

Into the Death Zone

A Mount Everest Adventure

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It was late April 2010, and 13-year-old Jordan Romero was halfway to the top of Mount Everest, the world’s tallest mountain. Jordan, his father, and a team of climbers were just beginning a journey that could, if everything went right, lead them to the highest point on Earth.

So far, so good, Jordan thought. They had already climbed to 23,000 feet-higher than some jets fly. He knew, though, that trouble—and death—could come without warning. Violent snowstorms could trap them. They could be injured at any time. Or they could simply become too weak to continue. Altitude sickness, a serious and sometimes fatal condition caused by the lack of oxygen at extreme heights, posed another danger.

But Jordan had been preparing for this expedition for months. So he kept placing one boot in front of the other. That, Jordan knew, is how a person makes it to the top of any mountain.

Suddenly, a deep crunching noise sounded behind them. Jordan turned and saw a heart-stopping sight. Enormous chunks of ice were tumbling down the slope. The ground beneath him and his dad gave way. He was knocked off his feet and began sliding down the mountain. It was an avalanche!

Was this trip turning into a deadly disaster?

Unmerciful Mountain

Climbing teams began exploring Mount Everest in the 1920s. It was not until 1953, however, that two men stepped onto the snowy summit and returned to tell about it. Sir Edmund Hillary, from New Zealand, and Tenzing Norgay, from Nepal, pioneered a route up from the mountain’s south side. Their feat is still considered one of the great accomplishments of human exploration.

At first, only expert mountaineers dared to follow in Hillary’s and Norgay’s footsteps. By 1980, though, several companies were offering guides and gear to less-seasoned climbers. For a very high fee, these outfits promised to help adventurers try to reach the summit. (Today, they charge as much as \$100,000 per climber.)

Year after year, the number of attempts grew. Climbers reported being stuck in lines, waiting their turn to stand on the summit. Trash piled up at base camps. Hillary said Everest had become “a circus.” Experts feared it was only a matter of time before a big disaster struck.

Their fears came true in 1996, when a blizzard took dozens of climbers by surprise as they struggled to reach the summit. Eight people suffered agonizing deaths in the thin air, high winds, and freezing temperatures, beyond the reach of any help.

Most climbers who die on Everest remain where they fall, frozen mummies in the cold, dry air. Retrieving them is too difficult and dangerous. To climbers who must pass by them, these corpses are gruesome reminders of the risks of climbing Mount Everest.

Jordan knew all of this. He knew that Everest was, in his own words, a “crazy, tough mountain.” Still, he believed if he prepared carefully and showed proper respect for the challenge, Everest would let him reach its summit.

Dreams of Everest

Jordan’s quest to climb Mount Everest began in a hallway of his California grade school. As a third-grader, he was fascinated by a mural depicting the Seven Summits—the tallest mountains on each of the seven continents. Mount Everest, on the border between Tibet and Nepal in Asia, dwarfed all the others. “My dad picked me up from school and I told him that I wanted to climb them all,” Jordan recalls. “Especially Mount Everest.”

His father, Paul, took his son seriously. As a paramedic, long-distance runner, and mountain climber himself, Paul believed in setting tough goals. He explained to Jordan that this would be more difficult than anything Jordan had ever done.

Jordan soon proved that his idea was more than a daydream. He toughened his body by running and riding his bike. He built his strength by attaching a tire to a chain and dragging it up and down the family’s long driveway. With his family’s help, he organized events to raise money and get donations of climbing gear.

Jordan and his dad and stepmom Karen formed Team Jordan. During the next three years, they climbed five of the Seven Summits. Jordan discovered how right his dad was—climbing these mountains was the most difficult thing he had ever done. Sometimes he broke down in tears

struggling up a mountain. Sometimes he even felt like quitting. But with his family's encouragement and support, he found the will to reach each peak.

In March 2010, Team Jordan flew to Tibet, a region of China. Mount Everest, the tallest mountain of all, was next.

Questions and Criticism

As their Everest attempt approached, Team Jordan gained international attention. Questions about Jordan's age constantly came up. At 13, he was three years younger than the youngest person who had ever reached the summit.

Some critics argued that a 13-year-old lacks the judgment to risk his life this way. Others said the high altitude could damage his growing body and brain. Some even wondered if Jordan's dad was using his son to get attention.

Jordan and his family believed they were the best judges of Jordan's abilities, and they agreed that he was up to the challenge. Jordan believed his quest was making him a stronger, better person. "It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves," Sir Edmund Hillary had said. This was one of Jordan's favorite quotations.

Going for the Summit

Mount Everest is so tall that it must be climbed in stages. Base camps are set up along the route, where climbers can rest and let their bodies adjust to the altitude before climbing to the next camp. Karen, Jordan, and his dad hiked into the first base camp on April 16. They were joined by four Sherpa teammates: Ang Pasang, Lama Dawa, Lama Karma, and Kumar, the talented camp cook. The Sherpa are a mountain people native to the area. Since the first explorations of Everest, they have helped and guided foreign climbing expeditions.

By late April, Team Jordan had climbed as high as 23,000 feet. Their bodies were getting stronger in the high altitude.

Then came the avalanche.

Jordan fell and slid. His crampons, the ice-grabbing spikes strapped to his boots, stabbed his dad in the thighs. But the main flow of ice and snow had missed them. Their nerves were shaken, but they were able to continue.

Not everyone was so lucky. Some distance away, two other climbers had also been caught in the avalanche. One was hurt. The other disappeared into a crevasse—a large crack in the glacier ice. His body was never found.

By mid-May, Team Jordan felt ready to try for the summit. They strapped on their packs, roped themselves together for safety, and began the climb.

This was the big push.

On May 21, they reached 26,000 feet—the “Death Zone.” At that altitude, the air is so thin a person can suffocate in minutes. Like most climbers, Jordan and his teammates used oxygen masks. Even so, they found that climbing in the Death Zone took every ounce of their willpower. They climbed through the night. They had to be on and off the summit in the morning. Afternoons are when the worst storms roll in, and the mountain is most deadly.

As they approached 28,000 feet, Jordan spotted “Green Boots.” He was an Indian climber, Tsewang Paljor, who froze to death in 1996. Now his body and lime-green boots are a landmark on the trail. The sight shook Jordan as he stepped around the corpse. It also reminded him to stay sharp.

The sun rose as Jordan, his dad, and Karen reached the final ridge to the summit. This proved to be the hardest part of the climb. They had been climbing for 14 hours and Jordan felt totally exhausted. The temperature was -30° Fahrenheit. Strong winds beat against them. On either side of Jordan, the mountain plunged thousands of feet. If he slipped, the safety rope might be all that would save him from disappearing forever into the valley below.

A few more breaths, a few more steps. And then, there was nowhere higher to go, nowhere in the whole world. Jordan was looking out on one of the most spectacular views on Earth. The jagged snow-capped peaks of the Himalaya mountains poked through the clouds to the east and west. To the north, the Tibetan plateau stretched for hundreds of miles. Gazing south, Jordan could see the country of India. Jordan hugged his dad, Karen, and the Sherpa crew. They snapped pictures, their faces peeking out from their hoods. Jordan used a satellite phone to call his mom and sister in California.

Jordan had become the youngest person ever to summit Mount Everest. The record mattered less to him, though, than the incredible view and thrilling experience, and the knowledge that he had done what he set out to do—one step at a time.

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