A New Everest Mess

Text by David Roberts  Additional reporting by Billi Bierling

As record numbers reach for the summit, a question arises: Should the world's strongest climbers be forced to risk it all for a flagging few?

Last spring the annual high-altitude circus set up its Ringling Brothers tents at Everest Base Camp. Thanks to long spells of good weather—without a single killer storm such as the one that took five lives in a day in 1996—a record number of more than 500 men and women reached the summit. Seven people died (in ways ranging from long falls to hypoxia), a relatively small number compared to 11 last year and 12 in 1996.

New Everest marks were set. Apa Sherpa added a 17th notch to his matchless gunbelt of Everest summits. A 71-year-old Japanese man named Katsusuke Yanagisawa, who his own teammates were sure was too slow and weak to reach the summit, set a new age record for tagging the top. And on June 14 perhaps the most remarkable feat of the whole spring season was performed by the last team to summit. Leading an expedition on the north side that hoped to make the definitive film about Everest legends George Mallory and Sandy Irvine, American Conrad Anker free-climbed the notorious Second Step, a rock-and-ice cliff at 28,300 feet (8,626 meters), as Mallory would have had to do in 1924 to become the first to climb the mountain. Anker rated the pitch at 5.10—probably beyond Mallory's capabilities.

As has come to be expected, there were a number of follies committed in the name of recherché "firsts." A Brit claimed the first cell phone call (as opposed to sat phone) from the summit, as he uttered, "One small text for man, one giant leap for mobilekind—thanks, Motorola." But Everest pedants cut him down to size by dredging up a Chinese expedition leader who had beaten the Brit to the cell-phone punch four years earlier. Meanwhile, a Dutch eccentric calling himself the "Iceman," who was determined to climb Everest wearing only boots, shorts, gloves, and a cap, had to turn back at 24,300 feet (2,407 meters), but still claimed an altitude record for shorts.

There were, alas, more clients than ever who filled the role so memorably framed by Jon Krakauer in Into Thin Air—novices who couldn't put on their own crampons. Greg Child, who climbed a very different Everest in 1995, spent two months reporting on the north side last spring. "Considering the number of people on the mountain," says Child, "considering the kind of people—a mountain full of nonclimbers, 80 percent guided and Sherpa-managed—I'd say that seven deaths is getting off lightly."

Among the tragedies of the season a year ago, the most controversial was the demise of David Sharp, a British mountaineer who lay in the snow, slowly dying of hypothermia and frostbite, as some 40 climbers allegedly walked past him without offering help, much less initiating a rescue. For the general public, the story of Sharp's death instantly became a parable epitomizing everything that's wrong with the Everest scene today.

Last spring, toward the end of May, it seemed entirely likely that the Sharp scenario would repeat itself. The potential tragedy involved a team called the Democratic Everest Expedition (DEE). One of a number of groups organized around humanitarian or nationalistic agendas, the DEE was born out of the political turmoil that has seized Nepal. Led by Ang Ngima, the team set out to honor martyred anti-government demonstrators by placing the flags of eight different political parties (ranging from Maoists to Marxist Leninists) on top.

One of the DEE’s team members was 22-year-old Usha Bista. As a non-Sherpa Nepali, she would be the first woman from the country's far western Terai plains to attempt Everest. Her inclusion, presumably, would demonstrate a solidarity among all of Nepal's far-flung ethnic groups. "Half of the people in my village," Usha would later say, "have never set their eyes upon a mountain." Growing up fatherless in Asia's poorest country (which has a median per capita income of $270 a year), Usha was nonetheless required to raise more than
$27,000 to join the DEE's expedition.

Despite these obstacles, on May 21 Usha had reached an altitude of 27,300 feet (8,321 meters), almost the same altitude at which Sharp died the year before. As Usha crawled slowly upward above the South Col, she was on the verge of a collapse comparable to the one that doomed Sharp.

The Usha Bista saga, however, would have a different ending from Sharp's, producing the most compelling—and at the same time the most puzzling—of all the stories that emerged from the mountain this past spring.

May 21 dawned a perfect day on Mount Everest—clear, windless, and relatively warm. Shortly after 7:30 a.m., Meagan McGrath, a 29-year-old captain in the Canadian Air Force, was descending from the summit on the south side of Everest. (In recent years, more and more of the strongest climbers have started their summit bids from the South Col as early as 11 p.m. the night before, ensuring not only that they reach the summit in the predictable good weather of early morning, but that they get out ahead of the throng of slower climbers.)

One of the strongest climbers on the mountain, McGrath was accompanied by her Sherpa guide Ang Rita, of Asian Trekking, the same low-budget guide service Sharp had hired, which was widely censured in 2006 for not sending a Sherpa to accompany him on his summit bid.

Just below a prominent feature called the Balcony, McGrath came upon Usha standing in place, bent over as if to catch her breath. "She looked like she was in trouble," recalled the Canadian. McGrath tapped Ang Rita on the shoulder and asked if they should assist Usha, but he ignored her and took off, continuing the descent without a word.

Was Ang Rita thus abandoning not only a potential victim, but his own client? McGrath is unwilling to say as much. "To give him the benefit of the doubt," she muses, "I'd presume he was going on down to get help." (No one contacted during the reporting of this piece recalls Ang Rita playing such a role.)

