



To the top of the world and back (Part 2)

Ian Stewart:

But at the same time, it's kind of weird just to sit down in the snow and just watch your oxygen run out. It feels like you're just kind of going out or giving up without a fight, which is just a very weird sensation. So I'm kind of just sitting there trying to logically make sense of all this in my mind, and like, "What should I do?"

Brent Bachus:

After months of mental and physical preparation resulted in his successful ascent of Mount Everest, Consulting senior manager Ian Stewart had little time to celebrate at the summit, quickly realizing his remaining oxygen levels were dangerously low. In the second part of my conversation with Ian, he recounts the life-threatening descent that proved to be his greatest challenge, how he ultimately was saved by a friend, and what he learned about himself, his life, and taking unnecessary risks.

Ian:

Now ordinarily, to get back to the balcony from the summit should have only taken me about two to two and a half hours. I buffered a lot of extra oxygen for this kind of case. However, going back to that viral photo you were talking about, that was taken on the summit ridge. So there's a ridge between the south summit of Everest and the actual summit, which, vertically speaking, is only a couple of hundred feet difference. It's really minute, but you have to traverse this long ridge that has all these ups and downs, and it's very much a single-file ridge. On the south side of you, you have the Lhotse Face, which is basically a near-vertical 8,000-foot drop all the way down to camp two. On the north side, you've got the Kangshung Face, which is a near-vertical 11,000-foot drop down into Tibet.

You're kind of perched very precariously in a single-file ridge and there's still people coming up and going down, and getting around people is extremely difficult and extremely dangerous. If we're coming down the mountain, the first technical feature you get to from the summit is this thing called the Hillary Step. Now the Hillary Step used to be this 40-foot vertical rock face that was a really challenging obstacle near the summit. If you've ever read *Into Thin Air*, this is where the lines got held up near the summit that also led people to the summit really late. This used to be the main bottleneck on Everest.

Now after the earthquake in . . . I believe it was 2016, that actually knocked part of

the Hillary Step down. It's no longer this 40-foot vertical rock face, but now this kind of slanted 45, 50-degree-angle rock face that's tricky, but it's not that hard, because you're wearing crampons, which are basically these metal spikes on your feet. You're walking across slick rock with ice and stuff. Just the fact that you're looking down to the side, there's 8,000 feet of air below your feet, so you have to not like kind of freak anyone out.

It's not that hard, but people get stuck there. On my way down at the top of the Hillary Step, there was basically a giant log jam. There was a woman that was trying to come up the Hillary Step, which, by the way, is only one up, one down. Only one person can be on it at a time. This woman kind of got halfway up it and just froze. I'd seen this woman before. She was just not terribly experienced and kind of got to this kind of technical section and just kind of froze out of fear.

We stood at the top of the Hillary Step for over an hour waiting for her to get through it. This whole time you're sitting there, and you know your oxygen is down in two to two and a half hours. Now you've used up half of that just sitting there and going nowhere. It was probably the weirdest sensation I've ever had in my life, because you're sitting there on this ridge and there's people in front of you. Everyone is screaming at this woman all kinds of profane things, as you may imagine, yelling, "This isn't the place to learn how to be a mountaineer," like, "You're going to kill all of us up here if you don't get out of the way," just all these really aggressive things. I'm kind of sitting behind all these people thinking to myself, well, it's not going to really help anyone for me to start screaming too, despite the fact that I'm now growing increasingly scared, but at the same time, it's kind of weird just to sit down in the snow and just like watch your oxygen run out.

It feels like you're just kind of going out or giving up without a fight, which is just a very weird sensation. So I was trying to logically make sense of all this in my mind and like, what should I do?

Brent:

And Ian, I'm imagining, I mean . . . You're not . . . You can't be alone in terms of the precariousness of the situation, right? As far as the other climbers go, too?

Ian:

Yeah. I was probably, I don't know, 15th or 20th in line to the edge of the top of the Hillary Step, and there were 20 people in front of me screaming at this woman, down at her, and then, you know, another probably 50 people behind her, trying to come up, screaming at her. So even once she gets through, you're trying to navigate around all these other people, and you still have to wait your turn in line to go down or let other people come up. So it was definitely mayhem for an hour or so up there.

Brent:

I can only imagine. So she eventually got up, or went back down, or obviously something happened.

