

THE RISK AND REWARD OF EVEREST

*in conversation with those who
know the mountain best*



THIS PAST WINTER, AN INTERNATIONAL TEAM OF EXPERTS IN MEDICINE, PHYSIOLOGY, AND METEOROLOGY EXAMINED ALL OF THE KNOWN DEATHS ON EVEREST, REPORTING THE RESULTS OF THEIR STUDY IN THE ONLINE EDITION OF THE *BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL*. THE TEAM'S FINDINGS (SEE PAGE 39) HAVE SHATTERED COMMONLY HELD NOTIONS ABOUT WHAT LEADS TO DEATHS ON THE MOUNTAIN. WHILE MANY BELIEVE THOSE WHO PERISH ON THE 8,850 METER (29,035 FOOT) PEAK TEND TO DO SO BECAUSE OF AVALANCHES, FALLING ICE, AND PULMONARY EDEMA, THE STUDY HAS PINPOINTED THE MOST CRITICAL FACTORS IN CLIMBER DEATH, NOTING THAT SEVERE DETERIORATION IN WEATHER AND LATE STARTS HAVE PLAYED FAR MORE IMPORTANT ROLES THAN PREVIOUSLY THOUGHT.

THE EXPLORERS JOURNAL BROUGHT TOGETHER SIX EVEREST LUMINARIES TO WEIGH IN ON THE RECENT FINDINGS AND SHARE THEIR THOUGHTS ON CLIMBING THE WORLD'S HIGHEST MOUNTAIN. JOINING US IN THE DISCUSSION ARE APA SHERPA, WHO, IN MAY, SUMMITED EVEREST FOR THE NINETEENTH TIME; PETE ATHANS, WHO HAS SUMMITED SEVEN TIMES; PETER HILLARY, THE SON OF SIR EDMUND HILLARY AND A NOTED CLIMBER IN HIS OWN RIGHT; KENNETH M. KAMLER, WHOSE MEDICAL EXPERTISE HAS SAVED NUMEROUS LIVES ON EVEREST; ASTRONAUT AND PHYSICIAN SCOTT PARAZYNSKI, WHO SUMMITED THIS PAST SPRING; AND RENOWNED BIG MOUNTAIN GUIDE JIM WILLIAMS, WHO, AFTER NUMEROUS EXPEDITIONS TO THE BIG E, STOOD ATOP THE ROOF OF THE WORLD IN 2000.

EVEREST, NUPTSE AS SEEN FROM CAMP 1 ON PUMORI AT 19,100 FEET. PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT PARAZYNSKI.

EJ: For you personally, what has been the greatest allure of Everest?

Peter Hillary (PH): All of our circumstances are so different and consequently so are the incentives and rationales for climbing. I assume for Apa it is his career, although I know he loves being up there and it was great that his first ascent was made as a member of our expedition 19 years ago. I have heard similar comments from Jamling Tenzing about his father, Tenzing Norgay's rationale for ascending into the "death zone." For others, perhaps it makes all the toil of our professional careers worth it so that we get the Everest opportunity.

I became the first second-generation Everester to tag the top back in 1990, and, given that my father and Tenzing were the first to summit the mountain in 1953, that success has been amplified. I know many people think that someone like Brent Bishop or myself may well be carrying out some family edict rather than being passionately drawn to the mountaineering experience for its own sake. But the reality is I have been climbing all my life. I climbed McKinley last year, Kilimanjaro a few weeks back with my daughter, and plan to climb Mt. Cook in the Southern Alps. And let's face it, no one is surprised that medical families produce more doctors and business families more business types. The mountaineering influence is transgenerational as well.

Apa Sherpa (AS): Ironically, summiting Everest was never a personal goal for me. My father died when I was 12, leaving me and my family to fend for ourselves. In 1988, I was able to find work as an expedition porter to earn money to support my family. It turns out I really took to the mountain. But then again, I come from Thame, Tenzing Norgay's hometown, so perhaps it is only natural that climbing is in my blood and that I thrive in an exhilarating high-altitude environment.

