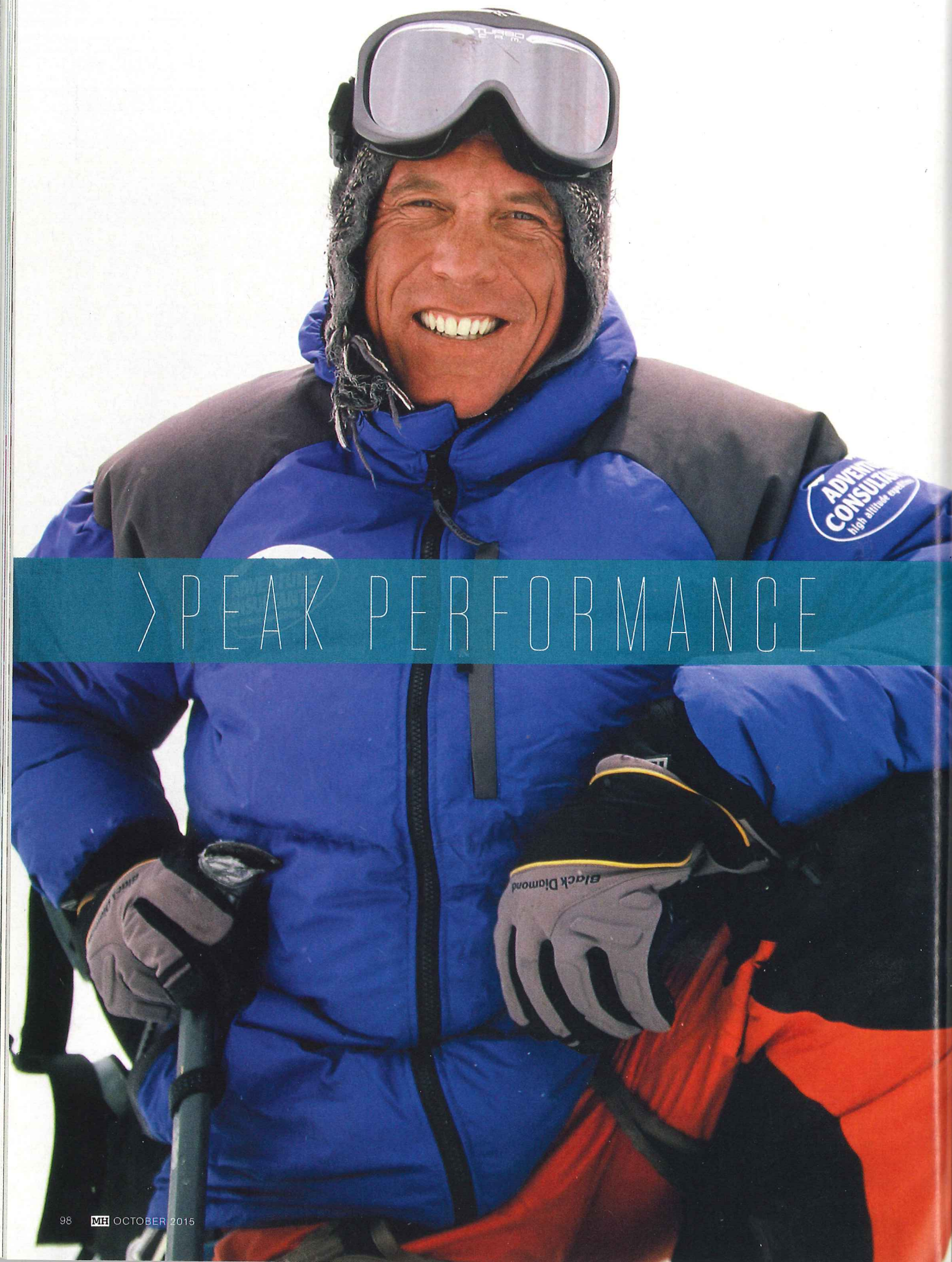


> PEAK PERFORMANCE



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IT'S A RAZOR-THIN LINE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH ON EVEREST. AFTER FACING HIS OWN TRAGEDY ON THE MOUNTAIN, **GUY COTTER** EMERGED A MORE CAPABLE MAN. USE HIS LESSONS TO SCALE YOUR OWN HEIGHTS BY **AARON SCOTT**



BOB COTTER HAS ALWAYS BEEN DRAWN TO THE HIGH POINTS ON EARTH.

