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Opinion
News
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By Denise Bokinac
Journal Staff

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Imagine taking a journey across Canada on a snowmobile. For most, doing so is just a dream, and doing it alone would be unthinkable. And few would ever think of trying to beat the Guinness world record of 11,604.6 km for the longest snowmobile journey. But Yves Leblanc, a 49-year-old self-confessed outdoorsman from Gatineau, Que., is doing just that. The word "impossible" never entered his mind.

Leblanc left Mont-Laurier, Que., on Dec. 27 and headed east to make his way to Newfoundland. From there, his plan was to head back west and travel through each province, up through the Northwest Territories to the farthest point in Alaska which should put him about 50 km from Russia. Then he plans to head to Inuvik, Tuktoyaktuk, and back down across the prairies to home. This makes a total of 28,000 km traveled on the snowmobile!

I had the chance to meet this daring, robust man when he stopped to spend the night of Jan. 16 in Nipawin. He was at Season's Edge, where they changed the belt, greased the machine, and gave it a general inspection. Manager Cal Pankratz and his team not only gave him a show of Nipawin hospitality by donating their time and necessary parts, but also graciously offered us their office to use as an interview room.

About nine years ago Leblanc, following his love of the outdoors, decided to give snowmobiling a try. He fell in love with the sport and became a passionate enthusiast. "It allowed me to see some scenes that I never would have had access to before," Leblanc explained, "but I immediately realized that I wanted to eventually see all of Canada from a snowmobile where I could see it in a different way than I otherwise could have."

To go on a journey of this magnitude takes a lot of planning. When he started to map it out three years ago, it was on a much smaller scale. It was while doing the research that he came across the current world record. Although it was not his original intention to compete for it, when he realized the distance he wanted to travel was farther than the record, he decided to register for it. Then he realized that another 30 days would put him back home and put on many extra miles for the record.

His research also led him to a few people who were a lot of help, not only in planning the strategy for the expedition, but in leading him to some contacts along the trail. One of these people was Jean-Guy Charette who along with three other men, did a trek last year from British Columbia to Ottawa. It turned out that Charette lives only a few kilometers from Leblanc and he has been (and still is) a huge help in many things including finding contacts along the trail.



Yves Leblanc shows his web cam that can be attached to his helmet to video as he snowmobiles. The only problem is the battery does not last long in the cold temperatures. It was warm enough on the day he left Nipawin to use it. He will be posting video on his website.

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Part of the preparation involves getting all of the gear you are going to need together. Going for the world record has turned into a good tool for sponsorship, which is not as easy to get as one might think. Large companies get a staggering amount of requests each year for sponsorship. Since it would be impossible to fulfill every one, they were understandably skeptical of Leblanc who had no real snowmobiling background to give them. "All I had was the serious belief that I could achieve this," says Leblanc. But when he started to make plans that showed he was willing to go on his own, Bombardier realized he was serious, and between them, the dealership, and Leblanc himself, the machine was purchased and modified for the trip. From there, the other sponsorships were relatively easy to get.

A good thing, because the whole project is going to end up costing around \$50,000. Leblanc estimates his cost at about \$25,000. He said he has to estimate because he is still getting sponsorship along the trail, such as the food and lodging he received from the Northern Greens Resort here in Nipawin.

He is driving a Bombardier GTX 600 Limited Edition that was selected for the weight it could carry, the fuel efficiency, and the comfort of the ride. It has had a few modifications made to it that were thought up by Leblanc and constructed by the dealership.

The machine is one of the very few made with a third seat. Both the second and the third seat were taken out and a custom-built storage bin put in. There are two five-gallon gas tank saddles on the sides and external storage for oil on the back. There is a cradle on the top of the lid to put his snowshoes and a spare jacket in. They also attached a backrest onto the box to make the ride more comfortable.

The machine itself had the skis replaced with the Summit version to optimize floatation, a fifth boogie wheel was added to extend the durability of the slide and the track was changed to an Ice Ripper.

