

Experience is Everything

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What does it take to climb the toughest endurance mountain in the continental United States with 23 other dentists in order to raise money for charity? This past summer I was about to find out.

A picture in a dental newsletter of dentists on top of a mountain piqued my curiosity. What were they doing there? My wife, Jill and I have taken our last three summer vacations revolving around hiking mountains-Telluride,

I called the number in the article and spoke to Danny Bobrow of the American Dental Company who organized the three climbs to Mount Whitney in 1998. His love for climbing mountains and connection to dentistry and fund raising led him to start a tax-exempt company called Dentists Climb for a Cause. His goal was to tie together climbing, dental teamwork and fundraising for their sponsor charity Operation Smile. Immediately, Danny was interested in qualifying me for their next climb in Seattle, Washington at Mount Rainier. How much do you weigh? What is your normal exercise routine? Do you lift weights? Have you ever climbed before? All I did was ask about the article and I found myself trying to sell him on the idea that I might be available for the next climb. However, one of his goals was already met as I first discovered the wonderful work of Operation Smile. It is a group of physicians and dentists who surgically repair facial deformities such as cleft palates and lips both in this country and abroad.

Soon thereafter, I was sent an equipment list of mandatory and optional items, and instructions on where to rent them. Unfortunately, all of the items couldn't be rented at the same location. Inside the National Park, we were able to rent the heavy equipment at Paradise Lodge, where RMI, or Rainier Mountaineering, Inc. is located. I never heard of crampons, ice axe, leg gaiters, headlamp, overmitts, glacier glasses, or capilene underwear. Jill and I never needed any of this equipment. It all seemed very foreign to me living in Southern Florida. I decided to only purchase a regulation type 5,000 cu. in. backpack for my training regimen. Danny suggested that I work up to walking on a treadmill at a 15% grade at 2mph for at least one hour. I also worked with a weight trainer for more specific leg and back exercises. I needed to maintain a good aerobic base with running, and using various aerobic machines.

As part of my commitment, I agreed to raise a minimum of \$3,000 to Dentists Climb for a Cause. I had help from Danny who has experience in this area. It was surprising that with a focused effort, the money raised itself. Danny arranged for press releases in the local papers and television, and I had a form in my office with posters explaining what my goals were and how to contribute. Friends, family, and colleagues naturally contributed the bulk of the donations. Everyone wanted to see my success-which was the safe return of my son and myself regardless of my attempt to summit. In promoting this trip, I was at the same time promoting Operation Smile. On the last day at work my staff threw me a party. As I walked into the office I was shocked to hear a chorus of "He'll be coming around the Mountain". They surprised me with a very generous contribution, cake and balloons.

Before we left for the airport at 5am, my wife's parting words were "be careful and don't take unnecessary chances."

As we flew into Seattle we were able to see Mount Rainier for the very first time. Visibility was perfect, and this giant mountain was alone clear above the clouds. When we arrived at the first rental store just outside the Park for our apparel, two large garbage bags surprised us with gear. How would we manage to stuff everything into the backpack? We pulled into the parking lot at Paradise Lodge at 5,000 ft and noticed a climber that just came down. Did you summit, I asked. He looked exhausted and grunted yes.

That night we informally met the climbing group. I was shocked to discover that at age 45 I was in the middle of the pack. There were two men who were 60, and many in their 50s. We mingled and got briefed on what to expect for the next day. Before we are allowed to attempt to summit, we must pass Climbing School. This day starts with renting our heavy equipment, and familiarizing ourselves with its use. Are these boots supposed to fit so loosely? How do I secure my ice axe and crampons (spikes or cleats that attach to the bottom of special snow/hiking boots) to my pack? How much food and water do I need? How should we dress for today's weather? Our questions are answered, and we embark on a brisk hike with a "light 25 pound pack" up the mountain for over an hour without a break. Wait a minute. This isn't the way Jill and I are used to hiking. What's the rush? Where's my water break? I quickly adjusted to the idea that this was going to be much more than I had anticipated. Apparently, the guides use this as a barometer to test our endurance for the next two days. As we are told to keep up the pace, the guides are talking like boot camp sergeants. "Your mommas can't help you."

