

The First Solo Antarctic Traverse

In last week's celebration of two solo treks across Antarctica, the pioneer whose unsupported crossing 22 years ago set the standard has been unfairly diminished.

By David Roberts

Mr. Roberts is a writer and mountaineer.

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Last week, after a marathon closing dash of 77.5 miles during 32 sleepless hours, the American Colin O'Brady stormed to the finish line at the foot of the Leverett Glacier to claim the first solo, unsupported traverse of Antarctica — a challenge Mr. O'Brady had called The Impossible First. Two days later, culminating a rivalry that commentators likened to the race between Robert Falcon Scott and Roald Amundsen to reach the South Pole in 1911-12, Louis Rudd of Britain finished the same arduous journey of more than 920 miles across the frozen continent, surviving brutal winds, whiteouts, crevasse scares and temperatures below minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit. Mr. Rudd's expedition was conceived in part as a tribute to his friend and mentor, Henry Worsley, who died of peritonitis after sledding more than 800 miles attempting the same feat three years earlier.

All but lost in the celebration of Mr. O'Brady's and Mr. Rudd's splendid achievements was the deed of another polar explorer, the Norwegian Borge Ousland, completed more than two decades before. Or, if Mr. Ousland's own traverse was glancingly and anonymously invoked, it was tagged with an asterisk, as this year's trekkers were hailed for attempting the crossing without the aid of dogs or sails.

It's not surprising that in 2018, the effort to claim the purported first solo, unsupported traverse of Antarctica became an all-out race between two contenders. For sponsored professional adventurers who feel the need to connect in real time to a social media audience, true exploration becomes secondary to the need to set "records," to claim "firsts," no matter how arbitrarily defined.

Between November 1996 and January 1997, Mr. Ousland man-hauled a sled initially laden with 412 pounds of food and gear for 64 days across Antarctica from the ocean edge of the Ronne Ice Shelf to McMurdo Sound on the seacoast below the Ross Ice Shelf — the same base from which Mr. Scott set off for the pole in 1911. Along the way, he received no help or supplies from others, not even a cup of coffee at the well-appointed Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station. On the "downhill" leg from the pole to the coast, Mr. Ousland occasionally unfurled a "ski sail" of his own devising:

in his words, “a simple piece of square fabric” that would catch the wind and help propel him as he skied across the snow. That minimal aid, in the view of more recent traversers such as Messrs. O’Brady, Rudd and Worsley, disqualified Mr. Ousland’s epic solo jaunt from the laurel of an “unsupported” journey.



Colin O’Brady in Antarctica in December. Colin O’Brady/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Following last week’s outpouring of congratulations to the American and the Briton, some veteran observers of the Antarctic scene wondered whether their feats should be starred with asterisks of their own. Most significantly, this year’s traversers began and ended their treks not at the seacoast but at the heads of the two great ice shelves. The distance they traveled — 925 miles — was only half the 1,864 miles that Mr. Ousland covered in 1996-97. In the tweet announcing his finish, Mr. O’Brady claimed, “As I pulled my sled over this invisible line, I accomplished my goal: to become the first person in history to traverse the continent of Antarctica coast to coast solo, unsupported and unaided.”

Grueling Treks, One Twice the Length of the Others

The Norwegian explorer Borge Ousland traversed Antarctica — farther than the straight-line distance between Chicago and Los Angeles — in about two months: Nov. 15, 1996, to Jan. 17, 1997. Two recent trekkers used satellite phones and GPS navigation; they traveled along a track, the South Pole Overland Traverse, for more than 350 miles.





By The New York Times | Sources: Borge Ousland (1996-97 route); GPS locations of campsites and planned Antarctic Logistics & Expeditions route (O'Brady and Rudd routes); all routes shown are approximated.

The heads of the Ross and Ronne Shelves, he insisted, were “where Antarctica’s land mass ends and the sea ice begins.” As the Antarctic historian and mountaineer Damien Gildea argued in a post to the website ExplorersWeb: “The ice shelves are land ice and therefore part of the continent. This was accepted by all the earliest polar travelers who did, or attempted, crossings.” Mr. Scott and Mr. Amundsen, of course, had no choice but to start their expeditions from the true coast, and on their return from the pole, Mr. Scott and his four companions died on the Ross Shelf, unable to haul their sledges one step farther.

ExplorersWeb also pointed out that from the South Pole to the “finish line” at the bottom of the Leverett Glacier, both Mr. O’Brady and Mr. Rudd skied along the South Pole Overland Traverse track, “a flattened trail groomed by tractors towing heavy sledges” to resupply the polar station. “Flags every 100 meters or so make navigation easy during whiteouts.” What’s more, the tractors scrape away the hard ridges of sastrugi — the wavelike ridges of hard snow — that are a sledder’s

nightmare, and the track is routed to avoid crevasses. It's unclear what condition the trail was in when Mr. O'Brady skied along it. But in his own photo from Day 50 (Dec. 22), only four days short of the finish line, tractor marks are clearly visible, and no hint of sastrugi ridges can be seen.

In 2018, polar trekkers could count on the incalculable support of GPS, satellite phones and rescue crews equipped with planes and helicopters capable of landing within hours of an emergency call. Mr. O'Brady sent out tweets and Instagram photos detailing his daily progress and spoke to his wife in Oregon regularly by satellite phone. When an ailing Mr. Worsley called for help in January 2016, an airplane whisked him to Chile. He died not on the ice but in a hospital in Punta Arenas.

In 1996, Mr. Ousland navigated by compass and the sun during the day, tracing his route on sketchy 1:250,000 maps, and used an unwieldy, early-generation GPS device at night in his tent to check his position. The silence and solitude posed psychological challenges of their own. As he later wrote, "It generally takes 10 to 14 days to find the inner harmony needed to survive in such an unforgiving world. But when it all comes together, being so totally alone is also a good experience."

Early on, he fell through a snow bridge into a hidden crevasse and was saved only by strong titanium bars linking him to his sled, which served as a dead-weight anchor. If he needed rescue, he could have activated an Argos beacon that sent a mere dot of his location to a colleague in Norway. The only hope of evacuation was a Twin Otter airplane stationed at the Patriot Hills base camp in Antarctica more than a thousand miles away by the end of his trip.

As the news of Mr. O'Brady's "first" spread across the media, Mr. Ousland wrote magnanimously on his Facebook page, "We congratulate Colin O'Bradly [sic] with his achievements in Antarctica." But he added that he "was the first person to ski alone across Antarctica." As he told me in an email: "It should not be necessary for me to have to stand up and fight for my 'honor.' I believe that I should be credited as the first to have crossed Antarctica solo and unsupported from coast to coast. Period."

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