Ken Kamler (KK): The first time I saw Everest it was like seeing a famous movie star. Everest is not the hardest mountain in the world to climb nor is it the most beautiful, but it's the one surrounded by the most legend and the most symbolism. "Climbing Everest" has become synonymous with taking on any difficult, nearly impossible, challenge. The greatest discovery an

explorer can make is to find those unexpected strengths we all have within ourselves.

Jim Williams (JW): As a young person in the 1960s, I read about the American West Ridge climb of Mt. Everest and was above all intrigued by the Sherpas. I was taken by their culture and work ethic. I always wanted to be like a Sherpa in the mountains...the most trusted person in the background...the one who had an intimate knowledge of the mountain environment. As for making the summit—the reason after a while is not to make the "summit" for any other reason than to end the discussion of "Have you climbed Everest?" Others in the mountaineering business with less experience and skill have "summitted" and are given credit beyond yours if you have not "summitted" Everest. Unfortunately, standing on the summit is not nearly as rewarding as the years spent in the process of climbing with Sherpas and others on the mountain in their backyard; learning respect and life lessons for some honest and hard-working folks.

Pete Athans (PA): No other mountain has this powerful or as deep an allure—an allure, which, for the most part, is a combination of awe, challenge, and curiosity. With its high altitude and technical challenge of rock, snow, and ice, it is a natural attraction for mountaineers. It is also a symbol for greater personal achievement and self-actualization. The allure of Everest is further amplified by the mountain's sacred nature for the people of Nepal—the Sherpas especially.

Scott Parazyński (SP): The adventure and audacity of Hillary and Norgay's successful first ascent, amplified by my imagination after reading many different accounts of their climb (and almost every other climb I could find in print), captured me at an early age. I've been climbing in earnest since I was 15, gradually increasing the difficulty and commitment associated with each peak. I began rock scrambling on crags in Greece during my high-school years, followed by more substantial rock in California and Colorado, and eventually moved into snow and ice in North and South America. The Himalayas, and Everest in particular, are the ultimate test piece.

Many people assume that someone who flies in space, flies aircraft, rides a luge, dives under the sea, or climbs big mountains is a risk taker or daredevil. Although my vocation and hobbies are

ASCENT THROUGH THE ICEFALL

Climbers enter the lower reaches of the treacherous Khumbu Icefall, one of the most dangerous stretches of the Everest climb from the Nepali side. Photograph by Scott Parazynski.





a bit outside the norm, I am extremely respectful of risk. I study, train, and prepare for risks in the environments I visit, and manage them carefully. With respect to Everest, I took a very measured approach to the mountain, only considering it after many years of “apprenticeship” on lesser mountains of the world. You need to make your mistakes on lower, more forgiving peaks before taking on the Big E. I knew from prior climbs that I had the wherewithal to turn back from a coveted summit 100 meters from the top when bad weather set in, and that I had the technical skills to take care of my teammates and myself if the going got tough. Unfortunately, many Everest aspirants fast-track their way to the mountain, and run into serious difficulties because they haven’t been tested before.

EJ: Are you aware of the risks posed by the peak and the number of deaths on the mountain?

KK: I’ve been to Everest six times and each time, people have died there. I’m a cautious climber, well aware of the risk of Everest and of the “sport” of mountain climbing in general. The risk is part of the attraction—not in any thrill-seeking way but rather as a way to test yourself. You need to be in control, totally focused and concentrated, and the results of your efforts are evident immediately.

PA: Having completed 16 expeditions and having summited seven times, I think I have a succinct understanding of the inherent risks.

AS: I have to say that when I read the *British Medical Journal* report, I was not at all surprised by the disproportionate number of Sherpa deaths on the lower reaches of the mountain, particularly in the Khumbu Icefall, one of the most dangerous parts of the Everest climb. Sherpas tend to make four to five times as many traverses through this deadly zone as the climbers who hire them for an expedition. They have to set the ladders and ropes and transport the heavy loads of equipment needed for the higher camps. Western climbers might go through the icefall four or five times for acclimatization purposes. A Sherpa’s risk on an individual traverse through the Khumbu is probably lower than the average climber, but the 15 to 20 passes they must make through the icefall during an expedition increase that risk severalfold.