Will I be able to handle this? Will Erick? Did he have enough time to adequately train? After a relatively quick stop to eat and drink, we are instructed to put on our leg gaiters, strap in our crampons, put on glove liners and glacier glasses, and walk to the beautiful snow fields with our ice axes. I fumble with trying to maneuver my pack with all the straps and compartments and attempt to follow instructions. At the same time, Erick is depending on me to help him through this. I felt like the blind leading the blind. It reminded me of my first day of dental school pre-clinical when I was always two minutes behind everyone else. We practiced walking up and down a 20%-40% grade of snow, rest-stepping, pressure breathing, switching hands with our ice axe on switchbacks, and self arrest with our ice axe on command in case we fell down the mountain. It was all very new to me, and physically and mentally demanding. My hands and toes are cold, and already I am starting to raise a blister on my left foot. We break for our next instructions for rope teams.

The second day of the hike is over glaciers with crevasses. If one person should fall, the other three or four rope team members should be able to save his life. We ended the day with another brisk walk down the mountain. Although everyone passed, we all had concerns for the next two days. Feeling a little insecure, I phoned my wife with my concerns. Normally very cautious, she encouraged and motivated me to keep my focus with a positive

Dentists Climb for a Cause

Gore-Tex overmitts that make it difficult to maneuver and carry the ice axe. Hang in there, I tell myself, your toes and fingers will warm up. Hang in there. Finally, the feet are more comfortable, but my hands are not. I can not stop; I must wait for the next rest stop to make any adjustments.

At our first stop, there is one person on the fifth team that had enough. The guides ask who is the best person on our team. Jimmy and I point to Danny. Danny gets little to no rest, as he ties into the third team, and Jimmy and I wait for our new teammates. Our guide escorts this sole member of our climbing team back to Muir, loans me his leather gloves, and we continue with our new guide Brenda. Her diminutive size has me wonder whether or not she could handle my weight should I accidentally fall into a crevasse.

We are now on to disappointment cleaver, so named since many people turn back at this point. A cleaver is the part of rock that the glacier surrounds. I mentally prepare myself for the most difficult leg of the journey. Rest-step, breathe. Rest-step, breathe. The nighttime sky is magnificent, but I can't fully appreciate it due to my focus at my feet. We must keep the same pace in order for the rope to be adequately stretched out. As we slow down, I realize that the team ahead of us is negotiating a steep incline. Finally, we reach the goal, and open our packs, and take out the "Alaska"-type down parka to retain our body heat.

I tell Brenda that I need a blue bag. She unties me from the team, and instructs me on what to do. Wanting to be sure, I asked her... "Shut up and listen," she says before I can even get a question out. No offense was taken for there was no extra time. I bagged my waste and twisted the first bag, placed it in bag number two and twisted it, and then placed that in bag number three, twisted, tied and carried it in my pack. I was very proud of myself! Brenda turns to me and says, Alan, you're doing well, but can you make it further, are you sure you can go on? I tell her I'm feeling fine. But she persists; I don't want you telling me in 15 minutes that you had enough, which would piss me off. If we go on, you have to go all the way. I wasn't sure if she said this to the others when I was indisposed, but it sure was intimidating. She needed to give me a gut check for this next stretch. We lost three more team members, and Danny rejoined our rope team again.

It was the most beautiful part of the entire journey. I felt like we were in Antarctica. The sun was starting to peak through, and the ice formations, crevasses, and ice bridges were awesome. In some parts we needed to time our steps to leap over some crevasses. Still focused on survival, I couldn't fully appreciate the beauty, or take pictures comfortably. As the air was getting thinner, my pack was getting much heavier. My inexperience in packing too much gear was weighing me down. The inclines were getting very steep, and the weather turned bitter cold and breezy with snow. At times I lost my balance to the wind. I made it to the next rest stop, but was completely out of breath. I was in oxygen debt. I quickly put on my parka, and took a drink of water. Even though it was in a special plastic to resist the cold, the water was half frozen. My appetite was gone. I was spent.

