



A.5(b) FITNESS ON EXPEDITION VENTURES

Chris Blessington 2008

INTRODUCTION

An important but sometimes overlooked aspect of preparing to go on an expedition venture is physical fitness. All sorts of other priorities such as equipment and clothing, fundraising and pre-expedition research may crowd out the obvious and overriding priority, that is to be ready for the physical challenges that will lie ahead. If you are to play your full part in the team and want to enjoy the expedition it is important to ensure that you are physically as well as mentally prepared for the experience. You will want to be a fully functional member of the team, well able to cope with all the physical challenges ahead and not a liability.

This guide will discuss the important areas of physical fitness on which you should work. Your leaders will not look for international athletes but they will expect you to be fit and strong and healthy. Fitness for any disabled members will require more specific advice.

EXPEDITION AREA AND ACTIVITIES

Think about the region in which you will be operating. Ask questions about the range of activities that you will be expected to participate in. Will you for instance be skiing, swimming kayaking, walking or climbing? Will you be carrying packs? Will some of the walking be up steep hills or broken ground? Consider the climate and terrain: the demands of living in arctic, desert or rain forest climates are very different to those that you may be used to.

FITNESS PLAN

The first thing to consider is your overall fitness plan. Don't leave it too late and think that a last minute burst of activity will do the trick. It won't and in many instances that I care to think about it has led to disappointment. More often than not a crash course leads to overdoing it, strains, and injuries that in the worst cases will write you off before you start. I can remember one member turning up the day before we were about to depart with a torn ligament in his knee. As a consequence, he was left behind and naturally was terribly disappointed. With a sensible and progressive fitness plan he might have avoided that. Use the whole period available to you before your expedition. Plan to improve your general fitness and stamina by playing more sport, swimming, walking, cycling and/or running.

GENERAL HEALTH

When talking about overall fitness we mean teeth, eyes and ears as well as general health. There is nothing worse than suffering from toothache or losing an old filling when you are out of reach of dental help. If you normally wear glasses or contact lenses make sure that you have spare sets with you and that the contact lenses are compatible with the terrain in which you will be operating, they are unlikely to be suitable in arid or other dusty areas. If you have hearing problems and need

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aids check battery supplies and compatibility with the areas where you will be going. Doctors or opticians will give you proper advice.

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WEIGHT CARRYING

If you know that you will have to carry heavy equipment for long distances start practicing with a loaded rucksack. Start with light loads and increase the weight over several weeks. Check that the fitting of the bag and its position in the small of the back and the hips is good and the strain on the shoulders is minimal. Get an experienced person to help check the fit of the rucksack for you. Most approved equipment providers will help with this. When it feels comfortable, increase the distance you walk and ensure that this includes broken ground and hilly terrain. Begin with short walks with 5 - 8 Kg and increase gradually to about 10Kg. Don't do this on your own and don't overdo it. If your back and shoulders feel strained go back to the beginning and check the fitting of the rucksack.

Learn how to shoulder a heavy bag. Do not try to pick it up and swing it straight up on to your back without first lifting it onto your partially bent knees. Keep up your walking regime so that you are regularly walking your 10 – 15 kms routes with comfort and ease. We are not talking about speed-walking here, but try to maintain a comfortable average of 4 Kph.

Consider taking two walking poles that can reduce the load by some 25% and practice with them during your training.

MUSCLE STRENGTHENING

Your back and shoulders need to be strong but there is nothing to be gained if your legs and ankles are weak. So many times a sprained ankle twisted on broken ground spells the end of a good expedition. It also means that others have to carry you and your equipment out of the area and back to safety. It therefore goes without saying that attention to lower leg and ankle strength is a vitally important part of your fitness programme.

Whilst on the subject of lower leg fitness it is important to mention that walking boots need to be well fitted, comfortable and well broken in. Achieving a spectacular set of blisters on your first walk on an expedition is not something that you will be proud about.

It is not all about carrying weight either; regular runs and long walks or sessions in a gym will increase your stamina, your lung capacity and your general fitness. Pull-ups, push-ups and sit-ups will tone your muscles and improve your overall strength. Don't do any of this without the usual warm up and warm down sessions and don't do it without taking advice from reliable, trained physical training instructors on the amount of each exercise to do and the way in which it should be carried out.

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TIME LINE FITNESS PLAN

Plan to have your fitness programme peaking about a month before you leave. The last month will be largely taken up with other matters that will take up most of your time. If you have achieved a good level of fitness by then it will be relatively easy to keep it up with a regular level of training but without frenetic last minute activity that could well end in disaster.

It is a good idea to keep a fitness/exercise diary to help you keep to a routine and check your progress. If you want to use helpful published diaries with helpful tips, schedules and routines, check out one of the following publications:

- The Exercise Training Diary for Dummies, by Allen St John
- The Ultimate Workout Log: An Exercise Diary for Everyone, by Suzanne Schloberg
- Body Minder Workout and Exercise Journal, by Frances Wilkin.

They can be bought through the familiar on-line bookstores or bookstores. You could also consider designing your own version. Whatever you choose to do, the important issue is to discipline yourself to maintain your fitness and exercise plan.

CONCLUSION

Your ultimate enjoyment of the expedition will depend largely on the degree in which you have thought about all eventualities and have prepared yourself to meet them. Think ahead, plan ahead, take advice from expert trainers and carry out a sensible personal training programme. It will ensure that you get maximum enjoyment from your expedition.

Good luck, enjoy the process of improving your overall fitness in readiness for your trip and most important of all, have a wonderful time during your expedition.

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