JW: To be honest, mountain climbing is unsafe. There is nothing you can do to make it safe. What you can do, however, is learn the skills necessary to reduce the risk to an acceptable level and to mitigate disaster by being prepared for the unexpected things that happen in the mountains. I believe the fascination with death on Everest is because it is “sexy” to discuss death as a function of risk on the world’s highest mountain.

SP: I’ve tracked the stats on Everest for many years via Liz Hawley’s reporting, and more recently online via the AAC and *British Medical Journal* articles. The risk of death after summiting has been shown to be roughly equivalent to that of perishing on a Space Shuttle flight. Attempting to summit without supplemental oxygen increases the odds substantially, so I never considered doing it without O₂.

EJ: In looking at the statistics, do you believe you may not be at as great a risk as other climbers because you are better prepared to deal with such danger and risk?

JW: Most of those who die after summiting die as a result of poor leadership, poor preparedness, or abandonment of good decision-making. Everest has become a test piece for fitness and determination rather than the culmination of years and years of solid mountaineering training. This is to a large degree the result of guiding on Everest, but one must remember that guides only provide a service that a certain part of the population requests. I believe as a well-trained guide you should not be sucked into the “summit at all cost” mentality. I often ask my clients to think about this one question: “Would you be here climbing on Everest if you could not return home and share it with others?”

SP: I think it’s most important to be humble before the mountain, meaning you need to check your ego at the base of the Khumbu Glacier. Both of my seasons on Everest, I had trained to the limit of my physical ability, and with my background as an astronaut, I had refined my ability to manage risk and make good decisions under pressure—even if it sometimes meant failing to attain my goals. I didn’t ever think I was beyond danger or risk, or that I was somehow a better or stronger climber than others, but I did believe that I’d be able to identify if and when it was time to turn back.

DEATH ON EVEREST

THE COLD, HARD FACTS

PA: No one eliminates risk on Everest, although excellent preparation and knowledge do assist in mitigating many of the risks. Some of the more capable mountaineers and guides on Everest have perished for a variety of reasons and some of the least experienced climbers ever to go to the Himalaya have climbed Everest unscathed. I've been fortunate in that I am innately a conservative climber and I implicitly trust the Sherpas with whom I work, plus I have great patience.

EJ: What do you look for in fellow teammates—in terms of overall fitness, psychological makeup, and training? Who in your estimation is the ideal person for the peak? And, who should stay far far away from it?


KK: Although I've never led an Everest expedition—I've had enough to do just taking care of my medical responsibilities—I do have input in evaluating potential climbers. The people who do best on the peak are those who early on show a willingness to work hard and remain cheerful, carry an extra load without looking for recognition, and don't complain when the going starts to get rough. As for training, one should be in the best shape of one's life. No one comes down from Everest saying it was easier than they thought.

JW: As a guide on Everest, I am concerned about the motivation of the team members. If the motivation is "summit at all costs," I am less interested in having that person on my team. I am also less interested in those who are looking for the "best budget deal." Climbing Everest should not be bound by unattainable goals and budget constraints that affect the way one approaches the project.

SP: While I didn't lead my two expeditions on Everest—I climbed with a personal Sherpa but without a guide—I have led a number of expeditions to other parts of the world. Moreover, working off the planet in confined spaces, I have a pretty good feel for the types of people who can thrive as team members in extreme environments. Having a good sense of humor, a ready willingness to pitch in and help, road-tested judgment, and technical competence are the top four things I look for in climbing partners. You can be the most fit climber-athlete in the world, but if you are lacking in any of these categories, no one will want to tie in with you.

An international team of experts, led by Paul Firth of Massachusetts General Hospital, has examined known deaths on the world's tallest mountain. Their study—published in the online edition of the *British Medical Journal*—sheds some light on what makes Everest among the most dangerous places on Earth. Of the 14,138 mountaineers (8,030 climbers and 6,108 Sherpas) who have participated in expeditions on Everest between 1921 and 2006, 3,058 have made it to the summit; 212 have died.

