

## Windswept dreams

**L**ong before the May expedition to the Nepalese side of Everest kept the gossip columns abuzz, a group of young South Africans had decided they wanted a crack at Everest. It must have been tough for the team of Alex Harris, Sean Disney, Anton Erasmus, Robin Walshaw, Mark Campbell and Sean Wisedale when the tragedies of the May season brought home the scale of their undertaking. But they stuck to their dream. They would go to the mountain after the monsoon.

The climbing nucleus of the team was Harris, Erasmus and Disney, who were the first South Africans over 7 000m when they summited Russia's 7 134m Pik Lenin a few years ago. Harris in particular has impressed with his hunger for big mountains, where securing a permit is often as tough as climbing the damn thing. Many of us thought they wouldn't get their trip off the ground, especially after the debacle in May. But they did, leaving us with a mixture of admiration and jealousy.

The team had a permit for the Tibetan side. They would follow the legendary George Mallory's route: from the North Col at around 7 000m, the climbers ascend the North Ridge to its junction with the North-East Ridge at 8 350m. A tricky 1.5km, including the First and Second Steps, then separates the climbers from the 8 848m summit.

About 75 percent of the ascents of Everest have been made via the South Col route on the Nepalese side. Everest's two huge southern neighbours, Lhotse and Nuptse, shield the South Col route for a good part, whilst the vast Tibetan face is completely exposed, and the evil jet stream winds rake the mountain even down to the 7 000m North Col.

It wouldn't be easy. In October the days, already less than 12 hours long, get shorter and shorter, and Everest gets very, very cold. Until 1993 only one party had ever completed the North Ridge to the summit during the post-monsoon season. The South Africans, whose average age is around 25, would have no Sherpas to lighten their loads, no oxygen to clear their altitude-muddled minds and warm their chilled bodies.

Back home we were intrigued: oxygenless high altitude mountaineering seems to be undertaken best by climbers in their mid-thirties to forties. Often the painfully slow process of acclimatisation is a bitter pill for youthful climbers to swallow, and so the discipline the team showed in their early days on the mountain was impressive. They were acclimatising well, but the winds were hampering the establishment of a camp high on the North Ridge.

It sounded like a rough season. A frozen and disoriented Czech climber was given shelter and nursed back to safety by the South Africans. Every now and again the team would give radio broadcasts back to South Africa.

For the team to have any real chance at the summit a high camp had to be established around 8 000m. The winds were frustrating their efforts, and they were not spending enough time acclimatising above the North Col. Other expeditions packed up, but the South Africans clung on into October. The team was being worn down, and eventually leader Alex Harris and Anton Erasmus realised that their



From left to right: Walshaw, Harris, Erasmus, Disney and Campbell.

only shot was an alpine-style dash from the North Col to the summit. All the while the jet stream lashed the Ridge.

An alpine style push to the summit is no picnic: more than three kilometres of awkward terrain to the summit, carrying only the bare minimum of equipment. The final two kilometres are above 8 000m, the so-called Death Zone. To pull off such a feat using oxygen would be very impressive indeed, but without oxygen it would require world class alpinism. They probably could have made the summit, but I'm not sure if they would have returned. It must have been a very thoughtful pair of climbers sitting in their tent at the North Col.

The weather made the decision for them. With their tent torn by the wind and crushed by snow, they packed up. They had been on the mountain for two months. Almost 75 years earlier to the day, George Mallory had written of his decision to retreat from the North Col after being "exposed to winds in which no man could live an hour".

Perhaps it was youthful mountain madness to think that they could climb Everest's Tibetan side without oxygen in the post-monsoon. But what is mountaineering? In 1953, a week after Everest had been sieged with oxygen, a young Austrian soloed without oxygen the final four kilometres to Nanga Parbat's untrodden 8 126m summit. History now recognises Hermann Buhl's performance as the greatest feat in Himalayan mountaineering. He described the climb as the finest 40 hours of his life.

No doubt South Africa's two expeditions to Mount Everest in 1996 will be contrasted. But if George Mallory and Hermann Buhl were still around, I think I know with whom they'd want to drink a beer.

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