Ian:

Yeah, they eventually got her up and sort of through the crowd of people that was sitting up there. She received a lot of choice words as she came through, but she was just one example of people that were up there. There was a woman on my way up the Hillary Step, she was in front of me. I got to the top of the Hillary Step right behind her. There was this four-foot ice wall we had to climb over, and I ended up

having to literally get down on my haunches, pick her up on my shoulders, and stand her up and throw her over the edge to keep her moving up, because she just kind of stopped and froze there for 15 minutes.

Brent:

So you get back down. Maybe talk about it, the minute of when you realized the risk of, "Oh my goodness, is this the end for me?" versus "Okay, I'm in the clear." Can you talk a little bit about that transition period of time and just what was going through your mind then?

Ian:

Coming down from the summit and you realize that you're running precariously low on oxygen, you don't at any point actually think about dying or if you're going to die. It's not a thought you want to entertain at all, but you do recognize the chain of events that's going to occur if that happens. I mean, if you run out of oxygen, the first thing that's going to happen is you're going to start getting really, really cold. One of the main things oxygen does for you that people realize is it actually helps keep your body, and particularly your extremities, your fingers and toes, warm. So you know if you run out, you're going to start getting really, really cold, and you're probably going to get frostbite pretty quickly. Then, you know, the next thing is you're probably going to start getting hypothermic and dizzy, and at some point you're probably going to want to sit down, and then that's where things can really go poorly.

So you're kind of just working your way down and just trying to hold off just the first step in that chain of events from occurring, which is, "How far can I get down before I run out of oxygen?" And you just try to move as quickly as you can. We're now at probably hour 16 or so without having had any food or water since leaving camp four. Even at camp four, you can't really eat or drink that much. So extremely dehydrated and just like sapped of all energy. I'd gotten down to about five minutes of oxygen left when, luckily, one of the Sherpas in our group, who had already gone down ahead of us, came back up with our spare tank of oxygen from the balcony, and we were able to swap out and put new oxygen in. At that point, I knew I was in a better spot, but I didn't feel totally safe yet, because there also had been this massive storm that had come in and it was whiteout conditions.

You literally couldn't see where your feet were. You're just kind of stumbling and falling down the mountain. You're trying to watch where you're placing your feet, but you can't see your feet. So you're stepping off ledges all the time and tumbling down. You're roped in, but you're still going to slide down this rope until you get to the next anchor point, which in some cases could be a hundred yards away. You could very easily break a leg or a back or arm or anything. Any one of those things spells almost near-certain death. So you're kind of working your way down again through this sort of ice storm. You're looking around and there's these people literally all over the mountain that are sitting there with their faces buried in their hands. You're kind of just wondering, "Is there anything I can do to help these people?" You'll stop, and you'll tap them on the shoulder sometimes, but everyone is so out of it, they just tell you to go on. There's not really much you can do anyways, because I can barely stand up on my own accord.

Brent:

But you've got an innate desire to still go check on others that might be in worse spots than you.

Ian:

You do. I mean, I think it comes down to . . . You put yourself in that situation, and I can't imagine a scarier thought than needing help and having people just walk by me and not try to help. That's part of the scary reality of Everest or mountains, 8,000-meter peaks, is that when you're up there, you really are a bit on an island. You've kind of got to take care of yourself, because people just don't have the strength to help others oftentimes. It wasn't really until about, I don't know, like 15 to 20 minutes before I got back to camp four, where you could actually see the tents. You're off the steepest flanks of the summit. It kind of flattens out a bit, and at this point the wind is blowing at, I don't know, 60, 70 miles per hour.

There's ice pelting you in the face. The skin's getting rubbed raw from all the ice hitting you. At that point, you realize, "I'm through the worst of it." The interesting part about it was, it was less a feeling of relief so much and more so a feeling of just being also ashamed, which is what I wrote about in the blog. It's this notion of . . . As someone that's done a bit of mountaineering, you've got to know when you're in a position that you should turn around, right? You can't just leave this up to chance, because there's a chance you risk something very severe happening. That's kind of what I did, to be honest. I couldn't see how much oxygen I had, so I was just kind of going on blind faith that I had enough to get back down. It wasn't until I got to the summit that I realized the scenario I was in. If I hadn't gotten bailed out by that Sherpa walking back up . . . By the way, I was with a guide who was in the same boat as me, down to his last five minutes as well.

