Thoughts About Everest

STACY ALLISON AND GEOFFREY TABIN

MY FIRST EXPOSURE to the great Himalayan peaks was on the 1982 American Women's Himalayan Expedition to Ama Dablam's Southwest Ridge. As I stood atop Ama Dablam, I had my first glimpse of Everest. I was awed by its enormousness looming another 6500 feet above me. It inspired me, for a brief moment, to fantasize standing on its summit. But immediately, I realized that was for the "Big Boys" and the task at hand was getting myself off Ama Dablam.

Three years later, I'd almost forgotten my fantasy until I discovered that a good friend, whom I hadn't seen or talked to for five years, had a permit for the direct North Face. I called Scott Fischer right away, awkwardly apologizing for not keeping in touch; at the same time I asked to be considered for his 1987 Everest trip. I was invited a month later.

The budget for this expedition was a staggering $250,000. We decided to use the possibility of the *First American Woman Summiting* as our major angle for fund-raising. At the time, I didn't think much about it. If it helped raise money, that was fine by me. I knew that as soon as we left the United States, gender would be inconsequential. I will admit that the idea of being the *first* was rather intriguing. Having spent so much time and energy in fund-raising with this thought, the possibility became a big part of my mind-set and an association with my person.

Our 1987 expedition was unsuccessful. On my summit attempt, the jet stream lowered, bringing winds in excess of 100 mph. Scott Fischer, Q Belk, Wes Krause and I were pinned in a snow cave at 23,500 feet for five days and at 25,500 feet for three. A week earlier, we had been to 26,400 feet without oxygen, a personal record for all of us.

I had unfinished business with this mountain. I knew I had the mental and physical capabilities to reach the summit. I wanted another chance. I also believe in fate. Before I returned from my travels in Asia after the climb, Scott Fischer had sent a letter and résumé, unknown to me, to the Northwest American Everest Expedition in hopes that I would get another shot.

During the two years of preparation for the 1987 climb, much of my identity was tied to the possibility of becoming the first American woman to reach the summit of Mount Everest. When I did not get there, I had to reassess my reasons for climbing in order to deal with the disappointment I felt. I'd failed on other climbs; yet this felt so different, greater. What set this failure apart from the

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Photo by Stacy Allison

In the Khumbu Icefall on MOUNT EVEREST.

others? I had a pretty good idea what it was. I had not been climbing for myself or the love of climbing—I was consumed with the thought of being first, of the notoriety, the acceptance, the glory, the fame and fortune. I had to laugh at myself. I'd been so susceptible to the "summit of hype." I had been diverted far off-track from the real enjoyment and meaning of what climbing is to me. I became clear. I climb for the challenge of testing my physical and psychological limits, of discovering new creative and resourceful ways of overcoming technical or psychological barriers. I climb to learn and master the skills involved, the pure concentration and control, the comradery of my partners. And, of course, the best playground in the world is the out-of-doors.

I also clarified the risks I was willing to take to achieve my goal. I have many interests and other goals in my life, and a high quality of that life is very important to me. As a good friend said to me before I left, "You cannot kayak or play the piano without fingers. You cannot have the full enjoyment of walking barefoot on mossy rocks without toes." Ahhh . . . to enjoy many aspects of life!

With all this in mind, I was clear as to where I was coming from and where I was going when I was invited to become part of the 1988 expedition. I knew my objective, I knew what it would take to achieve it, and I knew why I wanted it. There was no "hidden" agenda this time. I am a climber—I just happen to be a woman—and my goal was the summit of Mount Everest.

As I reflect on the summit, I think briefly about the irony of my focus and failure in 1987, and now, how apropos my focus and success seem in 1988.

There seems to be a need in human nature to bring things to conclusion. There was a definite need to make final this episode of climbing that began seven years earlier for American women. With this conclusion and resolve, we can move forward. Now that Everest has been climbed by two American women, it should eliminate much of the competition and pressure from women, freeing them to climb Everest or other Himalayan peaks as a form of self-expression. This will make climbing on Everest safer, as the focus and reason will have to change. Women will be able to climb side by side with their partners on an equal basis with no special preference. They will no longer have to prove themselves to anyone but themselves.

I am amazed these days how climbers criticize directly or often indirectly their colleagues. If you are not out in front pushing the leading edge of difficult and often dangerous routes, or if you are not willing to risk it all, your climbing is questioned, even invalidated. I find it unfortunate that egos are so fragile, and that climbing has evolved into such a competitive state, that we judge, rather than encourage and allow our fellow climbers the freedom to grow and express themselves in their own way.