- The mortality rate above basecamp on Everest was 1.3%. This is significantly higher than the death rate on mountains attempted by similar populations of climbers, including the Himalayan peaks of Ama Dablam (6,814 m) and Cho Oyo (8,201 m), which have respective death rates of 0.46% and 0.64%. The death rate among climbers on Denali (6,194 m) in Alaska is 0.03% and 0.02% for Rainier (4,392 m) in Washington.
- For deaths above 8,000 meters, cognitive impairment and ataxia or cerebral edema were often present where pulmonary edema was not.
- Marked fatigue, late summit times, and the tendency to fall behind companions are common among nonsurvivors.
- The death rate among foreign climbers is higher than among Sherpas. Sherpas tend to die on the lower slopes, particularly in the region of the Khumbu Icefall. Most foreign climbers die above 8,000 meters, usually during descent from the summit.
- A typical expedition to Everest lasts a minimum of 60 days, but more than 80% of climber deaths occur the day of the summit bid or shortly thereafter.
- Severe deterioration in the weather played a role in 25% of all deaths.

The team, which included researchers from Britain, Canada, and the United States, hopes that their findings will provide a foundation for improved safety, for both mountaineers and Sherpas. A copy of the full report can be downloaded from our website at www.explorers.org. For more information, contact Kent Moore of the University of Toronto, a co-author of the paper, at gwk.moore@utoronto.ca. 

—AMHS with additional reporting from Jeff Blumenfeld





TOPPING OUT IN THE KHUMBU

Climbers close in on Camp I at the top of the Khumbu Icefall on the South Col route to the summit. Photograph by Scott Parazynski.

AS: The expeditions that hire me tend to make their own selections in terms of team makeup. Having been on the mountain for as long as I have, however, I can tell just by watching climbers on their first pass through the Khumbu who has what it takes to succeed and who will likely fail based on how they negotiate the cravasses and constantly shifting ice. I can also tell you that weaker climbers definitely increase the overall level of risk to their fellow team members.

PA: Sometimes what makes the most successful businessman, doctor, or attorney, does not always equate to being a successful mountaineer. People with Type A behavioral traits are often frustrated in the high-mountain environment where factors beyond one's immediate control can preclude success. Anyone who doesn't have the presence of mind to walk away from a summit day that is inopportune should not attempt the peak.



EJ: Do you believe most people attempting Everest have an unrealistic expectation of making the summit?

AS: I do think people come to the mountain believing climbing Everest is easier than it is. I have turned back several times. In 1989, I was on an expedition with Gary Ball, Rob Hall, and Phinjo Sherpa. We got up to Camp 4 at 26,000 feet when Rob began having stomach problems. Pressing on made no sense so we turned back. I also turned back in 2001 during an expedition with a Japanese team, the members of which were all over 55. They were not physically able to go beyond Camp III. I could have told them that further down below.

JW: As leaders of an expedition, it is up to the guides to ensure that members of the team have realistic goals and expectations. In 1995, we had reached high above the Balcony on a glorious "summit day" in very deep snow, which slowed our progress. We realized that we would be unable to summit and return safely, so we turned the entire team around at 9:00 A.M. It was a great disappointment to us all

but all realized it was the correct decision in light of the conditions and the amount of available oxygen. There was no need to high point.

SP: Most of the climbing team members I've shared Everest with had a reasonable chance of making it to the top. But I was appalled to see a "climber" on another team, descending the Khumbu Icefall, who had to be coached on rappelling, one of the most fundamental of mountaineering skills. On both my seasons on Everest there were climbers who successfully summited, but then failed to descend because of exhaustion. Obviously this is a far cry from success. You absolutely have to keep enough gas in the tank to make a round trip!

EJ: Both 1996 and 2006 were particularly deadly years on the peak. Were the well-publicized incidents on the mountain those years a matter of chance, accidents waiting to happen, or the result of unusual circumstances, or were there risks taken in those years that were some how atypical?