As a boy growing up in Christchurch, he used to catch the rail car up to Arthur's Pass and spend his weekends amid the stone peaks of New Zealand's Southern Alps. At the age of 14, he completed a 10-day traverse of the Alps from

Arthur's Pass to Mt Cook, 240

kilometres to the south. Those 10 days of hard labour in snow and ice fired his imagination. He promptly quit school, left home and moved to the hamlet of Mt Cook where he honed his mountaineering skills on the treacherous slopes of New Zealand's highest peak.

Within a decade, Cotter was working for Adventure Consultants, a high-altitude guiding company owned by his childhood friend Rob Hall. In 1992, the two men guided the first-ever commercial expedition to the summit of Everest. In an era when the ratio of deaths to successful summits on Everest stood at 1:4, guiding a group of amateurs to the highest point on Earth was a stunning success.

Cotter smiles as he recalls these triumphs. A staunch and undemonstrative character, his hair now greying, his cheeks chiselled by decades of high-altitude suffering, it's a rare show of emotion.

For Cotter, mountains have always distilled life down to its essence. In a world of petty rules and regulations - of fences and stop signs, of parking meters and tax returns - mountains are places of unfettered freedom. "I love how tangible, how real things are in the mountains," he says, his huge, hard hands wrapped around an early morning long black in a Christchurch cafe surrounded by the mighty cranes and pounding drills of a city rebuilding. "In many ways, we live in a false world these days, so to actually do something that is real and meaningful is very empowering. The mountains teach you what's really important and what isn't; you make decisions that have a direct impact on whether you live or die. It's very, very real."

The question is, what do you do when the wrong decisions are made? How do you react when things turn dark? And how do you claw your way back to the top when you're haunted by a fall from the greatest heights of all?

>TURN SHIT INTO SUGAR

Four years after that glorious 1992 expedition to the summit of Everest with Hall, Cotter witnessed an event so horrific it has gone down in mountaineering history simply as the '96 Disaster. Documented by Jon Krakauer in his classic book *Into Thin Air*, and stunningly portrayed in the new film *EVEREST* (Cotter's character is played by Sam Worthington; the film will be released on September 17), this tragedy saw a collection of climbers stranded in Everest's "death zone" above 8000 metres while a shock blizzard engulfed the mountain. By the time the winds eased and the clouds lifted, eight climbers were dead.

As the disaster unfolded, Cotter was leading another expedition up the 7161m shard of Pumori, just 8km to the west of Everest. He was at Pumori base camp as Hall's Adventure Consultants' expedition approached Everest's summit; he could see the tiny dots labouring along the summit ridge. He radioed in his congratulations to his mate, then set about breaking camp. Two hours later, word came through that Hall was still on the summit. The news hit Cotter like a fist. Even on a good day, a climber would spend no more than half an hour on the summit before retreating back down the mountain. And this was no good day - to the south Cotter could see a nasty cold front brewing. "It was dark, it was menacing, and it was moving our way very, very quickly," he recalls.

Cotter laced on his boots and barrelled the 8km to Everest base camp. By the time he arrived, the skies were black and merciless winds were lashing the tents with snow and ice. He radioed up to Hall. His friend was still on the south summit, deep in the "death zone", desperately trying to get his stricken clients down. As the night passed, the two stayed in radio contact. Cotter pleaded with Hall to start climbing down. Hall told him that his oxygen mask was choked with ice, that his frostbitten hands wouldn't allow him to negotiate the ropes.

By the following morning, Hall was still on the south summit, his oxygen gone, his hands and feet frozen solid. He asked Cotter to patch him through to his wife on the base camp satellite phone. "Sleep well, my sweetheart," Hall told his pregnant wife. "Please don't

worry too much." Those were the last words anyone would hear him utter. Twelve days later, Hall's frozen body was found partly buried under a snowdrift on the south summit.

Put yourself in Cotter's shoes. What do you do after watching a mountain snatch the lives of eight people? After talking to your childhood friend as he freezes to death, listening to his oxygen-starved voice croak through iced lips as he farewells his wife?

Most men would toss out their boots, cut up their climbing ropes and turn their back on mountains forever. But not Cotter. He took ownership of Hall's Adventure Consultants business and, the following year, led another expedition to the summit of Everest. In the years since, he's climbed Everest on two more occasions, while bagging a host of other notorious Himalayan peaks.