Life hasn't changed much for me down here. I contemplate that brief moment in history when I stood on top of Mount Everest only to descend from another ethereal summit of my life.

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A very brief word on the expedition and a note on human values. Our group established Base Camp on August 22. Working along with a large Korean

expedition, we prepared and fixed the route through the Khumbu Icefall and to Camp II for ourselves and other expeditions. We placed Camps I, II, III and IV at 19,700, 21,300, 23,600 and 26,200 feet on September 5, 12, 25 and 29. Three days after Pasang Gyalzen and I climbed to the summit on September 29, Peggy Luce, Geoff Tabin, Dawa Tsering, Nima Tashi, Phu Dorje and the leader of the Koreans, Nam Sun-Woo, reached the top.

It should be emphasized that our members, Steve Ruoss and John Petroske, gave up a summit attempt to aid in the rescue of the Spanish team. On October 14, Sergi Martínez fell altitude-sick on the South Summit. His Spanish companions gave him all their remaining oxygen and with their Sherpa companions went to the summit. On their return, they found him in a very critical condition, blind and in and out of consciousness. They rigged a kind of rope basket and dragged him to the South Col, where they asked for and got permission to use oxygen we had stored there. The next morning they began to drag him lower. Meanwhile, Ruoss and Petroske were climbing toward the South Col on a summit attempt. When they met, Ruoss, a physician, examined Martínez and felt he had little chance for survival. Nevertheless, the pair immediately helped in the rescue, as did the members of all teams. Martínez was brought down to Camp II. An experimental pressure bag was used with considerable success. Ruoss and Petroske nursed him for 48 sleepless hours. Finally, 20 climbers from all teams carried him down to Base Camp for a helicopter rescue. The respect of our two members for human lives is one we can all learn from.

STACY ALLISON

SEVERAL RECENT ARTICLES have questioned why Americans are not pushing the limits in the Himalaya. Ed Webster and Carlos Buhler's ascents of Everest and Kangchenjunga this year, just to mention two of the very fine climbs made by Americans over the past decade, prove this contention is wrong. But the question of just how far the limits should be pushed remains unanswered.

Talk to Buhler about how strung out he was on the world's third-highest peak, or shake hands with Webster and feel what he lost in Tibet last spring. When Eric Escoffier raced up K2 a few years ago, he was called a hero, despite the fact that his partner died on the descent. When Peter Božik climbed the *Magic Line* on K2, it was hailed as a great breakthrough, even though one of his partners died. Will anyone call Josef Just's ascent of Everest, on which he died, a victory?

Every climber should feel free to decide how close to the edge he wants to push. For me, no mountain is worth a life, no route a finger or toe. Perhaps our

expedition this year was out of touch with the trend towards light and fast ascents in the Himalaya: we used oxygen and climbed an easier route. But we also succeeded and brought everyone home in excellent health. On my own summit day, my teammates and Sherpa friends helped enormously, which only increased my pleasure in the experience. Going up the "standard" route was steep, exciting and fun, and it was a great personal adventure for me. And isn't that at the core of why we all climb?

Considering the carnage this fall on Everest and on K2 two years ago, perhaps we should think again about what is important in mountaineering. The death rate among the best climbers attempting state-of-the-art ascents above 8000 meters has reached an unacceptable level. Another major problem is that with multiple permits being given out for the same routes, numerous teams now swarm over the world's biggest peaks. This increases the danger and diminishes the experience for everyone and will certainly lead to more political and safety problems in the future. Unfortunately, the issue of granting permits is out of control.

But we do have control over how we choose to climb. Despite the numbers of people, the firsts and the records, my vote for the top billing in this year's circus goes to Johnny Petroske and Steve Ruoss, who gave up their summit attempt to save the life of a fellow climber. That is what being a real mountaineer is all about.

GEOFFREY TABIN

This is part of an article which we have been given permission to reprint. It appeared on page 51 of *Climbing* of February 1989.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Mahalangur Himal, Nepal.

ASCENTS: Mount Everest, 8488 meters, 29,028 feet, via the South-Col route, Summit reached on September 29, 1988 (Allison, Pasang Gyalzen); on October 2, 1988 (Luce, Tabin, Dawa Tsering, Nima Tashi, Phu Dorje).

PERSONNEL: James Frush, leader; Donald Goodman, deputy leader; Stacy Allison, Diana Dailey, Peggy Luce, Stephen Ruoss, M.D., Geoffrey Tabin, M.D., Jean Ellis, David Hambly, John Petroske, Charles Schertz; Robert Singer and Lawrence MacBean, Base-Camp managers.