

TO THE TOP OF DENALI: Walking a tightrope at 20,000 feet

Bend Bulletin Reporter climbs to the
highest point on the continent

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Stunning peak looms large along the entire West Buttress route, including this unidentified peak towering over Camp 2 at 11,200 feet. Hawryluk's team put in four camps over the two-week expedition.

Editor's Note: Since June 17, *The Bulletin* has been chronicling Health & Fitness reporter Markian Hawryluk's trek to the summit of Denali, also known as Mount McKinley, in Alaska. This is his final dispatch, written after his safe return to Bend.

Starting up the knife-edge ridge on the way to our highest camp on Denali on June 28, lead guide Mike Roberts stopped our four-man rope team for a gentle reminder.

“If somebody falls off the ridge,” he said matter-of-factly, “it’s your responsibility to jump off the other side to stop him.”

Roberts was a master at reminding us this trip wasn’t just a walk in the park. The previous night, the last time our entire 10-man group would gather together in a single spot until the summit, he spent a good hour explaining to us how dehydration could lead to frostbite, how to recognize the symptoms of acute mountain sickness or other medical perils of altitude, and how a minor slip could be disastrous.

On that note, he bid us good night and sent us off to dream about lost digits or head-first slides down steep mountain slopes.

Fortunately, exhaustion trumped worry, and we were soon fast asleep.

I came to Denali in mid-June, part of a guided expedition to climb the highest peak in North America. At 20,320 feet, it was the highest peak I’ve ever attempted. It would also turn out to be the toughest.

We had already put in 10 days of hard work, ferrying loads of food, fuel and gear up the mountain to be in position for a summit push. Now we had only three days of real climbing left to get to the summit and back. And we were probably due for some bad weather.

The next morning, we packed up camp and climbed the slopes outside of Camp 3 at 14,200 feet. The top of the 2,000-foot slope was protected by fixed lines — ropes secured to the mountain with long stakes pounded into the snow. We attached to ropes with a mechanical device known as an ascender that can be moved up the rope freely but locks down if weighted in the opposite direction.

The slope was about 50 degrees and I could feel the weight of my pack in my calves with every step. The key was developing a rhythm. I began the Fixed Rope Foxtrot, a four-step dance up the ropes. On beat one, I slide my ascender up the rope with my left hand; beat two, left foot forward. Beat three, I plant my ice axe ahead of me with my right hand; beat four, right foot forward. The dance was interrupted every time someone on our rope team — we were tied together with a separate rope for safety — came to one of the snow stakes securing the lines to the mountain. He’d have to lean over, unclip the ascender from the rope and reattach it above the anchor.

It became a welcome respite from the exertion of moving up the lines.

We had done the same route two days earlier to stash a load of supplies on the ridge. The extra two days of acclimatization at Camp 3, however, made the second trip up the lines seem much easier.

The ridge itself was spectacular. At times it narrowed to only a foot or 2 across, with steep drop-offs on both sides. It’s what climbers call exposure, probably because it feels as if your butt is hanging out, exposed for the world

to see.

I was at the end of the rope, a position I generally chose because I find it the most challenging spot on the team. While you don't have to worry about any rope or teammates behind you, you're also at the mercy of the climbers in front of you. You can't go any faster or slower than the entire rope team. But when the climber at the front of the rope crests the top of a hill and reaches flat ground or a downslope, he has a tendency to speed up. The last person on the rope, however, may still be on the steep portion and finds himself sprinting up the slope to keep up. The longer the rope, the greater the effect. And I was the last guy on the longest of our three rope teams. In the thin air of nearly 17,000 feet, it was like doing wind-sprints uphill with your mouth taped shut. (I'd get my revenge on the hike out, when we reversed order; I set the pace coming downhill.)

Making camp

When we finally reached Camp 4, I was exhausted. Fortunately, our luck with weather and campsites continued. Being one of the last expeditions on the mountain — nearly 80 percent of Denali climbers registered for 2007 had already completed their climbs — most camps had plenty of open sites. We could usually move into a site another team had recently vacated.

It was only at Camp 3 that we realized how lucky we were to be squatters for most of the trip. We arrived at that camp to a full house after several hours of climbing in stiff winds with heavy loads. Although there were spots available, none were in turn-key condition. We had to dig out tent platforms to try to get a level sleeping surface. A kitchen area had to be dug out for our tepee-style kitchen tent. And all the areas had to be protected with four-foot-high snow walls.