"Are you OK?" McGrath asked Usha after Ang Rita had gone.

The Nepali woman waved at the pack on her back, asking in a weak voice, "Can you get my goggles?" McGrath then noticed that the woman had her gloves on the wrong hands.

During the next hour, an American client and his Sherpa guide stopped to help McGrath, but as many as six other climbers cruised by without pausing. The three healthy climbers soon managed to wrestle Usha, who could no longer walk, down to a small ledge, where they anchored her securely to the fixed rope. Then the American and the Sherpa chose to continue their own descent.

"I volunteered to stay," says McGrath simply. "I looked at her oxygen tank—the needle was at zero. So I gave her my own oxygen. I tried to warm her up, rubbing her arms and back over her down suit. At last she stopped shivering. But then she started to go unconscious."

At 8:45 a.m., a little more than an hour after McGrath had found Usha, American Dave Hahn and Sherpa Phinjo Dorje came upon the duo. Hahn, a senior guide for the Ashford, Washington–based International Mountain Guides (IMG), had just reached the summit for his ninth time, setting a record for American-born mountaineers. In Everest terms, IMG is at the opposite end of the spectrum from outfits such as Asian Trekking—many times more expensive, but with a well-earned reputation of safety and responsibility toward its clients.

"Is everything OK?" Hahn asked.
"No, everything's not OK," McGrath replied.

Hahn had already received a radio call from an American expedition leader alerting him to be on the lookout for a woman in trouble above the South Col. "I knew this was her," Hahn reports. "I could see at once that she probably had cerebral edema." HACE, or high-altitude cerebral edema, a swelling of the brain, is a leading killer of climbers on 8,000-meter [26,247-foot] peaks. "I felt her wrists—they were ice cold. I could see frost on her face. I was yelling at her and shaking her. I didn't think she was going to make it."

Trained as an EMT, Hahn carried injectable dexamethasone, an anti-inflammatory drug that can work short-term wonders in cerebral edema cases. He got out his kit, unfroze the syringe, prepped the needle, and injected Usha in the leg. He told McGrath to put her own oxygen set back on. As soon as she did, Hahn removed his rig and strapped it over Usha's face.

"What Meagan did was really gutsy," says Hahn. "But I wasn't sure about her ability—she was just a client, and I could see that she'd reached her limit."

"I knew that going without oxygen myself would hammer me, but it wouldn't kill me."

Now Hahn and Phinjo "manhandled" Usha down the long slope, eventually aided by Lakpa Rita, the only climber willing to climb up from the South Col to help. "It was pretty crude," remembers Hahn, "but we had gravity working for us."

It took the rescuers only an hour and a half to get Usha down to the South Col. There, by sheer good luck, eight British doctors were camped, awaiting their own chances to go for the summit. They got Usha into a tent and treated her for hypothermia. By now the woman's cerebral edema was full-blown. After a little more than an hour, one of the doctors announced, "We need to get her on down the mountain, or she'll die tonight."

Resting near the British doctors at Camp IV on the South Col was another IMG guide, Mike Haugen, and his climbing partner, Rainier Mountaineering, Inc., guide Casey Grom. In terrific shape, they had been the first of some 50 climbers to reach the summit from the south side that day, arriving on top at 5:00 a.m. With Hahn near exhaustion, it was Grom and Haugen who now took charge of the rescue effort as they tried to recruit a team to carry Usha down the Lhotse Face to Camp III, over steeper and trickier terrain than that which Hahn, Phinjo, and Lakpa had negotiated. Going from tent to tent, the two guides pleaded urgently for volunteers. Says Grom, "Everybody had climbed to the top that day or was going for it the next. There weren't many people available or strong enough. Teams wanted to help, but the leaders couldn't spare Sherpas who were responsible for their own clients."

A doctor, André Vercueil, volunteered, giving up his chance for the summit. But after prolonged begging, the rescue party still amounted to only four: Hahn, Grom, Haugen, and Vercueil. "We needed more people," says Grom. "Trying to work the rescue with only four could put us in a really hairy situation. Eventually we got three Sherpas to join up."

One of the Sherpas, who spoke no English, belonged to Usha's DEE team. According to Haugen, he was less than helpful: "At one point he unclipped my safety line. I yelled at him. Then he unclipped the line connecting Usha to the fixed rope."

It took the seven rescuers ten hours to transport Usha from Camp IV down to Camp III, at 24,000 feet (7,315 meters). As Grom points out, most teams climb up from III to IV in less than half that time. Night fell before the team could reach the haven of camp, but, responding to a radio call, several doctors at Camp III came out to bring food and water to the rescuers and to help guide the litter down the last hard section.
It would require two further teams of volunteers to carry Usha from Camp III down through the Khumbu Icefall to Base Camp, from which she was flown by helicopter to Kathmandu. Astonishingly, not one member of Usha's own Democratic Everest Expedition (except the Sherpa on the Lhotse Face) helped with the rescue. In a Kathmandu hospital, Usha was treated for frostbitten toes and fingers (her right thumb had to be amputated), then released.