That '96 Disaster proved a moment of regeneration for Cotter. He didn't endure the tragedy - he used it as a catalyst for growth. He didn't shrink in the face of his fears - he stared them down until they scuttled out of sight. And you don't have to be a snow-scoured alpinist to see the value of these qualities.

>CHERISH THE CHALLENGE

When the storm finally lifted in 1996, the survivors straggled down from the high camps and gathered at base camp. Realising that this would be the last time they were all together, they stood in a circle, surrounded by the wind-whipped tents and tattered Nepalese prayer flags, and conducted a wake to farewell the dead. Cotter stood and delivered a brief eulogy for Hall. "It was," he says, staring down at his coffee, "a cathartic moment."

Cotter admits that the '96 Disaster rocked him - but he refuses to ruminate on the dark emotions of that time. "Yes, you definitely get affected by the loss of friends. It's a hard aspect of mountaineering. And it's happened a lot through my career - I've seen a lot of friends pass away in the mountains. But at the same time there's no surprise there."

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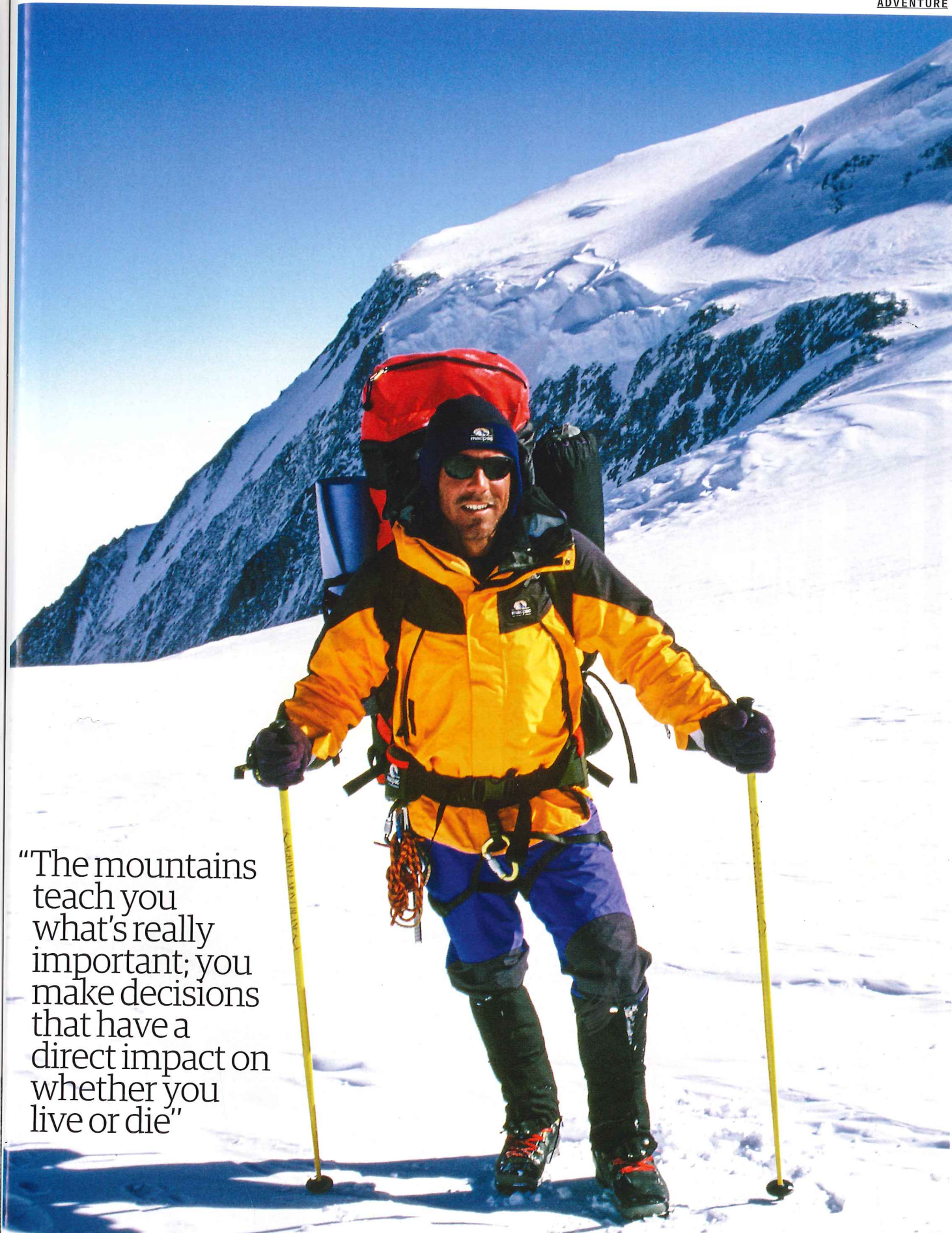
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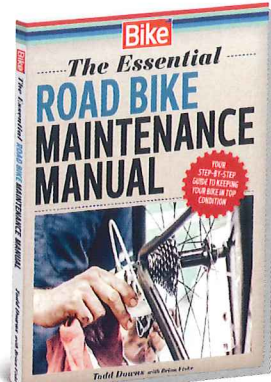
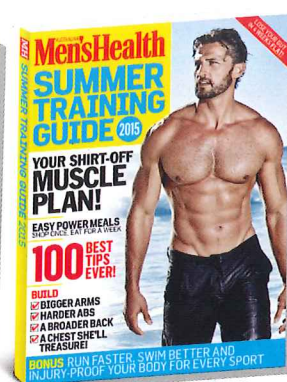
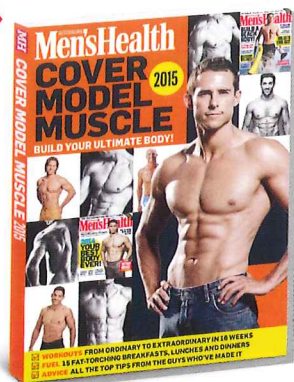
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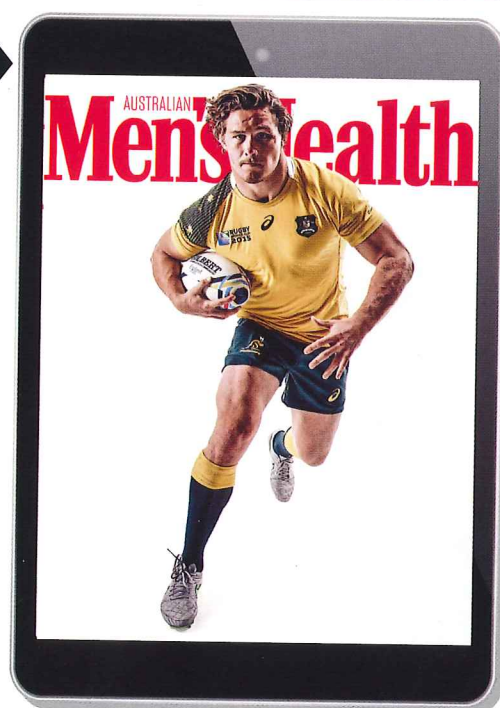