Unused to the altitude, it took only three shovels of snow to leave us winded. Standing up too fast from a bent-over position created a head rush that left us dizzy.

Snow wall construction is an art unto itself. We used specially made snow saws to cut blocks 1 foot by 1 foot wide by 3 feet long. The blocks were then positioned in place in an igloo-style wall, trimmed so they would fit evenly together.

Our first attempt at a snow wall was a shoddy affair. The blocks were too small and uneven, there were gaps where wind and snow could batter our tents all night. With a little constructive criticism from our guides, we regrouped and started over. This time everyone in our group seemed to find his own talent. Some cut blocks from the quarry, others shuttled them to the wall. I settled in as chief architect, shaping the blocks so they would fit tightly together. It took the rest of the day for us to get solid walls up around

the tents and kitchen.

But at the 17,200-foot Camp 4, we moved right into existing walls, staking claim to the best sites quickly when we saw other climbers hot on our heels. To lighten our loads, we didn't carry the kitchen tent up to Camp 4. The guides cooked meals in their huge airplane hangar of a tent. Eventually they took to delivering the meals to our tents: breakfast in bed on the top of the continent.

The daily forecast

Normally, teams take a rest day at Camp 4, but weather on Denali is unpredictable, and it's often better to take a bird in hand. We slept late on June 29, our first day at the camp while our guides carefully watched the weather. Forecasting in the mountains is an acquired skill. Our guides had years of experience on Denali, and it was in reading the winds and conditions that they separated themselves from the average climber.

As other teams geared up to go, we waited for the word from our guides. Roberts, a guide from New Zealand on loan to the American Alpine Institute for this climb, had summited Denali multiple times and was fresh off two summits of Mount Everest earlier this year. He spoke with a smattering of Kiwi phrases like "hold fire" or "corkers" that often stopped us in our tracks, unsure of what he wanted us to do. He had a unique way of classifying degrees of boiling, from a "bottom boil" to a "top boil" or to the rare "full body boil."

The terminology created a tense moment when an attractive female mountain guide from another team came by for a hot drink, and one of our team members had an unfortunate pause before saying "boil" and ended up referring to the guide's "full body." But then none of us really survived that visit with our dignity intact. You've never seen 10 men act so silly as when they see a woman for the first time in two weeks.

Aidan Loehr, the other lead guide, was a Denali veteran himself. A former Marine and an Alaskan bush pilot, he had long blonde hair that reminded us of Fabio, especially when he pulled out the butter. I'm still having nightmares about the bagels he fried up for us almost every morning on the trip.

Loehr had once been photographed by a Bulletin reporter climbing at Smith Rock, his long pony tail flapping in the wind as he inched his way up the rock face.

"I think he was a little disappointed when I got down," Loehr told me. "I think he thought I was a girl."

Our third guide, Portland-native Forest McBrien, kept us entertained with his eclectic humor and eating habits. One day he piled tuna, cream cheese,

mustard, grape jelly and probably a number of other condiments I've now forgotten onto a pita and ate it. He also experimented with drinking grape jelly diluted with hot water.

"It tastes just like warm Welch's grape juice," he told us.

McBrian and I truly bonded when I gave him a bandana I had bought for the trip but found myself not using. He had always wanted a green bandana, he told me when I mentioned I had one in my pack. But he wondered whether it was a Kelly green or an army green. "It's a forest green," I told him.

As the junior guide on the trip, McBrian found himself in the middle of weather debates every morning. It was up to the lead guides to make the call. Every morning Roberts and Loehr would debate the forecast from either side of him in the tent as he hoped for extra sleep.

Our first morning at Camp 4, the weather debate continued. We had a long, rising traverse across a bowl outside of the camp to Denali Pass where winds were often too fierce for safe passage. The guides were watching the pass carefully, reading the winds by the snow drifting off the pass. By noon they were convinced the weather was going to stabilize, and they gave the word. We were going for the summit.

The summit push

The team knew that we might move on short notice, and most of us had our gear ready and waiting. Within an hour we were roped up and heading out. The traverse was steep and again we relied on snow stakes pounded into the snow along the way. We clipped our climbing rope into those stakes, but there was no guarantee the stakes would hold if our entire team was pulled off our feet by a bad fall.