The heroic rescue of Usha Bista, a rescue without precedent—a completely helpless victim carried from above 27,000 feet (8,230 meters) all the way down to Base Camp—seemed to turn the David Sharp story on its head. At considerable risk to their own safety, some of the strongest climbers on Everest had dropped everything to go to the aid of a woman they didn't even know. It was not that the Sharp debacle had taught everyone on Everest in 2007 responsible behavior—witness the half dozen climbers who passed by the semi-comatose Usha without even pausing. What did take place was that the best guides and the most selfless Sherpas and climbers proved capable of life-saving humanity and compassion.

"Usha was incredibly lucky that Dave [Hahn] was there," says Haugen. "Otherwise she'd be dead."

Yet in the aftermath of the spring season, puzzling new questions arose. What was Usha doing on Everest in the first place? And how had she gotten to 27,300 feet (8,321 meters) all but single-handedly, only to collapse and create the drama that would be required to save her?

According to Haugen, the scuttlebutt around Base Camp was that two doctors working for the Himalayan Rescue Association clinic had examined Usha before she started her climb, and told her she had no business going above Base Camp. One of the doctors reportedly said, "You have at least a lung infection, and maybe the beginnings of pulmonary edema." (Usha, however, denies this claim.)

What about the self-styled Democratic Everest Expedition and their apparently shameless failure to help one of their own? "In my mind," says Hahn, "that team was a pretty squirrely entity. It wasn't a conventional expedition. I doubt they even had radios."

Upon emerging from the hospital, Usha effusively thanked her rescuers, then claimed that her fellow team members had not only abandoned her high on Everest, but had refused to give her food and water. Interviewed by Kathmandu journalist Sudeshna Sarkar, Usha revealed her profound naïveté about Everest: "I felt I was in safe hands. Even if I couldn't make it to the summit under my own steam, they would drag me to the top."

Usha's brother Bimal Bista claimed that team leader Ang Ngima insisted that she still owed $2,460 of the $27,000 fee. According to Bimal, Ang Ngima had called the family from Base Camp and threatened, "If you don't pay up the remaining money as soon as possible, your sister will face serious trouble."

Ang Ngima, Usha recalled, tried to dissuade her from attempting the summit, but she persisted: "After having spent so much money and effort, how could I go back?"

Works Cited
Is K2 the New Everest?

A climbing catastrophe hits the world’s second highest peak.

By David Roberts

On August 1, 2008, in a single disastrous chain of events, 11 climbers were killed high on K2’s Abruzzi Ridge in Pakistan’s Karakoram Range. One of the worst accidents in mountaineering history, it made headlines around the world. Surprisingly, along with outpourings of sympathy for the victims, the tragedy generated a virulent backlash.

The vast majority of the public assumed that the climbers on K2 (a much harder and more dangerous peak than Everest) had duplicated the scenario indelibly captured in Jon Krakauer’s Into Thin Air—affluent novices buying their way into a deadly ordeal. Web posts on the New York Times’ site commented, “Heroes my ass. No one should feel an inch of sympathy for these eggheads” and “They engaged in marginally suicidal behavior and wound up dead. To me, they were stupid and reckless beyond all limits.” Even the great Tirolean mountaineer Reinhold Messner railed against purported “K2 package deals” luring beginners to the mountain, and concluded that “something like this is just pure stupidity.”

Upon further analysis, however, this year’s K2 disaster bore no resemblance to the storm-generated fiasco on Everest in 1996. The climbers who perished on the Abruzzi Ridge were not dilettantes purchasing spots on guided “Yellow Brick Road” expeditions; they were, for the most part, experienced mountaineers. Several had attempted K2 before; several had climbed Everest; and others had performed big-wall climbs in the great ranges.

Most of those who died, it seems, simply happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. It was not incompetence that doomed them so much as incredibly bad luck, all of it hinging on the spontaneous collapse of a mass of ice.

“I called it the Motivator,” says Ed Viesturs, “because you sure wanted to get out from under it as quickly as possible.” Viesturs, who climbed K2 in 1992, is referring to a huge overhanging serac above the Bottleneck, a 60-degree couloir at 27,100 feet that most climbers agree poses the trickiest and most dangerous passage on the popular Abruzzi route.

American climber Carlos Buhler, who traversed the same terrain in 1994, concurs. “You break every rule in the book when you go up the Bottleneck,” he says. “That serac is just hanging over you—it’s a nightmare.”
“And yet,” Viesturs adds, “the Motivator looked the same year after year. It seemed to be pretty stable.”

On August 1, after waiting weeks for a window of good weather, some 20 to 30 climbers from separate expeditions set out for the summit. While Dren Mandic, a Serb, and Jehan Baig, a Pakistani, fell to their deaths during the ascent, at least 18 made it to the top. Descending after dark, most were in the vicinity of the Bottleneck when the serac that had hung in place for decades suddenly collapsed and sloughed off the mountain.

As ADVENTURE went to press, the precise sequence of events that snuffed out the lives of three Koreans, two Sherpas from Nepal, a Frenchman, an Irishman, a Norwegian, and another Pakistani was far from clear. Such uncertainties are common in big-range mountaineering. But it seems likely that the collapsing serac took three or four climbers with it on its 9,000-foot plunge to the Godwin-Austen Glacier. And by wiping out the fixed ropes that had been strung up the Bottleneck, the collapse stranded a number of other climbers above the lethal couloir, where they faced a bivouac at some 27,200 feet without shelter, sleeping bags, food, or water. Some of the remaining climbers may have frozen to death, and others may have fallen in desperate efforts to climb down the Bottleneck without fixed ropes. At least four men, however, performed that last-ditch descent successfully, collapsing exhausted into lower camps on the mountain, some of them with severe frostbite.