To go on a solo ride such as this, one needs to be prepared for anything. Leblanc carries an arctic sleeping bag, a down filled undermat, a tent, stove, camping fuel, enough dehydrated food to last three days, a satellite phone, and a couple of devices for orientation. He also has a transponder that he keeps on the snowmobile so his wife at home always knows his position. If the machine were to make an unscheduled stop for more than a half-hour, she would know he was in trouble and help would know where to locate him.

This is a lot of stuff to put into a small bin. "I fit it all in with a lot of patience and compactness," Leblanc laughs.

An important part of preparation is knowing you can handle all of the aspects of the journey. Although confident of his physical endurance, last winter Leblanc did a two week, 4,000 km 'pre-test' to make sure he was both physically and mentally fit for such a quest.

Getting away from work for the amount of time it takes to go on a quest of this proportion is not always easy either. He gets six weeks of holidays from his job at Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) and is able to 'bank' overtime hours. They also have a program that gives a certain amount of time off by taking a pay reduction. Between all of this and the fact that he banked his holidays from last year, he was able to take the time he needed.

It takes a person with a lot of capabilities to do something like this. You have to be strong both mentally and physically, and you have to be creative and able to think up solutions to any of the many problems that might arise. But probably most importantly, you have to believe in and be comfortable with yourself.

Leblanc had to deal with more than a few frustrations at the beginning of his journey. The weather was not cooperating at all. There was very little snow in the east and both Leblanc and his snowmobile had to be transported long distances causing him to eliminate much of the eastern portion of the trip. He even rode in the pouring rain on his last day in Newfoundland. At times, he had to play it by ear and find solutions as he went along.

"The worst part was probably the fact that I had to improvise so much in the first two weeks because of the lack of snow," he explains. "It was very mentally difficult to try to keep my morale up when every day it seemed like there was another hurdle. It was a question of total improvisation."

But when he reached Kenora, Ont., he finally found snow. From there on he has been able to ride steady. He has still had his share of problems however. With the recent storm, trails were not groomed and he has been hitting drifts of up to four feet high. And on the trail from Hudson Bay to Nipawin, he spent two hours digging out of a drift he was stuck in.

It was well worth the effort though to be on that trail, for that is where he saw his first moose. "What a majestic animal it is!" he exclaimed.

Overall, two things have stood out so far. One is the change in landscape.

"My ride from Hudson Bay to here was amazing fields that were out of sight," Leblanc clarifies, "you would swear you were on a frozen ocean. It's very different from what we are accustomed to riding. When we hit a field and go half a kilometer, we have gone a long distance and here you can go several kilometers before hitting a road or anything to cross over."

The second thing is the people. He has met a lot of great people so far. "No matter where I go, people have met me with open arms," said the gregarious fellow. "And they have been very helpful, giving directions, riding with me, feeding me, whatever is necessary at the time."

The days of riding are long, and the after hour obligations make them even longer. Leblanc explained that each evening, he types his journal onto his blackberry to send to his wife so she can post it on the website. He also tries to make contacts for the next day and line up some company for the trail. With all of this, he rarely gets eight hours of sleep a night. On some parts of the trail, it is going to be vital to have someone to ride with. "From Fairbanks to Nome is a five-day, cross country ride and the elements are too high risk to ride alone there," explains Leblanc. "I will ride it only if I have somebody that has already ridden it with me. But to that end, there is a dealership in Fairbanks that is working on lining somebody to ride with me on that stretch."

There is also a stretch from Dawson City to Inuvik and Tutuikuk that is high risk but if he cannot find a fellow snowmobiler to ride with, he will be able to have someone follow him by car. "They use the highway there for everything, snowmobiles, ATV's, motorcross, and cars," adds Leblanc. "It is the only multi-purpose highway in North America."

Leblanc credits the support of his wife Nicole for his success. She is working very hard at home where she manages the web site and gets all the data on it. "Its something that I hold to my heart and I really appreciate the fact that my wife embraced and allowed me to do it," he said. "She is my arms and mind at the other end of Canada."

We wish him well on his journey and hope that his stop in Nipawin on his way home can be overnight once again. If you want to keep track of the Leblanc, his website is www.snowodyssey.ca.

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