PA: All the above. Given the competitive nature of the commercial activities on Everest and the increase in sheer numbers of teams approved to climb, it is easy to argue that the accident was imminent. Although the storm appeared violently, such storms are not unusual on this mountain. Everything went well until summit day and, when the summit was within sight, the collective wisdom of generations of Everest climbers had little or no value. In the case of Rob Hall's team, Doug Hansen was simply obsessed and chose not to observe the guidelines to which previously he had agreed. I'll never understand why Rob chose to follow Hansen, with the rest of a weak team to manage in descent, to say nothing of the imminent birth of his daughter. What could one more summit have meant to someone who had already climbed it 5 times? This strikes me as "atypical." Had I been in Rob's shoes, I would have let Hansen go and brought the rest of my team to the South Col. This one decision would have saved probably 4 lives. Scott Fisher should not have climbed that day. The effects of altitude were cumulative and his performance lagged that

of everyone else as a result. Everyone in his team managed to make it down safely, thanks to Neil Beidleman and Toly Boukreev. Scott's death was senseless and entirely avoidable. To this day, it is difficult to accept it happened.

KK: On both my '95 and '96 summit bids, Rob Hall and his team were one day ahead of us. In '95, Rob came down without summiting, having turned around because, as he put it, "It was a bit of a hard go." My team and I made an attempt but also turned around, just 900 vertical feet below the summit. The following year, '96, we were all back at it. Jim Williams and I were in a tent at 24,000 feet as we listened on our radios for news of Rob's summit team above us. Summit attempts always have turnaround times but it seemed that day that many of the climbers were behind schedule and summiting late. When you're close to the summit there's a very strong upward pull that leads climbers to cut their safety margins thinner and thinner. Sometimes you can get away with it but sometimes you can't—like when a violent storm suddenly rolls in. In retrospect, of course, they should have turned around sooner, as we all did the year before. I often think that had we not done so then, the disaster would have been in '95 rather than '96.

AS: Rob Hall had invited me to be part of his 1996 Everest team but my wife, Yangji, asked if I would stay home that season and build the house I had promised her. I truly believe my wife and God saved my life that year, the only year I wasn't on Everest.

JW: In 1996, in my opinion, the issue was competition. The problems that developed were the result of expedition leaders making business decisions before making solid mountaineering/guiding decisions. The two main players in 1996 believed that they had a great deal to gain by getting various celebrities to the summit. They focused on achieving those objectives and forgot that their first responsibility was to *all* their members and to their own well-being. In the end these decision tracks lead to their own demise. The storm and weather, although bad, were not unusual or unexpected. I do not know much about the 2006 year. I suspect, however, that the conditions in 2006 were not unexpected by those with many years of experience on Everest. I think at the '96 disaster decade mark, the media was looking for a story on Everest and

eventually found one in the poor choices being made by a few misguided individuals constrained by budgets and self-imposed rules, which all led to a well-publicized turn of events.

SP: I think '96 was a significant catalyst for change on the south side of Everest. A more global acceptance of having and adhering to a turnaround time, earlier departures from high camp, generally better screening of guided clients, and a team approach to fixing the route before the big wave of climbers attempt to summit has improved success and safety on the mountain. Satellite internet access to better weather forecasting has also been a factor, but the overall risk remains. There will always be people willing to take on Everest, and—unfortunately—there will continue to be deaths in the endeavor.

EJ: Ken and Scott, as doctors who have dealt with injuries on Everest, what do you believe would increase the survival rate those climbing?

KK: There's a saying in mountaineering: "There are old climbers and there are bold climbers, but there are no old, bold climbers." The more cautious you are, the more likely you are to survive, but the less likely you are to summit. As a doctor, I'm constantly observing my teammates for early signs of medical problems, especially fatigue and breathing difficulties, but if I sent down every climber who was tired or coughing, no one would ever climb Everest. Risk and reward must be balanced. We have to always remember how much more we have waiting for us below than we have at the summit.

SP: I think better preparation, both technically and extending over a greater length of time, would increase the odds of success as well as reduce the mortality on Everest. Climbing gear has improved dramatically since 1953, but technology can only protect a climber so far. Ultimately, skill, physical conditioning, and well-honed decision making are required to make a safe round trip to the summit.