In the immediate aftermath of the accident, the accounts of the survivors verged on incoherent, and their various stories could not be reconciled. The Italian Marco Confortola, for instance, the last survivor evacuated from base camp, told reporters that he and Irishman Gerard McDonnell had bivouacked above the Bottleneck. After resuming the descent, they were caught in an avalanche. “I saw my friend Gerard’s boots falling among the blocks of ice and snow,” said Confortola. “That was the worst moment.”

Dutchman Wilco van Rooijen, meanwhile, insisted that he had joined Confortola and McDonnell on the mountainside. He later told Reuters that after the serac collapse, panic had set in: “Everybody was fighting for himself, and I still do not understand why everybody [was] leaving each other. People were running down but didn’t know where to go.”

Van Rooijen informed Adventure that he eventually parted ways with Confortola and McDonnell and descended alone. “I was on the wrong side of the mountain,” he said. “I was lost. . . . There were so many moments when I thought I saw a climber and thought I heard voices, but I knew there couldn’t be people there.” Van Rooijen missed Camp IV altogether but ultimately crawled into Camp III, where teammates revived him.
Some heartrending stories also emerged from the disaster. Cecilie Skog, the wife of Norwegian climber Rolf Bae, had climbed Everest and reached both Poles with her husband. On August 1, she watched as the serac carried Bae to his death, then she descended safely with a teammate. McDonnell, the first Irishman to climb K2, had left a farewell note on his online blog upon leaving base camp, a phrase in Gaelic that translates as “That’s all for now, friends. The time is coming.”

What or who, in the initial analysis, was to blame for this disaster? Some of the survivors criticized others on the mountain. Van Rooijen lashed out at unnamed climbers who had fixed the ropes in the Bottleneck in “the wrong positions.” As he told the London Times, “We were astonished. We had to move [them during the ascent]. That took, of course, many, many hours.”

The delay, van Rooijen claimed, caused the climbers to reach the summit far too late in the day. (Additional time was lost attempting to rescue Mandic and Baig.) Some climbers didn’t top out until around 8 p.m. Says Viesturs, “I can imagine them coming down exhausted and counting on the fixed ropes. When the ropes were gone, it’s possible some waited for daylight, and a few, perhaps, tried to downclimb the difficult terrain and fell off.”

But Greg Child, who climbed K2 in 1990 by a harder route than the Abruzzi, says, “8 p.m. is about when I reached the top. An experienced climber ought to be able to get down in the dark. K2 is a much harder go than Everest, so there’s no agreed-upon turnaround time. Turnaround times, in fact, are an invention of commercial guiding operations, because their clients need boundaries.”

A number of K2 veterans pointed out that today’s overreliance on fixed ropes may have contributed to the death toll. Ten or fifteen years ago, climbers on K2 would have been roped together and carrying ice screws. With the fixed ropes stripped from the Bottleneck, the stranded climbers could simply have set up rappels—as Buhler did in 1994, after judging it an easier and safer alternative to clipping in to the then minimal fixed ropes. But this year’s climbers carried neither ice screws nor their own ropes.

Fixed ropes or no, K2 remains a harsh mountain. Between its first ascent in 1954 and 2007, only 284 climbers reached K2’s summit, while 66 died on the mountain. During the same period, Everest saw 3,681 aspirants reach the top, with a death toll of 210. In terms of the ratio of summit successes to fatalities, K2 is four times as dangerous as Everest.

In more than a century of climbing in the Karakoram and the Himalaya, only an avalanche on Nanga Parbat in 1937, which took the lives of seven German climbers and nine porters, stands as a deadlier single accident than this year’s K2 disaster. And in the history of mountaineering worldwide, it is hard to find a similar predicament, in which the natural breakdown of a ridge or face doomed the climbers who were stranded above it.
Child offers a final perspective. “I’m not going to put the boot into any of those folks. They were on K2 for the same reason I was when I went. To me, it was the ultimate test of mountaineering. “But something like this is bound to happen again. What the hell—climbing is dangerous.”

Works Cited

The Savior and the Storm on K2

Heroism: Pemba Gyalje Sherpa

by Christian DeBenedetti

On August 1, 2008, at just about 8 p.m., a massive serac cleaved from a glacier near the summit of K2, the world’s second highest mountain, and barreled down a section of the Cesen climbing route called the Bottleneck. In an instant, one climber was dead, key safety lines were swept away, and 17 climbers were trapped above 27,000 feet with little chance of escape.

In the days ahead, the disaster on K2 would become one of the deadliest mountaineering incidents in history, leaving 11 victims in its wake. The tragedy would shake modern mountaineering to its core. And it would yield a hero, Pemba Gyalje Sherpa.