I asked Danny who was behind me how he felt and he said fine. I told him I needed a little help. I actually wondered if I were a liability to teammates or myself. He agreed to take some of my

excess food, which lightened my load and lifted my spirits. Resting was not permitted for long so that we can maintain our heat and keep our hearts in a target zone. Too much resting at any time will not let the body start up again. I was reassured that this final leg to the summit was the shortest of the trip, but as I was soon to discover, the steepest incline.

There were times as I was stepping that I had to close my eyes to maintain my focus. The snow was blowing, and I was getting light-headed. We approach the volcanic crater-like summit, and there is little time to celebrate. Survival is paramount. We snap some pictures, eat a candy bar, and get the hell out of there. Conditions were not conducive to the normal 45-minute rest. As we get ready to descend, Brenda turns to me and says, Alan, you took this food up here, and you bring it back!

There were two rests left before I see my son. With little rest on top, I didn't fully recover. We make it down to the next stop, and I am now hyperventilating. We are told that we earned an extra long stop, and I lie down on my pack. Brenda realizes that I am near my limits and volunteers to help with my extra food. She feeds me her own cookies, and tells me to place my head on her leg. Her nurturing recharged my batteries. It wasn't long until I saw Erick who greeted me with a big smile and kiss proud of what his dad safely accomplished. It was a tremendous high for me to share this with him at that very moment. He would be the only person back home who would have any idea what it was really like. Still, there was no time to celebrate. We were in another fire-drill mode. We clean up the campsite, re-pack our gear, and take our garbage with us.

My right foot has two major blisters. Fortunately, someone has some more moleskin that enables me to push on. We pack our crampons, and go down the mountain with only two more rests until Paradise. It then occurs to me that we have to boot ski down. I don't ski, especially with a heavy pack. I try walking, but fall on my rear more times than I care to remember. The guide says after many unsuccessful attempts of this, put on your Gore-Tex shell pants, hold on to these ski poles, and I'll pull you down. Now I'm moving. I reasoned that I would rather have a sore rump than a broken or sprained leg.

We approach Paradise, and a sense of accomplishment permeates my soul. I reflect back on what this meant to me, and what I learned from this experience. Our bodies are the most incredible machines. They can respond to the most adverse conditions as long as the mind will allow it. To accomplish this, one must have faith both in oneself and in a higher power. I thank God for my safe return to my family.

Goals are a wonderful barometer to set our clocks. It was fun to get into the best shape of my life since I was young. It helped me regain that feeling of years gone by. But our goals were not individual, for Erick and I were part of a larger community of dentists who were looking out for each other, and in turn we were all part of a greater community raising money and awareness for Operation Smile. But my greatest happiness came from my son's valiant efforts. I really feel he got so much more out of this experience than anyone else. His maturity interacting with the rest of the team made me very proud of him. Most of what he knows is through studying books, but this taught him more than he could have learned by reading: experience is everything.

Dentists Climb for a Cause

mental attitude. That night we had a banquet and started to gel as a climbing team. We all realized that our very survival could hinge on the abilities of the person next to us.

That night we loaded our packs: sleeping bag on the bottom, overmitts, and Gore-Tex top and bottom shells next, followed by fleece pants and longjohns depending on weather conditions. How much food should I bring? Even after talking to the other guys, I still wasn't sure what to bring, how to package it, or where to put it in my pack. Experience would soon reveal my mistakes.