In the space business, we often say, "train like you fly, and fly like you train." What this means in the context of Everest is that the more you can climb in snow and ice environments before you come to the Himalayas, the better your odds will

be. Being comfortable on steep snow and ice, as well as living on a glacier for weeks on end is best learned on other climbing expeditions—on Denali, Aconcagua, and other Himalayan peaks like Cho Oyo, which are excellent preparation for Everest.

JW: Although I am not a doctor, I have dealt with a great number of medical emergencies on this and other mountains as well as some very remote areas in the world. The determining factor that I have come across that most influences the outcome of potentially serious medical problems is how prepared and knowledgeable the group is. There is a new program, “Doctors on Everest,” which was launched to better prepare those attempting the summit. Despite its good intentions, it is actually reducing the number of trained medical personnel on expeditions, who have been replaced by those with only the most basic first-aid training. This has further eroded the depth of knowledge needed to climb Everest, thus weakening the overall experience of teams on the mountain.

EJ: Scott, with your training as an astronaut, is there anything you might want to add in terms of training for extreme environments? Ken, you too might want to comment here.

SP: There are many corollaries between the space-flight environment and high altitude mountaineering: living and working in a remote and often harsh environment, often with limited resources, and a small team. Margins for error are often slim, so participants must be extremely well trained. Gearing up for a summit push on an 8,000-meter peak is very similar to suiting up for a spacewalk. You're wearing a full down suit, an oxygen mask, a backpack, and thick gloves in a very thin atmosphere, just like being outside a spacecraft. We use analog environments to prepare future flight crews for the rigors of spaceflight, including National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) training in the Wind River Range and elsewhere. We often send crews to the *Aquarius* underwater habitat off the Florida Keys for saturation dives, and have also sent astronauts along with science teams to the Atacama and to Antarctica. Future space explorers on the Moon and Mars will benefit from living and conducting field research under these difficult conditions.

KK: The *Aquarius* missions are not physically



THE SUMMIT IN SIGHT

From Camp III at 24,500 feet, the summit of Everest rises on the far side of the Lhotse Face. Photograph by Scott Parazynski.





APA SHERPA



SCOTT PARAZYNSKI



PETER HILLARY

demanding like Everest but there are similarities in the mental demands. You have to work and think clearly in a hostile environment from which there is no easy escape. If a problem develops, you have to solve it—you can't just leave.

EJ: What was your most frightening/challenging moment on Everest? How did you respond to it?

PA: Effecting the rescue of Beck Weathers and Makalu Gau and dealing with issues well documented in *Into Thin Air* was both frightening and surreal. I worked to make their rescue a success as did so many others at the time.

KK: My most challenging moment on Everest was undoubtedly the '96 disaster. I was the only doctor high up on the mountain when the storm hit. It was my fourth trip to Everest and by then I had spent a combined total of one year on the mountain. I had seen deaths from all sorts of injuries and illnesses, but this was the first time my friends were injured and dying. I had to detach myself from any personal thoughts and just concentrate on being a doctor.

I was at 24,000 feet with Jim Williams and we knew it would be hours before any survivors reached us. That gave me time to collect my thoughts—not easy to do at that altitude—and plan for every injury I thought I might see. We gave preliminary treatment to the survivors, then Jim led me down to Camp 2, at 21,000 feet, where we set up a field hospital to provide more sustained treatment. It wasn't until the most severely injured climbers were helicoptered out the following day that my emotions came flooding forward and I allowed myself to realize I had lost some friends.

AS: The first time I was ever on Everest it was difficult. I really wasn't aware of the danger posed by the mountain. Simply, I wasn't prepared.