Pemba, 34, and three members of his Norit K2 team—leader Wilco van Rooijen, Marco Confortola, and Gerard McDonnell—reached the Bottleneck minutes after the serac fell. Rather than face a dangerous descent in total darkness, Pemba’s three teammates decided to bivouac for the night. At 27,000 feet the temperatures would reach minus 40ºF. Pemba, a seven-time Everest veteran, knew the dangers of the death zone. He chose instead to descend the Bottleneck alone, without oxygen, picking his way down the 60-degree couloir guided by a single tattered safety line that had survived the avalanche. He reached Camp IV by 1 a.m. His teammates, he assumed, would be down at first light.

By daybreak on August 2, chaos reigned. More than a dozen climbers were missing or dead, and the weather had worsened considerably. Van Rooijen had staggered away from the team, desperate to get down by a different route, and soon became hopelessly lost. McDonnell had wandered back uphill, apparently confused. Frostbitten and delirious, Confortola had climbed partway down the Bottleneck, unable to remember how he’d done it. Just before he passed out from altitude sickness, a second avalanche swept toward him carrying McDonnell's mangled corpse.

With his team in shambles, Pemba had to act fast. He heard over the radio that Confortola had been spotted midway up the Bottleneck. "I thought, OK, if we are lucky, I can rescue Marco," Pemba says. So he began to climb, soloing through swirling snow up the couloir. "It was very scary, but I knew Marco was still alive," he says. "I could not turn back."

When Pemba reached Confortola some hours later, the Italian was in bad shape, unconscious and suffering from severe altitude sickness. Somehow Pemba managed to revive him with oxygen and guide him to the base of the Bottleneck. At that moment another slide roared from above, this time carrying the bloodied bodies of two Sherpas and two Korean climbers. A chunk of falling ice blasted Confortola in the back of the head. Dazed, the Italian began to slip. "I was falling," he told a reporter. "The avalanche would have taken me away. But Pemba grabbed me from behind. He was holding my neck. He saved my life."
By the time the pair made it to Camp IV, Pemba was shattered, collapsing into his tent for a few hours' sleep. When he woke that evening, he got word that van Rooijen, the lost Norit K2 leader, was still alive. He had to go out again.

After a night alone in the open with no water and no ice ax, van Rooijen had been presumed dead. Then, unexpectedly, he called his wife on his satellite phone. Using the call data, the Norit K2 team fixed his location on the mountain's South Face, far from any known routes.

Armed with only rough coordinates, Pemba, along with another survivor, Cas van de Gevel, struck into terra incognita, picking across avalanche-prone terrain at night. After searching for hours, the pair decided to resume the next day. They finally found van Rooijen in the late afternoon by following the sound of his ringing cell phone. The three men staggered into Camp III well after dark, on August 3, exhausted but alive.

In the weeks after the tragedy, Pemba returned to his Kathmandu home, far from the horrors he'd just witnessed. You'd think that after such an experience, he would never want to climb again, soured forever. But Pemba has no such plans. He'll be back in the mountains, he says, by the time next season rolls around. Thank goodness. Climbing needs more heroes like him.

14 x 8000: Ed Viesturs Joins the World's Most Exclusive Climbing Club

May 18, 2005 19:36 EST

Previously published May 12, 2005 03:00 pm EST, corrected May 13

What did Ed Viesturs find on the summit of Annapurna? Wind, cold, and a sea of clouds below. But also success, gratification and an invitation to the world’s most exclusive club of mountaineer’s: The one consisting of those who have stood atop all 14 8000+ peaks on Earth.

The 12 altitude knights

Viesturs became the 12th member of an elite council inaugurated in 1986* by Tyrolean legend Reinhold Messner on the summit of Lhotse.

Messner was not the first to covet such a goal. The second 14 summit knight was Jerzy Kukuczka, now considered perhaps the best climber in history. Jerzy made all the 8000er summits in less than eight years, setting a record that has yet to be broken. In addition, many of his climbs were first- or winter ascents. Jerzy finished 11 months after Messner but it would take nine years before the next climber completed the list of the 14, 8000ers - that’s when Loretan came in, at spot number 3.

With or without O2?

Kukuczka’s only “fault” was using supplementary O2 on Everest. Since Messner accomplished his goal without gas, he established something of a sub-classification of “best of the best.” Only five** climbers (including Viesturs) among the 12 chosen ones have summited the Great 14 without bottled O2.

Even Juan Oiarzabal, after completing his list on Annapurna in 1999, decided to take on Everest again, this time without O2. He summited in spring, 2001.

Aces by surprise

Both Messner and Viesturs were already very well-known before they got the ‘final confirmation of excellence’ by completing the 14, 8000ers.

However, some relatively unknown climbers have astonished the international community when they stood on the summit of their final 8000er. Such was the case for the three Koreans on the list; and Alberto Iñurrategi, who summited them all in elegant style and without O2 when he was only in his early thirties.

Viesturs will never forget Alberto. They were together, on Annapurna, when Alberto completed the list by bagging the second-ever ascent of the SE ridge – along with Jean Christophe Lafaille. It was a bold climb, so risky that Ed opted to retreat before the definite summit push: Conditions were far from safe.

Viesturs is NOT the first American to make it

Well, he is, but only if you consider ‘Americans’ those living in the US. Actually, the first American who summited
all the 8000ers was from Mexico: The amazing Carlos Carsolio** accomplished the goal and became the youngest to complete all 14. He held that distinction until the Basque climber Alberto snatched the title from him. Both were 33 when they completed, but Alberto was a couple of months younger. Carlos climbed all 14 without oxygen, but emergency oxygen on Makalu dropped him from the no O2 list.

