

THE MISSISSAUGA NEWS

Death present on all Everest climbs; Beating mountainous challenges for charity
Another Mississauga adventurer finds his sea legs

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The summit of Everest is about the size of a conference table top. And you can't rope in on the summit. Step off one side and you fall 10,000 ft. Step off the other side and you bounce once before dropping 8,000 ft. All it would take is one trip in air so thin at an altitude of 29,035 ft. that you need an oxygen tank to function.

Mississauga businessman Rob Follows and his wife Katrina Sandling made history when they reached the summit of Mt. Everest at dawn on May 24th of this year. They are the first Canadian couple to climb the Seven Summits - the highest peak of each continent.

It's not what you expect from a businessman, with the exception of maybe Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin brand. Branson is known for his highly publicized feats of derring-do. He is part adventurer, part showman. But if Branson had done it he would likely have taken along an entire camera crew and maybe a band to provide entertainment on the climb.

Rob Follows doesn't look crazy. Meet him in his office and this founding partner of STS Capital Partners comes across as a serious businessman - which he is. So why did this serious businessman end up climbing Everest?

Follows says it started when he examined his life plan. He has an entire file detailing what he wants to accomplish in his life. And when he explained all that to his then-girlfriend, now-wife Katrina Sandling, she suggested the two of them climb the Seven Summits. That was definitely a "stretch goal" because while the duo had trekked in Nepal, they had never tackled climbing a mountain. First came Kilimanjaro in Africa.

He proposed to Katrina on the peak of Mt. Aconcaua in Argentina, the second summit they tackled.

They climbed that 22,841 ft. mountain without oxygen. She accepted before he even read the list of reasons why he thought she should say yes.

After climbing Mt. Elbrus in Russia, they married on the peak of Vinson Massif in Antarctica, making them the first couple to marry on one of the Seven Summits.

They tackled Everest the first time in 2005, but when the jet stream didn't move off the summit, they abandoned their attempt at the 26,000 ft. mark.

As Follows explains, "The jet stream was only a kilometre away. It moves fast and when it hits the temperature falls from minus 40 to minus 100 and then you die - being wealthy or influential doesn't help you."

After climbing Mt. McKinley in Alaska, and Mt. Kosciuszko in Australia, it was time to tackle Everest again and cross off the last mountain on their list.

This time they climbed as Team Canada alongside Brampton businessman Len Stanmore who was climbing to raise \$1 million for breast cancer research.

But for Follows, climbing mountains wasn't just about romantic adventure. He says that charities and non-profits face mountainous difficulties that dwarf Mt. Everest and he was determined to raise \$1 million for Altruvest, the non-profit he founded to help other non-profits improve their governance.

Follows says there are two ways to climb Everest. You can do a \$15,000 trip to climb the south side from China (Tibet).

That's the easiest ascent, and the cheapest rate, but because of that it's also the most dangerous.

"You can drive up to the 22,500 ft. level and people get out of the car and literally die because they're not

acclimatized. The final ascent is along a narrow ridge to the summit," says Follows, "and last year a Korean climbing party of seven went that route to reach the top of Everest. As they climbed the wind was strong at their backs, but when it came time to come down, the wind was still strong and cold. They sat down to rest and they died there."

Death is part of Everest. The danger is part of the allure. Follows saw an American climber fall to his death in a crevasse last year because, "he was too macho to clip in. We were talking about coffee because he was from Seattle. Then we heard him yell and he went over the hill. He was climbing, and then he was dead. And the group he was with didn't have the resources to carry his body down."

Follows is more than willing to take risks. When he decided to overcome his fear of horses, he took up not only riding, but polo which he plays regularly.

But he is a businessman, and part of business is reducing risks where you can. And a lot of the risks associated with Everest come down to money. Follows estimates the climb this spring cost about \$120,000 US per person. That covers all the tents you need at four different camps, hiring Sherpas and guides, food, fuel and oxygen. "The more you spend, the more resources you have and the safer you are."

Follows' first Everest attempt cost \$50,000 a person plus \$20,000 for equipment, but he and Sandling were part of a bigger group. This year, they organized a private expedition and Follows and Stanmore covered all their own costs.

"You knew who had come from the Chinese side because you'd see them at mealtimes begging for food and oxygen," says Follows. And if people don't give, then they steal what they can. They have to just to survive. It's hazardous to be that under-resourced."

And if someone does get into trouble without Sherpas and guides, there's no way to bring them down to safety. An individual suffering from pulmonary edema is in a state of dementia that can make them violent and a danger to anyone trying to help them. It takes at least three or four people to transport a sick or injured person down the mountain, and if you don't have a large enough party it can't be done. Follows says his climbing party had the manpower and saved more than a dozen people on Everest.

During this climb the three Canadians took a four day break, helicoptering into Katmandu during a revolution to spend four days re-energizing in a hotel before tackling the summit. The jet stream was 600 km away and the weather was clear. They climbed through the night to the summit at 6:00 am on May 24th with their team of nine Sherpas and three guides. The weather was so clear they could see the curvature of the earth - an amazing sight that will stay with them forever.

But after an hour on the summit it was time to climb down.

Coming down is faster because you don't have to zigzag up and down the mountain to acclimatize, but it's harder. You can't see where you're going, especially wearing an oxygen mask and goggles.

But back in Canada, Follows continues to raise money for Altruvest, and work at the firm he co-founded - STS (Success to Significance) Capital Partners. It's a boutique international mergers, acquisitions and corporate finance firm. It's designed to help successful mid-range people (\$10 million to \$400 million) sell their businesses to strategic buyers.

And what is he planning as an encore to Everest? No more high mountains and less travelling, but something he figures will be equally challenging: having a family.



There ain't no mountain high enough - including the indomitable Mount Everest - to keep this Mississauga business couple from reaching their peak performance



Follows and Stanmore at a dangerous crevasse crossing.



Team Canada: Rob Follows, Katrina Sandling, and Brampton's Len Stanmore.



Climbing to the top. Photos courtesy of Rob Follows and Len Stanmore.



Finally, the summit. The Follows and Altruvest.