take days.

No drugs or other behaviour will substitute exercise for generating heat. My running is a disciplined way of thinking that I can't achieve by doing anything else. It gives me a powerful sense of well-being and keeps me alert. I see and feel experiences with a heightened awareness that I believe wouldn't be anywhere near as special if I didn't keep running. I value it enormously. It enables me to focus on the little extra things such as taking photographs and helps me to share my experiences with others.

I don't ever take this fitness for granted and work hard to maintain it. Ultimately this disciplined edge to push that little bit further enables me and the dogs to perform to the best of our abilities.

It is hard work but there's nowhere else I'd rather be!

Find out more about Gary and his unique way of life at www.garyrolfe.com.

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