SP: The lowest point for me on Everest was May 21, 2008. I was at Camp III (24,500 feet) when I had to abort my summit bid because of severe low back pain. Although I didn't know I had ruptured a disc in my lumbar vertebrae, I knew that the summit in my plain view was not to be, and that I had an excruciating descent ahead of me. Thankfully, I had an unlimited supply of ice! I literally laid down every 20 or 30 minutes to ice my back on the way down the Lhotse Face and Western Cwm. On my summit this past spring, the blowing snow on the South Col and unconsolidated powder on the Triangular Face were demoralizing. To make matters worse, we had just a sliver Moon and our meager headlamps to illuminate the climb ahead. On a typical summit day, you can see your target, and judge your progress. During my ascent, it seemed that I was taking two steps up and one step back due to the powder on the steep slope. I'd ask Danuru, my friend and Sherpa sidekick, how much further to the Balcony, and he would say, "We're almost there." After hearing this four or five times, I began to lose confidence in his assessments! We were actually making exceptionally good time, but not knowing this, I considered turning around a few times. I persevered and we were able to see the equivalent of an orbital sunrise from the summit!

EJ: So is Everest really worth the risk ultimately?

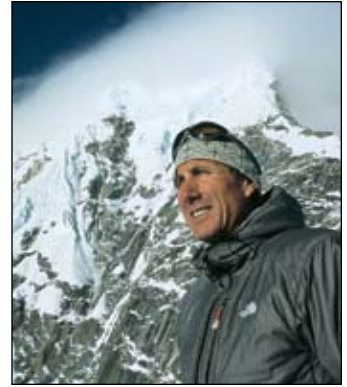
KK: Climbing Everest reduces life to its essentials—food, water, and shelter. You live intensely and naturally. You plan your day according to the



JIM WILLIAMS



KEN KAMLER



PETE ATHANS

weather, not according to the day of the week. It's a more harmonious and satisfying way to live.

JW: Frankly, it is not worth anything. No one cares in daily life if you have or have not climbed Everest. For me, the experiences and lessons learned while climbing with friends and Sherpas on Everest have made the entire experience worthwhile.

SP: I consider my 30 minutes on top of Everest as one of the defining moments of my life. Not only was it the fulfillment of a boyhood dream, the "delayed gratification" of summiting after the prior year's failure was pure exhilaration.

PA: Everest offers the opportunity to ascend not only a mountain of rock, snow, and ice, but to enter the landscape of myth and to plumb the depths and ironies of the human mind.

AS: I think it is important that people realize Everest will always be there and it is more important to keep all team members safe than to put people at risk. I never planned to set records. If I could have planned my life differently, I would gladly have given up the world records for a university education. If you must know, I would rather have been a doctor. I do think I have been able to help my people in some small way. My past three expeditions—including this year's Eco Everest Expedition—have been carried out to benefit the Sherpa people and highlight the threats global warming and environmental degradation pose for the Himalayan people. I think that if I can effect change for the better by raising awareness of the extraordinary yet fragile environment in which we live, it will certainly have been worth it for me and my people.

PH: To push yourself to the edge and then make it home again is life-changing stuff. Not just on Everest, but on any mountain. It's not everybody's cup of tea but for those of us who choose it, the experience is hard to beat. Perhaps the best thing about climbing is the camaraderie, the intensity, the "laughing at the storm that might kill you" feeling, that fleeting moment of living life to the maximum, of being in an incredible other-worldly place that few others will ever know.

As the statistics show, Everest is a dangerous place for mortals. But while climbers line up now for positions on expeditions to the South Col and North Ridge routes, it is clear that not all Everest summits are equal. In the world of evaluations—and this is a world of evaluations—I would give my father and Tenzing a score of ten out of ten for going where none had gone before and ten points to [Doug] Scott and [Dougal] Haston for their 1975 ascent via the South West Face, ten to [Reinhold] Messner for climbing the North Face solo and without oxygen in 1980, and ten to [Erhard] Loretan and [Jean] Triollet for their audacious 1986 alpine style ascent, and ten to Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld for traversing the mountain via the fearsome West Ridge in 1963—believe me, it is fearsome. I have climbed most of it, but not all of it and that is another story. I would only give a guided climber on Everest's standard routes one point. To be sure it is an Everest point but it just isn't the same as the climbers whose ascents pushed the envelope of human capacity and showed us all what was possible. Still, if you make a mistake it doesn't matter whether your climb gets one or ten points for its skill, audacity, or horizon-expanding qualities—you die. The journey better be worth it. 