

# Woman prepares for first solo trek to North Pole

BY RANDY BOSWELL, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE FEBRUARY 2, 2009



A handout photo of Christina Franco, a 42-year-old endurance athlete, who is preparing to set off solo from Canada's northernmost point of land to the North Pole.

**Photograph by:** Handout, Canwest News Service

In a feat being described as “one of the last polar firsts” still to be achieved, an Italian-American woman is preparing to set off solo from Canada’s northernmost point of land to snowshoe, ski and float nearly 800 kilometres to the North Pole.

No female adventurer has ever completed the dangerous journey from Nunavut’s Ward Hunt Island to the top of the world alone, but 42-year-old endurance athlete Christina Franco - a British resident for nearly 20 years - is aiming to be the first.

Last March, Briton Hannah McKeand, 34, had to be rescued by a Canadian Forces helicopter after her attempted solo trek to the Pole ended with a painful fall into an three-metre crevasse in the Arctic ice.

McKeand was just 13 days into her expedition.

Franco already has one arduous Arctic trek under her belt. In 2005, she completed a Canadian polar expedition in which she and a male partner skied more than 500 kilometres northwest from Resolute Bay to the former site of the magnetic North Pole.

She has also cycled and trekked hundreds of kilometres across African deserts, and climbed Tanzania’s Mount Kilimanjaro.

If Franco's journey next month goes as planned, she'll reach the geographic North Pole before the end of April - 100 years to the month after a party led by U.S. explorer Robert Peary first reached the planet's true North on April 6, 1909.

In an interview from London on Monday with Canwest News Service, Franco paid tribute to Peary and other polar pioneers for blazing a trail for her Arctic odyssey.

"All of those people were incredibly inspirational," she said. "It's due to them and their stories - my mom read them to me when I was young - that you start to imagine that these things are possible and want to do them."

Franco is also trying to raise funds for several charities, including one that researches the neuro-degenerative disease ALS, which her father died from two years ago.

She said she will be able to communicate with her expedition support team at Resolute Bay and in Britain via a mobile satellite unit, and intends to file dispatches for the expedition's website - christinafranco.com - throughout her trek toward the Pole.

"Initially, because of all the ice rubble, I'm going to snowshoe the first two or three weeks," she said. "My sled floats, and I can always put my sled in the water - but I don't plan to swim across anything larger than 20 metres. The second half, I imagine, I'll be mostly on my skis."

Franco added: "I'm not doing it with any kites. I don't have any dogs. I don't have a Sherpa."

Russian scientists stationed at the North Pole have agreed to fly her to Norway in May.

"I have 60 days, and I am going to do everything in my power to get to the Pole," she said.

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