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Origins of The Explorers Grand Slam with Vanessa O'Brien

We recently connected with Vanessa O'Brien, keeper of the [Explorer's Grand Slam](#) stats, about the origins of this 7+2 adventure challenge, and what the future holds for similar expedition endeavors. Here are her answers to 8 questions we put to her:

Q. We've noticed a significant trend in the last 10 years of mountaineers joining polar expeditions to complete their Explorers Grand Slams. When did the concept of the Grand Slam really take off?

The Explorers Grand Slam (EGS) (also known as the Adventurer's Grand Slam) originated when Sir David Hempleman-Adams became the first person to walk solo and unsupported to both the North and South poles and summit the highest mountain on every continent, including Everest. That was 1998. However, I would not learn about the EGS for another 14 years – not until I was planning to climb Vinson Massif. I first heard the term from Stuart Smith, who completed the EGS and climbed with me on Shishapangma. After I skied the Last Degree to both poles in 2013, I decided to set up a website in an effort to formalize what this challenge was and was not. I started by meeting Sir David outside London to get his thoughts. I contacted as many EGS people as I could find, then differentiated the coastal skiers from the last degree (LD) skiers. Obviously, there is a different level of endurance and all LD individuals should state that they are EGS LD. I request all potential candidates who complete the seven summits to register with Harry Kikstra of 7summits.com as he is the best repository of seven summits data. I often explain that the EGS list excludes pure polar explorers. My EGS list includes mountains, it is as simple as that. Tom & Tina Sjogren developed the original Adventure Stats which included Polar travel at adventurestats.com setting out the criteria for full coastal travel to the South/North Poles.

Q. Is it as difficult as it used to be? Why or why not.

Yes, I would say polar travel is more difficult now, especially coastal to the North Pole. First are the overall conditions – melting arctic sea ice (estimated to lose up to 12.8% per annum). Skiers face open water leads, large pressure ridges, and thinning ice. Then there are logistical problems – the Russian ice station, Barneo, closes for political reasons, a helicopter crashes, or the runway cracks – and one has the making of a damn good British sitcom ending in disaster. Frostbite is real, and the ending of Kenn Borek flights and SAR from Canada have added to the complexity of traveling to the North Pole. The North Pole witnessed seven unsupported, unassisted expeditions in the five years leading up to 2010. However, in the nine years since 2010, there has only been only one team to reach the North Pole.

Q. As more people venture to far flung places and claim various "firsts" there has been an industry-wide push to better define expedition lingo (example: "supported" vs. "unsupported"; "assisted" vs. "unassisted") What is your take on these distinctions? What do you think the early explorers would say about the explorers of today?

Unfortunately, most of the interviews take place before people head off, and then the media goes silent if they don't make it. If an individual does make it, suddenly they are re-writing history and that is just wrong. Both Borge Ousland and Felicity Aston told me that they have issues with the way their polar data is recorded, so the first thing I would ask the new owner of the polar data to consider, after debating expedition lingo, is to fact check the existing data. That data needs to be published and fully communicated, this is especially important when there is no official governing body. The Himalayan Database was bequeathed to the American Alpine Club after Elizabeth Hawley's death, and because that information was carefully curated by a dedicated group of individuals, it continued to go from strength to strength. Polar data is no different – it needs leadership, discussion, a set of rules that articulate expedition principles, and a platform to share results.

As for early explorers, the races to both poles proved how cut throat these endeavors would be – lying, cheating, stealing, and manipulation went hand in hand to achieve the unachievable. Are we better than that today? Maybe, just. However, the commercialization (which includes shortcuts in one way or another) and desire to 'reach the press' would certainly give the early explorers indigestion over a meal of pemmican and seal.

Q. You manage an online list of people who have completed the Explorers Grand Slam. What are some of the challenges and rewards of being a keeper of such a list?

The are no rewards – people expect to be added to this list when they complete the EGS and are irritated when they have to prove it. Challenges include keeping the list authentic to its original purpose – seven summits plus a minimum of the Last Degree to both the North and South poles. Today there are only 12 individuals who have completed a true EGS – summiting seven summits plus coastal north and south poles. It is probably worth listing them because what they have done is spectacular:

- David Hempleman-Adams
- Erling Kagge
- Fedor Konyukhov
- Heo Young-Ho
- Park Young Seok (RIP: 2011 on Annapurna)
- Bernard Voyer
- Cecilie Skog
- Maxime Chaya
- Ryan Waters
- Stuart Smith
- Johan Ernst Nilson
- Wilco van Rooijen

In addition, there are 6 individuals who completed a hybrid (one pole coastal and one pole last degree) and 49 individuals who completed the EGS Last Degree program for both poles.

Q. What are one or two pieces of advice you've received over the course of your expedition career that have stuck with you and/or shaped your experience?

I am a collector of quotes and one of my favorites is F. Scott Fitzgerald, who said, "Never confuse a single defeat with a final defeat." The reason I like this is because it talks to not giving up if you meet initial failure. Failure includes lessons which give you information and data. Failure should make the next go a bit easier. The other thing I would say is to keep an open mind. The people who have helped me the most are sometimes the ones I have known the least. This could be anything from soliciting donations to run a marathon to planning an expedition. Keep an open mind and communicate.

Q. We're you surprised by any differences between mountain travel and polar travel? Are there mountaineering skills that don't translate to polar travel?

Yes, there are differences. I actually like to borrow polar ideas for equipment and supplies for high altitude mountaineering. Not sure it works the other way round because while high altitude mountaineering is cold, either polar region will see something colder- full stop. Of course, one won't abseil down or climb a steep pitch during polar travel like on a mountain, or use jumars, encounter falling rock, and/or meet limited supplies of oxygen. That doesn't mean skiing to the poles is not challenging - there is no mountaineering where your sled is used as a floatation device and where you have to remove your ski binding to climb over pressure ridges which resemble small mountains. I am grateful to have experienced and gained an appreciation for such remote areas of our planet. If anything, that helps make me a better advocate for places that have no voice.

PolarExplorers has helped dozens of Explorers Grand Slam hopefuls achieve their [North Pole](#), [South Pole](#) and [Mt. Vinson](#) requirements. We'd love to assist you on your [Explorers Grand Slam journey](#). Space remains for our 2020 North Pole season and 2021 South Pole / Vinson season. [Contact us](#) for more details.