We retire early for the evening and awaken for an early breakfast in order to give our system enough time to digest the food without cramping. Having been warned to hydrate, we drink as much water as possible and utilize the extra time for bathroom breaks. We check out of our room and place our other belongings in the trunk of the car. For the first time we lift the fully loaded backpack and cannot believe how heavy it is. We trained with a 35-pound weight, and this had to be 50 pounds. It was only later that we discovered that we had too much food and water.

We are told that there are four rest stops to Camp Muir, which is at a 10,000-ft. elevation. In addition, the minimal amount of water recommended is 2 quarts, or ½ quart per rest stop. The rule is eat whatever you like, but eating at every stop is mandatory. As we take our third and final bathroom break 10 minutes before departure, we are finally ready. Breathe, breathe, I keep reminding myself. The guides tell us that a successful summit is 45% proper breathing and 45% rest-stepping. Deep breathing is most important before a heavy exertion to avoid going into oxygen debt. We make it to the first rest stop, which was mostly over snow-less ground. Snowfields and glaciers would await us after this initial break.

The second leg was more eventful. I was trudging along one step at a time, focused at the foot print ahead of me, breathing and stepping, stepping and breathing waiting for the next rest stop. About how much longer, I would ask. The answer was always the same, not much. Along the way, we heard two thunderous noises that turned out to be avalanche slides. Fortunately, we were far away enough to feel safe, but close enough to appreciate the power, force, and beauty. As soon as I had the base camp in my sight, I knew I would be fine. One step at a time, one rest stop at a time, one day at a time. In fact, I was surprised how well I felt.

There was no time to relax, no time to celebrate. Each day was at least twice as strenuous and difficult as the next. We unload our packs, repack, re-organize, and re-energize for tomorrow. After a briefing session for the next leg of our journey, we prepare for a

total of six rest stops round trip from base camp. Three before the summit, the summit, and two on the way back. We are instructed on the use of the avalanche detectors, helmets, headlamps, and the harnesses, which secure the ropes to our bodies. Conditions are extremely basic at Muir. The room is small, but sleeps 24. There are three rows of shelves with bedrolls that we sleep on. There is no electricity, but we do have access to hot water and an outhouse. To protect the water supply, no peeing is allowed anywhere except the outhouse.

We are to be awakened at 1AM to eat breakfast and start our trek. The snow is harder, and we need the time to make it to the top and be back at Paradise before the rental shop closes at 5PM. In order to be ready in the middle of the night, we need to pre-plan and be totally organized, and in bed by 6:30. Sleeping is not easy

with so many people in close quarters. Outside the night-time sky was absolutely magical, as the Milky Way was easily visible.

Wake-up comes just as we are about to fall asleep, and we are ready to go. Another fire drill is in the works. We dress warmly for the day as we hit bad weather. Finally, I am not behind, and I can relax as others are getting ready. Not so fast, I hit the bathroom for a bowel movement. We are warned that excrement on the mountain needs to be carried in our packs in three plastic bags. How do I do it with this harness on, I wonder. I somehow manage, but have problems fixing my pants. Unfortunately I was hot during the night, took them off, and put them back on inside out. After a minor panic attack, I undo the three straps to the harness, unzip the pants legs to the waist, step out of the pants with my boots and crampons still on, and re-strap my harness-making

sure it is locked. Already I am out of breath, but my rope team is ready to go. I leave Erick in bed and kiss him goodbye hoping that I see him unscathed.

I felt lucky to have Danny on our team, for he is an experienced climber. Jimmy from Brooklyn looked to be in great shape, and our guide was the eldest and presumably the most mature of the group. We are the fourth of five rope teams to depart. There is a trail of lights ahead of us that catches my peripheral vision since my eyes are fixed on the ground in front of me. It is cold, but as soon as we start walking, our bodies warm up. I see a light spray of rain in front of me in the light from my headlamp and suddenly realize that my sweat combined with heavy breathing is the source of that water.

My feet and fingers are cold, but I continue to wiggle them. I foolishly had thin glove liners under thicker glove liners. I brought the wrong gloves and may be forced to put on the