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Frost fright: the film *EVEREST* is a powerful portrayal of what Rob Hall (played by Jason Clarke) and his climbers endured in the '96 Disaster.



1 EVEREST BY NUMBERS

11,000m
Average cruising altitude of a Boeing 747



8848m
Height of Everest

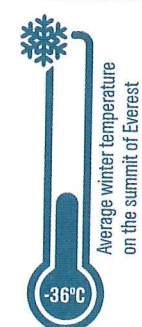
56

Percentage of summit attempts that were successful in 2012



18

Percentage of summit attempts that were successful in 1990



4mm
Amount Everest grows each year as a result of tectonic movement



33

Percentage of available oxygen at the summit of Everest compared with sea level



83,000

Approximate number of kilojoules a climber will burn on summit day

by those risks. "Now, that doesn't make the tragedy any easier," says Cotter, "and it doesn't make it any nicer. But the fact is, these risks are a part of mountaineering."

It's a hard fact that points to a larger truth about how we choose to live our lives. "How do you want to live?" asks Cotter. "Do you want to live your life with extremes, where you experience the full spectrum of human emotion and endeavour? Or do you want to try and hide from the fact that you're going to die and be content with a happy, simple, easy life?"

For Cotter, it's a no-brainer. But he's quick to clarify: experiencing the full spectrum doesn't equal the reckless pursuit of risks. He doesn't charge headlong up mountains to bag summits while grinning manically in the face of death. He climbs to share experiences in extreme conditions, to make decisions under acute duress, to face challenges and overcome them. Summits are simply the by-product of all this.

"See, it's not a question of whether you're going to face challenges in your life," he says, "it's a question of how you respond to them. If you don't place those challenges in front of yourself, you're not going to know how you respond to them. You're not going to develop and evolve as a person."

