



Vanessa O'Brien en route to conquering K2.

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On Top of the World

The Remarkable Accomplishments of Vanessa O'Brien

Esteemed explorers have graced the halls of the New York Athletic Club for decades. Robert Ripley, known for his evocative cartoons and "Ripley's Believe It or Not!" franchise, was an avid globetrotter. He visited over 200 countries in his lifetime (1890-1949), drawing cartoons of unfamiliar cultures and far flung landscapes. NYAC member Lincoln Ellsworth (1880-1951), the first individual in history to cross the Antarctic and Arctic by air, carried and planted a flag emblazoned with the winged foot in Antarctica in the 1930s. Two years ago, another explorer joined the ranks of NYAC membership: Vanessa O'Brien, the first American woman to ever summit K2, a formidable peak in the frigid Karakoram range in Pakistan. K2 puts Mount Everest to shame.

Vanessa spent her childhood exploring nature and playing team sports in the suburbs of Michigan. She attended New York University, where she earned degrees in Economics and Finance before entering the financial sphere in New York City. The 2008 financial crisis forced her to reconsider her career trajectory; but, what to do next? A friend suggested that she climb Everest. It was only a matter of time before she realized that she did not have a good enough reason to say, "No."

Vanessa did not approach the snowy crags of Everest as a complete amateur. She had summited Kilimanjaro while on holiday in 2005; however, Kilimanjaro is a cake walk compared to the giant in the Himalayas. Intense cardiovascular training, as well as Pilates for core stability and weight training for toning commenced. While in New York, she trained creatively, climbing the innumerable stairs of skyscrapers while donning a weighted vest and scaling indoor climbing walls. In focusing on improving her Vo2 max - the maximum amount of oxygen her body could utilize - she hoped to prepare herself for the rarefied air of high altitude.

Vanessa summited Everest for the first time in April, 2010. Two years later, she embarked on a challenge that few climbers attempt: the Seven Summits. The goal of the Seven Summits challenge is to reach the highest summit on each continent in the world: Everest in Asia (Nepal/China), Denali in North America (Alaska, USA), Elbrus in Europe (Russia), Kosciuszko in Australia, Vinson in Antarctica, Aconcagua in South America (Argentina), and Kilimanjaro in Africa (Tanzania). Not only did Vanessa complete the Seven Summits, she did so faster than any other female in history. Her time of 295 days, from May 2012 to February 2013, earned her a Guinness World Record; but the record was not enough. The Explorers' Grand Slam beckoned. This challenge consists of completing each of the Seven Summits, plus reaching the North and South Poles. After climbing her seventh peak, Vanessa skied to both the South and North Poles, thus completing the Grand Slam and, concurrently, becoming the first woman in history to complete this challenge in under a year.

With that stunning accomplishment in the books, one might presume that a period of resting on laurels was warranted. On the contrary, Vanessa was not ready to take off her boots. She looked to K2, a 28,252-foot peak in Pakistan, for her next adventure. Approximately one out of every four climbers on K2 expeditions perishes during their journey. A variety of factors commingle to make K2 far more treacherous than Everest. More than 90% of Everest climbers survive unscathed, in large part due to the man-made, commercial infrastructure, such as roads and tea huts, all accessible to climbers. K2 is devoid of such infrastructure, in addition to which Mother Nature is not kind to K2 climbers. The volatile weather and capricious rock fall pose a persistent and grave danger.

On July 28th, 2017, after three attempts and a 16-hour final 3000-foot ascent, Vanessa and her team of 12 summited K2. This feat made her the first American and first British woman (she has dual citizenship) to reach this summit. At the age of 52, she also was the oldest woman to reach that peak. Those facts notwithstanding, the elation of conquering

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the mountain was quickly overcome by panic. "While it takes a lot of effort to get to the top, it takes very little effort to fall to your death," she proffers. Eighty-five per cent of climbing deaths happen on the descent, as climbers face physical and psychological deprivation and the erratic elements.

Since her descent from K2, Vanessa has explored her interests in exploration and women's related charities. She belongs to the Royal Geographic Society (RGS) and the Scientific Exploration Society (SES) and is passionate about advancing women's causes and women in sports. She proudly carried the UN Women's flag to the top of K2.

She is also fascinated by the intersection of mountaineering and science. Mountaineers occupy a special position in that they reach seemingly "unreachable" geographical locales, places from which scientists yearn to collect samples. Vanessa has contributed to research associated with climate change and

biological responses to high altitude and extreme cold. It is hardly a coincidence that she is excited to make full use of the City House gymnasium in preparation for the demands of her next expedition, wherever that may be.

Vanessa's memoir, *"To the Greatest*

Heights: Facing Danger, Finding Humility, and Climbing a Mountain of Truth," will be published in May 2020 by Simon and Schuster/Emily Bestler Books. It is certain to be a fascinating look into the life of an extraordinary NYAC member.

- Laura Walsh



The precipitous perch overlooking the glacier below K2's Camp 1.