**Next in line**

Viesturs is the first new member in the prestigious club, but probably not the last one this year. To begin with, keep an eye out for Abele Blanc and Christian Kuntner, currently on Annapurna, ready to repeat Viesturs success on the very same route. Weather permitting, of course.

By the way, Annapurna seems to be the last obstacle for many climbers on the 14, 8000+ quest. Difficult and dangerous, many tend to climb every other mountain before heading for the fatal Anna. The mountain often requires many attempts (the third for Viesturs, for instance) and, sadly, it has cut the hopes and the life of not so few altitude dreamers. Another reason for Viesturs to be happy, and relieved.

For further details on the 14 x 8000 club members, check out the brand new table on Explorers Web's Adventure Stats.

**Corrections May 13:**


**Carlos Carsolio required emergency oxygen on his descent from Makalu.

Explorers Web, Inc. MountEverest.net

http://www.mounteverest.net/story/stories/14x8000EdViestursjointheworldsmostexclusiveclimbingclubMay182005.shtml
Heart Valve Surgery Success Story: Veronika Meyer
Mountain Climber Phenomena

By Adam Pick

The story of Veronika Meyer is extraordinary. A heart valve replacement recipient at age forty-six, Veronika has a unique mountain climbing hobby. Actually, mountain climbing is more than a hobby for Veronika. It’s more of an obsession for the scientist from St. Gallen, Switzerland.

Since receiving a St. Jude Medical Mechanical Heart Valve in 1997, Veronika Meyer’s mountain climbing accomplishments include the ascent of Mount McKinley, the highest mountain in North America, and Aconcagua, the highest peak of both the Americas.

In 2003, Veronika Meyer attempted the ultimate mountain climbing challenge - Mount Everest. Unfortunately, Veronika’s first attempt was not a success. Veronika was forced to turn back just below the famous Second Step landmark because of a heavy storm.

Although disappointed, Veronika was pleased to have climbed to 8,600 meters or 28,215 feet—her "personal best" altitude.

Then, in 2005, Veronika Meyer made her second attempt to summit Mount Everest, but had to turn back at 7800 meters because of unpredictable weather conditions. Although two members of Veronika’s team reached the peak, a third member tragically died during that expedition.

Veronika experienced three failed attempts to climb to the top of the world, located at 8,850 meters (29,035 feet) above sea level.

However, in 2007, on her fourth attempt, Veronika conquered Mount Everest. By all known accounts, Veronika Meyer is the first mountain climber implanted with a mechanical heart valve to successfully ascend Everest.

“Conditions were excellent this year with a lot of snow, but in addition, all of us were strong,” Meyer said.

Since New Zealander Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay first reached Everest in 1953, about 2,000 climbers have scaled the mountain. Another 205 people have died on its dangerous slopes.

“Veronika’s amazing accomplishment should offer inspiration to millions of heart-valve patients around the world,” said George Fazio, president of St. Jude’s cardiovascular division. “Despite living with a heart condition for many years, she has refused to accept limits and has pursued her goals with tremendous courage and determination.”

Youngest Person to Top Everest Draws Attention to Teen Adventurers

May 23, 2010 | By Paloma Esquivel, Los Angeles Times

Jordan Romero, 13, has climbed to the top of the highest peaks on six of the seven continents, beginning at age 9. He still faces the dangerous task of returning to base camp.

A 13-year-old from Big Bear Lake became the youngest person to scale Mt. Everest, gaining renown for the feat while renewing controversy over a trend of young record-breaking adventurers.

Jordan Romero called his mother, Leigh Anne Drake, 37, from a satellite phone when he reached the peak Saturday along with his father, stepmother and a team of three guides, Drake said.

"I'm calling from the top of the world," he told her.

The record was previously held by Ming Kipa of Nepal, who was 15 when she made the climb in 2003 with her brother and sister.

Jordan decided in the fourth grade that he wanted to climb the tallest mountains on each of the seven continents, said Drake. His mother and father are avid fans of the outdoors who took their son biking and hiking at an early age, but neither had experience with mountaineering until Jordan made his decision, she said.

"We said, 'All right, let's start training.' I don't think he'd ever hiked more than a couple of miles," Drake said.

Drake and a friend took Jordan for a six-mile hike near their home. He whined and cried the entire time, she recalled, but when they got down, he wanted to keep training.

"I decided we were going to follow Jordan's lead," Drake said. "If he wants to try it, we're going to support it."

Jordan climbed the first peak on the list — Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania — when he was 9. He since has climbed Mt. Kosciusko in Australia, Mt. Elbrus in Russia, Mt. Aconcagua in Argentina and Mt. McKinley in Alaska.

The eighth grader enrolled in independent study this semester to pursue the Everest climb, his mother said. He took algebra books and writing journals with him.

Brent Bishop, 43, who has climbed to the top of Mt. Everest twice and whose father was on the first American team to reach the summit in 1963, said he was amazed by Jordan's accomplishment but wary for other young climbers.