Our rope team was the first of three to make it across to Denali Pass. At every break, the routine was the same. We'd pull on a parka to keep warm, apply sunscreen, eat and drink. Our team had completed our task well before the second rope team arrived.

One of the climbers on the team — I'll spare him the ignominy of naming him — was struggling to keep up. When Loehr arrived at Denali Pass at the front of his rope, he immediately went to Roberts to discuss the climber's fate. He couldn't continue to the summit at this pace, and he would likely slow as the climbing got tougher. They would give him two options: proceed alone with Loehr as the rest of us continued on two rope teams, or turn around.

Frustration got the better of the climber as the guides confronted him. He became defensive, even combative as he saw his chance at the summit slip away.

As I listened to his protestations, I knew it could just as easily have been any one of us. He was tired, perhaps not in the best shape for climbing Denali. Nonetheless, he had probably spent months preparing for the climb and had put in two weeks of hard work to be in this position. He had paid a lot of money for the trip, the flight and his gear to be here.

On the other hand, allowing him to continue on our rope teams could put our entire team's chance at the summit in jeopardy. And worse, if he didn't have the strength to return to Camp 4, we could be stuck out in the open in uncertain conditions.

The guides tried to reason with him, but he would have none of it. Eventually his attitude sealed his fate. The guides weren't willing to continue upward with him. He would have to return with Loehr to Camp 4. In a classy move, he offered his thermos of hot water to the group. No one accepted the offer.

Sobered by the possibility of failure, we quietly regrouped, combining the second and third rope teams into a single unit, and continued toward the summit. We had already gained a third of the 3,000 vertical feet to the summit, and the second thousand feet went just as quickly.

At 19,000 feet, we had two major obstacles remaining, the 1,000-foot-high Pig Hill and the summit ridge. Looking up at the hill, we could see an ant-line of climbers zig-zagging their way toward the ridge. We followed along, breathing heavily in the thin air.

Midway through, a group of three climbers was descending directly down Pig Hill after a successful summit. Suddenly one of them lost his footing and began sliding down the hill. He pulled the second climber off her feet as well. Only the guide at the end of the rope stopped the fall.

Tragedy averted, we continued up Pig Hill. On the top of the hill, at nearly 20,000 feet, we finally knew we would summit. Although dark clouds were building down below, we were above the fray and there seemed little to stand in our way.

The final ridge on Denali is also a tightrope walk. And with other teams on the mountain, there would be some careful maneuvering in tight spaces.

At 9:45 p.m. on June 29, almost nine hours after departing Camp 4, after 12 days on the mountain, I finally stepped onto the summit. "You're a strong climber," Roberts told me as he shook my hand on the summit. It was one of the best compliments I'd ever received.

I had imagined the summit would open up to spectacular views on the Alaska Range. I've heard you can even see the curvature of the Earth from that vantage point. But the day was overcast, and we flirted with white-out conditions as we took our summit photographs.

A team of older Japanese climbers was leaving the summit just as we

arrived. They had camped right beside us and left three hours before we had. They were moving slowly.

As we prepared to descend, a group of three climbers reached the summit and one promptly announced he had set a new world's record for climbing the Seven Summits in the shortest amount of time, 156 days.

I offered my congratulations on their accomplishment, but it rubbed me the wrong way. For me, climbing is not about speed records; perhaps that's the lament of a slow climber. Mountaineering is about savoring the moments, enjoying the scenery, smelling the roses, if you will. But then, I'm also a firm believer that everyone should climb for his or her own reason and in his or her own style. If they feel the need for speed, more power to them. We packed up and let them enjoy their summit.

Many happy returns

I had read too many accounts of mountaineering accidents to relax now. Most fatalities happen on the descent, when climbers are tired and lack mental focus. I reminded the team, this is where we need to pay attention most.

We came back down the ridge, passing the Japanese team at the top of Pig Hill. We descended the slope carefully, making sure of every step. With the summit no longer looming as a carrot in front of us, the descent seemed much longer. We took a break at Denali Pass, just before the deadliest section of route, the traverse back to Camp 4.

The three-man world record team caught up to us as we were gathering ourselves for the final section. Since smaller teams generally move more quickly — and since they were speed demons — we let them go ahead of us on the traverse. That turned out to be a mistake.

