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TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN TO YOU



His quest to be the first man in the world to summit the highest mountain in each continent and get back to sea level by human power, may sound like an impossible one, but as he completes mountain number four, Noel Hanna is on a high writes Tara Craig...

The last time I met Noel Hanna he had just returned from a successful trip to Mount Everest, the second of the seven mountains he has challenged himself to

summit and return to sea level by human power. A year later, he is two mountains closer to achieving his goal and he's on a roll.

Mountain number four was Mount McKinley in Alaska, North America and by Noel's admission it was one of the toughest challenges yet. "The actual climb to the summit was second to Everest in difficulty but the journey

from base camp to sea level was the toughest yet." During the three weeks spent on Mount McKinley Noel faced freezing temperature, snowstorms and severe food shortages, but it was the death of two fellow climbers that really brought the gravity of his task home. "My expedition party was camped at 17,500 feet waiting for the weather to break so we could continue our climb. From camp we were watching two climbers coming down of the ridge,

straying from the regular course. One hour later we couldn't see them and we knew they had fallen. We set out on a rescue operation and found them 300 meters from our camp, the female climber was already dead and the man died the following morning. The experience had a real impact on a few of the climbers in my group, family men who suddenly questioned if they should really be taking such a serious risk. I wouldn't say I wasn't affected, but it didn't put me off finishing the climb, I am fully aware of the dangers attached to what I do."

“Most of the ground was uncharted territory, even my guides didn't know anyone who had made the trip by foot as climbers are only ever flown in and out of base camp.”

Following this traumatic incident Noel's climbing group, which started off as a party of ten plus two guides, was reduced to three and a guide and time was running out. "The weather was a real problem for us, at one point we had to sit for five days in camp because the conditions were just too bad to travel in and because the trip was taking longer than we expected food became pretty scarce, I was probably eating half the amount of calories I should have been."

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Noel at basecamp

On Saturday 19 May Noel and his team headed for summit but gale force winds impeded the climb and one climber started to get frost bite, so the mission was abandoned.

Not one to give up easily Noel asked another climbing team if he could join them for the final trek to the summit, so while his original expedition party headed back down, Noel persevered to the top, summiting on Sunday 20th May.

A day and a half later he was back at base camp and facing his toughest challenge yet. "I knew that the journey from base camp to sea level was going to be tough," Noel reveals. "Most of the ground was uncharted territory, even my guides didn't know anyone who had made the trip by foot as climbers are only ever flown in and out of base camp.

Visibility was poor and the ground was treacherous, full of deep glacier crevices. The journey took over six days and wasn't without incident as Noel reveals; "One of the guides fell 15-20 feet into a crevice and we had to rescue her, luckily she was fine, if a little shaken. The terrain was terrible, even when the snow started to melt away the bushes and shrubs posed an even tougher problem as they were practically impossible to navigate with skis and a backpack weighing over 70lbs on your back."

Finally the first real road off the mountain came into sight and Noel was greeted by his support van and the smell of frying steak. "God that was an amazing sight," he recalls. "It was great to off load my kits and enjoy a hot meal, even at 3.30 in the morning!" With his plane home to catch later that day, Noel was under pressure to complete the final stage of the

Noel resting at 8,300 ft



challenge, a 110-mile bike ride to sea level. "I was absolutely exhausted, but I knew I had to catch that plane, so it was case of putting the head down and getting on with it."

Back home, enjoying a coffee and cinnamon scone, the freezing mountainside seems a million miles away, but Noel is already planning his next trip. "It's great to be back after a successful trip, but I don't really feel I can celebrate as that climb was only part of the overall challenge. I'm going to continue training at the Burrendale Hotel Health Club and will start putting plans in place for the next trip. It can be hard to relax when you know there's so much ahead."

Since interviewing Noel he has completed his fifth climb, Mount Elbus in Russia with his wife Lynne. Congratulations to them both and best of luck with the final two challenges.