These challenges can be diverse - climbing a mountain, starting your own business, fathering a child - but if you elect to avoid them, you'll never grow.

> OWN YOUR OBSTACLES

The '96 Disaster drilled home to Cotter just how fragile life is at high altitude. Even Hall - a climber of legendary strength - found himself defenceless when the mountain turned angry. It's a lesson that may have driven lesser climbers to fatalism - *eat, drink and climb, for tomorrow we die*. Cotter, however, bristles at the very mention of such pessimism: "For me, the whole point of mountaineering is to approach every challenge with the view that I plan to come back alive. If I ever cross that line, then I know I've gone too far."

Boiled down to its essence, Cotter's plan in the mountains is to strike while the iron's hot. Stack the odds in your favour - heat the iron till it's glowing red - then go, and go hard. Whatever your pursuit, be it scaling a peak or building a portfolio, it's a plan that demands both exquisite timing and deep knowledge.

For Cotter, timing and knowledge translate to an almost mystical feel for mountains. "I need to be at one with the mountain," he says. "I need to know what the weather's doing, what the effect of the sun coming up on that slope is going to do, what the effect of that sudden wind increase is going to be. I've got to know what all these things mean so I can operate safely in the environment."

Knowledge doesn't just open up possibilities - it builds parameters, flagging hidden perils and budding disasters. For Cotter, this safety-first ethos is the key to >

thriving under extreme pressure. "If I can be aware of all the mountain's subtleties, then that's validation that I'm in the zone," he says. "When I'm in that zone, I can take a group of people to the summit of Everest and I can be in control, I can be within a margin of safety. It's not about surviving and *maybe* making it back alive - it's about being in control."

A mental trick Cotter employs: look at a mountain, or whatever challenge you're facing, like a pilot sees the cockpit of his aircraft. Oxygen supplies running low? Red light. Wind picking up? Red light. Clients worn to the bone? Red light. "Then I have to make the decision whether we carry on or go back down." Of course, if you lack the knowledge - if you haven't done your homework - there will be no red light. Cotter grins: "You're in a state of constant paranoia in the mountains. But that paranoia's what keeps you alive."

> LEARN YOUR LESSON

There's an old mountaineering saying: "Accidents don't just happen - they're well planned." It's a piece of wisdom that succinctly explains why things so dramatically unravelled on Everest in 1996. Small mistakes, minute oversights, simmering personality clashes - all these failings accrued, gradually weakening the defences of the expedition. The shocking appearance of an unpredicted storm brought the walls tumbling down.

Learning from these mistakes was key to Cotter going back the next year and leading that successful expedition to the summit. "You've got to be disciplined with your reactions," he says. "You have to look at what happened, analyse what went wrong and make sure that doesn't happen to you. History's very, very important. People who don't use history are naïve and don't last very long. They just make the same mistakes again and again."

The truth is, pioneers often come to a sticky end - from Captain Cook, devoured by Hawaiian cannibals, to Martin Luther King, gunned down by a white supremacist. In Cotter's mind, Hall was another such pioneer, pushing the boundaries of what people thought possible on mountains. Since 1996, however, the boundaries have been firmed, the lessons heeded.

For Cotter, these modern successes on Everest owe themselves to failures like the '96 Disaster. He scoffs at the stereotype of the bearded, muscle-bound mountaineer whose single-minded focus and determination carry him to the summit. "That stereotype is completely wrong. A mountaineer is pretty well the opposite. A good mountaineer's someone who has to think their way up the mountain; someone who's very aware of their strengths and weaknesses. A good mountaineer is someone who's completely honest with themselves."

Your take-home? Hold the mirror up to yourself. Note your strengths and examine your weaknesses. Examine them closely; learn from them. Because it's only through failure that real success lies. ■



2

BUILD A MOUNTAIN OF MUSCLE

Want to bag your own summit? According to Cotter, "there's nothing like climbing to prepare yourself for a climb". In the absence of snow-capped peaks, however, whip your body into summit-shape with this workout from PT Ruth Rampling, founder of TrekFit Australia (trekfitpersonaltraining.com.au).

"If you've made the commitment to trek to an unbelievable destination, then pre-trek training is a must," says Rampling. In order to build total-body strength and resilience, Rampling recommends targeting your legs and upper body in separate sessions. Do each exercise in the circuit back-to-back, then rest for two minutes. Complete three circuits in total. Increase the difficulty of the leg circuit by wearing a backpack loaded with extra weight - use water bottles or packets of rice.