A third of the way across, they realized their rope was not long enough to span the sections between the snow stakes along the route. They stopped to re-tie their rope, leaving us waiting behind them. Eventually, our gripes prompted them to move off the route as they fiddled with their rope, and we continued past them. I suggested docking two days off their world record time for poor technique.

It was nearly 2 a.m. by the time we got back to Camp 4. The final 100 yards to our tents was uphill. Thirteen hours of moving, despite eating high-calorie snacks along the way, left me running on empty. It took every last ounce of energy — and a few dry heaves — to get up the slope.

Loehr came down to meet us and walked me the final steps to my tent. I removed my crampons (steel spikes attached to boots for traction) and my harness and crawled into the tent. Loehr brought me a thermos of hot water

and some instant soup. By the time he returned with a water bottle 15 minutes later, I was asleep.

The challenge of Denali

Denali wasn't my life's dream or even the trip of a lifetime: just another in a long line of summits for me. It was a logical next step as well as a stepping stone to other larger or more challenging peaks. But it was the toughest climb I'd ever done.

The West Buttress route we took, the easiest and most popular route on the mountain, is not technically difficult. There is no obstacle on the route — save altitude — that couldn't be found on Mount Hood or plenty of other of mountains in the Cascades.

It's the length of the route that makes it challenging. Realistically, it takes a minimum of two weeks to snake your way from the landing strip at 7,800 feet to the 20,320-foot summit and back.

Factoring in for bad weather and rest days, most parties allocate a full 21 days for the climb. But that also means carrying food and fuel to last for three weeks. Add tents, gear and personal items, and you're carrying more than 100 pounds per person in the initial days of the climb.

We split those loads among our backpacks and plastic sleds dragged behind us on the flatter parts of the route. When the route got steeper, we'd carry half a load a time. That meant three days of work to move to the next camp. We'd carry half the load about three-quarters of the way to the next camp the first day, carry the rest of the gear up the next day, then return for the gear we stashed midway on the third.

That not only broke up our loads but ensured we'd spend at least three days getting used to the higher altitude, and corresponding lower supply of oxygen, at each camp.

I felt the challenge of Denali was not so much in the climbing as in being able to bounce back day after day, and log yet another day of hard work.

Frankly, our team got off easy. Denali is notorious for throwing bad weather — cold, wind and snow — at climbers without mercy. The mountain was particularly kind to us. We had only one day when we didn't continue upward due to weather. We summited in 12 days and were off the mountain in 15.

Teams that arrived on Denali only a week before had no such luck. Many were stuck at Camp 4 waiting for a weather window that never came. They departed without even trying for the top. In contrast, we had good conditions for a summit bid the day after we arrived at Camp 4. As we descended the next day, weather up high had turned once again.

We also benefited from being one of the last expeditions on the mountain. Previous expeditions led by our guides left us a supply of food and fuel high on the mountain, lightening our loads lower down.

We returned to Camp 3 at 14,200 feet the day after summiting. As we took a rest day before a long march out, we received word that four of the 10 Japanese climbers we had seen at the summit didn't make it back to Camp 4. They had to spend the night out in the open and were lucky the weather wasn't much worse. One came down with a case of snow blindness. Another developed pulmonary edema, a leakage of fluids into the lungs that without treatment and descent can be fatal.

Before we left the camp that night, we saw him being led around Camp 3 by two National Park Service rangers. One led the way, the other trailed behind carrying the climber's oxygen bottle. He was lucky help was nearby.

That night we packed up our gear for the last time and made the 12-mile trek back to the landing strip through the night. Of all the mountains I've climbed, all the beautiful ridges and inspiring summits, the trip out was one of the most memorable of my life. Perhaps it was the euphoria of getting more and more oxygen with every step, but the scenery in the perpetual dusk of the Alaskan midsummer night was stunning. It was as pleasurable a walk as I could ever remember.

We arrived at the landing strip at 5 a.m. on July 2, dug up some beer, chips and salsa we had left there at the start of our trip and celebrated our good fortune. Within an hour we had pulled out our sleeping bags and napped away the time till planes could land and whisk us away to civilization: showers, burgers and beer.

We started eating dinner about 5:30 that night. I haven't stopped since.

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