

Truckee organization helping adaptive skier reach South Pole

By Tim Mowry, Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

FAIRBANKS, Alaska – Grant Korgan wants to be the first adaptive athlete – he’s paralyzed from the waist down – to reach the South Pole and he came to Fairbanks to help make that dream come true.

Korgan, along with teammates Tal Fletcher and Tom Day, spent three days in Fairbanks last week pushing his sit-ski around on the ski trails at Birch Hill Recreation Area and the University of Alaska Fairbanks as part of his preparation for what he hopes will be a historic event.

Early next month, Korgan, Fletcher and renowned polar explorer Doug Stoup, along with a four-man film crew, will attempt to ski 100 miles to the South Pole. For Korgan, that means pushing a sit-ski – basically a chair on skis – 10 miles a day for 10 days while enduring temperatures that could drop as cold as 70 degrees below zero.

That’s where Fairbanks came in.

“One of the main reasons we came to Alaska was for cold weather training,” said Korgan, as he, Fletcher and Day prepared for a training session at Smith Lake on the UAF ski trails Friday afternoon.

Needless to say, they were a little disappointed when they arrived early last week to temperatures in the teens.

“When we booked our tickets it was 40 below,” Korgan said, referring to a record-setting cold snap that hit Fairbanks the week before Thanksgiving.

Despite the relatively balmy temperatures, Korgan, Fletcher, who will serve as one of two guides on the trip, and Day, a cinematographer who is part of the film crew, deemed their short stay in Fairbanks a success. They were able to test their equipment and bodies in the cold, namely a thermocouple device that measures the temperature of Korgan's feet. Because Korgan doesn't have feeling in his feet, he can't tell when they get cold.

"We're up here to test our gear, to test ourselves and to test the cold on my minimal circulation limbs," Korgan said.

Sitting in his sit-ski before their training session at Smith Lake on Friday afternoon, Korgan checked the temperature of his feet by plugging thermocouples that were taped to a toe on each of his feet into a digital thermometer. One foot was 77 degrees and the other was 75.

"Last night my foot got down to 27 degrees," Korgan said. "That's 5 degrees too cold."

When that happened, they called it a night and retreated to their car and hotel rooms to warm up. On Friday, Korgan returned wearing two pairs of socks and he had chemical heat packets in the bottom of his boots to help keep his feet warm. He planned to spend the next eight hours pushing his sled in circles around the lake. He hoped to cover 10 miles, the average distance they will have to go each day during their expedition.

In addition to the cold feet Thursday, the team encountered some mechanical difficulties after Korgan crashed at Birch Hill Wednesday and broke a push rod on his sit-ski, a small rod that allows the skis to bend and flex. They couldn't find a similar part anywhere in Fairbanks and ended up going to Sentry Hardware and buying a \$3.78 turnbuckle they rigged between the two skis.

"That's the name of the game," Fletcher said. "When you're

taking a spinal cord injury into that environment, you're going to have to do some problem solving. We need to do a lot of problem solving up here. They don't have hardware stores and super friendly people like they have in Fairbanks at the South Pole."

Dubbed simply "The Push," the expedition is the first of its kind. While lots of people have skied to the South Pole, nobody has ever pushed a sit-ski to the Pole. The sit-ski Korgan will use is custom designed by two-time paralympic gold-medalist Kevin Bramble of New Jersey.

Called the KBG Artik Crosscountry Sit Ski, the contraption has two independently articulating skis rather than the traditional monoski used by disabled skiers.

That feature allows athletes to push through turns rather than dragging a hand to turn. It also enables them to traverse undulating terrain and side hills. Made from carbon fiber and aluminum, the sit-ski weighs only 8 pounds.

Originally, the plan was for both Korgan and John Davis, a two-time paralympic gold medalist in downhill skiing, to push sit-skis to the Pole. But Davis suffered a training injury in Argentina recently that knocked him out of the expedition.

Korgan, 34, was paralyzed in a snow machine wreck deep in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in March 2010. He was in the hospital when he met Roy Tuscan, who founded the High Fives Foundation, a Truckee-based nonprofit organization dedicated to raising money and awareness for athletes who have suffered life-altering injuries. Tuscan, who dreamed of becoming a world-class professional skier, was paralyzed in April 2006 while skiing in Mammoth Mountain, Calif., though he since has recovered to the point he can walk again.

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