"I'm quite impressed with Jordan's focus and preparation and his mental fortitude," he said. "The issue is, is it safe for a 13-year-old to be climbing Mt. Everest?"
The main danger for a young person isn't the climbing, but the altitude, Bishop said.

"The planning and the weather cooperated to make this trip work out," he said. But "the danger is for someone who is 13 and they get caught up high in bad weather and they run out of bottled oxygen. That's where you might see issues with cerebral impairment."

Jordan's group still has to make the trek down the mountain, a dangerous route that every year claims lives. After that, to complete his goal he has to climb one more mountain: Vinson Massif in Antarctica.
Hiker Left for Dead on Mount Everest
By Cathy Free from Reader's Digest | December 2006

He’d spent seven hours clambering up the mountain through ice and snow, and now an exhausted Daniel Mazur sensed that success was near.

Although it was ten degrees below zero near the top of Everest, the soft morning light revealed clear blue skies for miles around. This is perfect — we’re definitely going to summit today, the climbing guide told himself, digging his crampons into the ice and taking a few more cautious steps. He and his companions were less than three hours away from the spectacular 29,035-foot summit.

It was 7:30 a.m. when Mazur climbed onto a narrow ledge called Mushroom Rock to rest and offer encouragement to his SummitClimb teammates, Andrew Brash of Canada, Myles Osborne of England and their Sherpa guide, Jongbu.

As the men looked out on the snow-covered peaks below, Mazur suddenly saw a flash of bright yellow to his left. Was it a tent? No way, he thought, squinting to take a closer look. No climber would camp out at this altitude. The yellow blur moved again, and Mazur’s jaw dropped in amazement. What the hell? he wondered.

Perched precariously on the edge of a jagged cliff was a man sitting cross-legged, trying to change his shirt. His thick snowsuit was unzipped to the waist and he had no hat, gloves or sunglasses.

Without an oxygen mask, sleeping bag, food or water, there was no reason for Lincoln Hall to be alive at 28,000 feet, and he seemed to know it. Pulling his frostbitten hands out of his shirt, Hall looked up at Mazur.

“I imagine you are surprised to see me here,” he said.

Hall had been alone on the mountain since 7:30 the night before. Following an arduous climb up the north ridge, he and his teammates had reached the summit at nine that morning. After celebrating the glorious view of the earth’s curve and posing for victory photos, they started on their descent, hoping to reach camp before dangerous afternoon storms rolled in.

But at 28,000 feet, Hall’s feet had stopped moving and he was overcome by a deep fatigue. He turned to one of the Sherpas he was climbing with. “I need to lie down — I need to sleep,” he told him.

With 25 years of experience behind him, Hall was a seasoned mountaineer. He had climbed Everest once before, in 1984, but failed to summit. Now, although he didn’t have the presence of mind to realize it, he was suffering from cerebral edema, a severe form of altitude sickness. The condition causes the brain to swell and leads to a stumbling, intoxicated gait, hallucinations and, eventually, death.

In fact, this area of the mountain, right below the summit, is known as the “death zone.” It is incredibly steep and icy, requiring climbers to use fixed ropes and ice axes to hack their way to the top and then back down again. And because of the high altitude, if a climber is going to get sick, it usually happens here.
Normally, the descent from here to advanced base camp takes about two hours. But Hall was weak and increasingly uncooperative as the edema overtook him. Two Sherpas had to lower him down between them, wasting precious daylight, while the rest of the group kept going.

After nine hours, Hall went limp. He appeared to be dead, and the Sherpas were ordered by their leader to leave him on the mountain.

Checking one last time for signs of life, one of the men poked Hall in the eye. When there was no response, they gathered his backpack, food, water and extra oxygen and returned to the high camp.

Just hours before, another climber, a German man named Thomas Weber, suffered similar symptoms, then collapsed and died, less than 20 yards from Hall. And ten days before, David Sharp, a climber from Great Britain, had become seriously ill from the high altitude and died beneath a rock overhang. Forty other climbers, intent on reaching the summit, had passed by, refusing to help.

Almost any experienced climber who’s been to Mount Everest knows somebody who didn’t make it back. Two of Dan Mazur’s friends, Rob Hall (no relation to Lincoln Hall) and Scott Fischer, died in the notorious snowstorm that killed six other climbers in 1996. Their bodies and nearly 200 others are scattered across Everest’s treacherous slopes, preserved for eternity in snow and ice.

“There are times when you literally have to step over somebody’s body to get to the top,” says Mazur. “It’s a grim reminder that you should never lose respect for the mountain.”

Near the peak on that crisp, clear May morning — “a mountaineer’s dream,” Mazur describes — he and his team members quietly realized they had a choice to make: Should they phone in Lincoln Hall’s predicament to his group, 7 Summits, and continue on? Or stay with him, until help arrived?

Mazur had reached the summit once before, in 1991. But for Brash and Osborne, who had spent $20,000 each to make this expedition, it was the dream of a lifetime. In the end, Mazur knew, there was only one possible decision to be made. “Luckily,” he says, “everyone made the right one.”

Osborne spoke first. “We can’t leave the guy,” he said. They all agreed.

Not only was Hall frostbitten and disoriented, he could slip and plunge down the 8,000-foot Kangshung Face at any moment.

