RUNNER’S HIGH

From Two Oceans and Comrades to Mount Kilimanjaro and Everest, Mandy Ramsden knows no limits.

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Everest. Just saying it stirs the blood and raises both the pulse and the hair on your arms. It also conjures up images of heroic bronzed-muscled and lined-faced, unshaven mountaineers standing knee-deep in snow clutching ice axes and ropes rather like soldiers carry bayonet-fixed rifles.

All of us have seen the famous first summit photograph of Tenzing Norgay holding a flag-bedecked ice axe. We are saddened by Irvine and Mallory’s desperately close and ultimately fatal efforts in the 1920s.
We have chuckled at Hillary's statesmanlike triumphant words in May 1953: 'Well, George, we knocked the bastard off.'

Many of us have read Jon Krakauer's Into Thin Air, the gripping account of the disastrous 1996 climbing season on Everest when 12 climbers died. We have seen the photographs of Beck Weathers's frostbitten face and hands. We know that one can die many times during a marathon, but that you can really die on Everest.

So I was somewhat taken aback when, as MC at a recent event, I was asked to introduce Mandy Ramsden, banking executive, single mother of four, and Everest climber.

Pretty, petite Mandy is the antithesis of the typical mountaineer. On stage she oozes enthusiasm and captivates her audience with her account of her Himalayan adventure, but sitting in my chair I had to keep reminding myself that this is Everest she was talking about, not a hike in a nature reserve or a stroll through Sandton City's finest shops.

On 22 May last year, while thousands of nervous Comrades runners were running their last few kilometres in training for one of the world's toughest ultra-marathons, Ramsden summited Mount Everest, aka Sagarmatha - 'On top of the world'.

KILIMANJARO
It was the culmination of an amazing adventure that started in 2006 with her first serious climb, an ascent of Kilimanjaro. Apart from a solitary London trip, this ex-Zimbabwean had never been overseas and had hardly travelled. 'Kili' was the start of a travelling frenzy for a woman who before this

had not even climbed one of Jouburg's mine dumps. The climbing bug had bitten and there were other mountains to conquer. She viewed the planet's famous mountains as both a challenge and a way to explore the world. In five short years she proceeded to climb each of the seven continents' highest mountains. In 2006 she 'knocked off' Elbrus in Russia and Aconcagua in South America. She followed those ascents with the Carstensz Pyramid in Oceania/Australasia in 2007, Denali (Mount McKinley) in Alaska in 2008 and the Vinson Massif in Antarctica in 2009. And then came Everest.

Her own account of her successful summit is delightful to listen to and read. Mandy kept a detailed and disarmingly candid account of her adventure. How many people would describe the reality of sleeping while wearing an oxygen mask? 'Almost unbelievable volumes of drool pooled against my face and trickled onto my bed,' or admit to making their Sherpas laugh by descending the famous Hillary Step on Everest entirely on their backsides.

STILL A RUNNER
Before becoming a 'Seven Summiteer', Mandy Ramsden was a runner. And she still is. She has two Comrades bronze medals and has run nine Two Oceans marathons. While camping at Everest base camp she admits to being sad on Easter Saturday when, on the other side of the globe, thousands of runners were running Two Oceans. In April she will earn her permanent blue number. But before that she plans to climb Pico Bolivar in Venezuela and Ritacuba Blanco in Colombia 'just for fun'.

This incredibly driven lady will just not relax or rest on her laurels. Once, overcome by guilt and believing that her constant travelling gave her limited quality time with her children, she apologised to them for 'being a bad Mum'. Her daughter, Katy, wrote a letter to her saying it was an honour to be her child.

It was an honour to share the stage, and to introduce this remarkable lady. Her talk was inspiring and motivating and left everyone in the audience determined to pursue their dreams with the same passion.

I am occasionally asked what would tempt me to swap a Comrades winner's medal. I have always replied that only Josia Thugwane's Olympic marathon gold medal might persuade me. Now I have found another worthy achievement. I would gladly trade a Comrades winner's medal to have stood where Mandy Ramsden stood at 7:45 on 22 May 2010.