“We found him sitting on a three-foot-by-three-foot platform covered with snow and ice,” says Mazur. “It’s hard to believe he didn’t roll over the edge during the night.”

The men got Hall away from the cliff’s edge and helped him back into his snowsuit. Rummaging through their backpacks, they shared their oxygen, lemonade and Snickers bars.

“Can you tell me how you got here?” asked Mazur.

“No,” said Hall.

“Can you tell me your name?”
Hall hesitated, then broke into a grin. “Yes!” he exclaimed. “My name is Lincoln Hall. Can you tell me how I got here?”

Thank God, he’s coming around, Mazur thought. But Hall wasn’t coherent for long.

“This is a great boat ride we’re on!” he kept saying. Still hallucinating, he stretched out his arms like he was about to do a backflip. He tried again to remove his snowsuit, then lunged for the cliff.

“Whoa! Where do you think you’re going?” Mazur grabbed him in a bear hug and tackled him onto the ice. Does this guy have a death wish? he wondered.

Then he flashed on his late friend Scott Fischer, who died on Everest. When climbers came across Fischer’s body, he was partially undressed, a bare arm sticking out of his unzipped down suit. Mazur knew it was common for people in the last stages of hypothermia to tear off their clothes. He also knew they tended to act like three-year-olds having a tantrum. Hall was belligerent — he wasn’t listening, or maybe he wasn’t capable of processing what was being said. Either way, Mazur decided, “I wasn’t going to let this guy we were trying to save kill himself.”

“Come on,” Mazur told his teammates, “we’ve got to keep him away from the ledge.” It looked like they’d have to anchor Hall to the mountain, to keep him from lunging off. They drove an ice axe into the snow, then attached a “sling,” mountaineers’ lingo for a strong nylon tether, which they tied to him with a figure-eight knot.

With the injured climber secured, Mazur radioed down to high base camp, where their team’s cook was waiting. “Go over to the 7 Summits camp, get their guys out of bed and get them on the radio,” he said. “Hurry!”

Ten minutes later, the head Sherpa on Hall’s team came on the radio.

“Lincoln Hall is in big trouble and needs your help,” said Mazur.

There was a long pause. “You mean he’s alive? How alive is he?”

“Well, he’s moving around, he’s talking,” said Mazur, exasperated. “We need extra food, water and oxygen to get him down. Otherwise he’s not going to make it.”

Mazur insisted the man put Hall’s leader, Alex Abramov, on the phone.

“You’ve got some guys in high camp, right? Send them up!” he told Abramov. The Russian climber agreed to send all the Sherpas he could gather.

“You can’t blame the Sherpas for leaving Hall on the mountain,” says Mazur. “It’s their job to help us climb, but it’s not their job to die.”

For more than four hours, Mazur and his team waited, stomping their feet and pacing on the small snow-packed ledge to stay warm.
“We were all pretty quiet,” recalls Brash, who had spent years training to climb Everest. “It was disappointed silence. We knew we weren’t going to get to the summit.”

At that point, no one knew if Hall was going to live. He shivered uncontrollably and his head jerked up and down. He was suffering from snow blindness, common at high altitude on such a bright, clear day. His fingers were so frozen they looked like pale yellow wax.

The team was relieved when two Italian climbers suddenly appeared on the ledge.

“Good morning!” said Mazur. “We’ve got a guy in trouble here! Can you help?” The men kept moving toward the summit. “Sorry, no speak English” was all they said. Mazur would spot them later at base camp, speaking English very well. “All I can say is, God bless their souls.”

It was almost noon when a dozen Sherpas finally arrived to help take Hall down the mountain. With a guide on either side of him, he was able to walk down to high camp. From there, he rode a yak to base, bumping down the mountain on a saddle made of foam sleeping mats.

It took Mazur and his team two days to make their way down. As soon as they arrived, they went to visit Hall, who was recuperating in his tent before the 100-mile trip to a hospital in Katmandu.

I hope that after all this, he’s a nice guy, Mazur thought.

He wasn’t disappointed. Although Hall was still groggy and slurring his words, they clearly understood when he said thank you for saving his life.

Hall would need surgery to amputate the tips of six fingers. Still, he knows he’s a lucky man, that he could very well have become the 12th person to die on Everest this year — the deadliest season since the 1996 tragedy. Although his rescue is miraculous, it has sparked a debate about climbers who leave behind the sick and injured in pursuit of Everest’s grand prize.

Even Sir Edmund Hillary, the first to reach Everest’s summit in 1953, chimed in with disgust when he learned that 40 climbers had passed by Britain’s David Sharp.

“People have completely lost sight of what is important,” he told a New Zealand newspaper. “In our expedition, there was never any likelihood whatsoever if one member of the party was incapacitated that we would just leave him to die.”

Mazur doesn’t know whether much can be done to prevent future deaths. The allure of the world’s highest peak is so great, he knows, climbers will continue to gamble everything for a few minutes at the top.

“It’s such a personal challenge — once you’re up there, you feel as though you could do anything,” he says. “Sure, I wish I could have reached the summit again. But there’s no way we could have left Lincoln Hall on that ridge. If we’d done that, the odds are he wouldn’t be alive today. And I would have to live with that for the rest of my life.”

http://www.rd.com/true-stories/survival/hiker-left-for-dead-on-mount-everest/