If we hadn't gotten bailed out by that Sherpa who carried up two extra bottles of oxygen, probably best case, we were going to have frostbite. You just started running through all this stuff and you're like, "These are all the things that I said I would not do."

Brent:

You put yourself in harm's way, right? Yeah.

Ian:

Yeah. You're mostly just ashamed because, at the end of the day—and I truly believe this—it's just a hill. I mean, yeah, it's a really big hill, and it's pretty famous and stuff, but my life's not really any different having done it. No mountain's worth dying over, or even losing a finger over or a toe over. I think the problem with Everest is that there's so much prestige around it, and people grow up idolizing it so much that you do get this tunnel vision of this summit fever, even when you're prepared to try to not have it. Every day we're on the mountain, I would repeat, "It's not about getting to the summit, it's about getting home safely." You kind of get caught in this trance as you get close to the summit and you're like, "Man, I'm at 28,000 feet. I'm really close."

Brent:

"There's no turning back now at this point" mentality. I can see it. It's been a singular goal for how long, and all the training and the preparation. I can certainly understand that position of saying, "Nope, I'm keeping going." Do you think, Ian. . . I guess the million-dollar question, at the end of the day, was it worth it?

Ian:

It was worth the attempt, because I think if I had never attempted it, I would have always looked back and regretted not trying. I have no doubts about that, so I'm glad I went there. I'm glad I did it. I met some really incredible people, and I got to fulfill a lifelong dream. So from that regard, yes. Now the real question of . . . I'll actually spin your question a little bit, which is, if I hadn't summited, would it be worth it to me to go back and try a second time to summit?

Brent:

Ah, okay. Good question. I like your spin better than mine.

Ian:

That's a really tough one that I have a tough time even answering now, because the reality is no, it would not be worth going back a second time, but just knowing myself and knowing how much it would just nag at me for not having made it the first time, I could see myself feeling compelled to go back. I kind of like to think that I'd be smarter than that, and I just wouldn't do it. I think, in my heart of hearts, I know maybe I would talk myself into it, even though I know that's not the logical or smart or really fair response given everything I put my wife through, my family through, etc.

Brent:

All of that sounds exactly logical to me in terms of how you would feel in the sentence that you would go through. So there's no formal testing, or certification, or other mandated regulations around who can have the opportunity to climb it?

Ian:

There's not. Now there have been talks of this for a long time, but I think you have to think about the economics behind the entire ecosystem that is a commercial Everest expedition. You've got Nepal, which I think by the World Bank's estimates is the 25th poorest country in the world. Every Everest permit is a five-figure permit fee. So they're reticent to almost limit the number of people to come in, because this is a money theory for the government of Nepal.

Brent:

Right.

Ian:

Quite frankly, the death toll on Everest doesn't really impact the demand. So it's not like making it safer really from an economic standpoint matters to the government.

Brent:

Right.

Ian:

If you're a commercial outfitter, you get paid all of your money up front. So to you as the outfitter, it doesn't really matter if your clients make it to the top or not, because you've got all that money up front. Now obviously, if none of your clients ever make it to the summit, then people aren't going to deal with your outfitter. There's an extent to which they start to care. But for the most part, a few people don't make it, they don't really care. So this whole notion of pre-testing you for your skills and qualifications doesn't really matter that much to them.

Brent:

Yeah, it's counterproductive to what their ultimate goals are from a financial standpoint, which is terrifying, honestly. Compare-contrast that to climbs on other mountains. Do you face similar circumstances or is Everest very unique with this?

Ian:

The economics are not unique to Everest. That's how it is from an outfitter standpoint. That's how it is on every mountain. You're paying all of your fees up front, and whether you summit or not, it's not like you get a discount or a refund if you don't summit. Now, one notable difference between Everest and . . . take Denali in Alaska. Denali is a highly regulated mountain. Only a few outfitters are allowed to guide on Denali. I think they limit to six outfitters and every . . . it's either two or five years, there's some review period, where they review the outfitter's performance, safety records, etc., and determine who gets to be a commercial outfitter for the next five years, or whatever that period is. So they're highly incentivized to be extremely safe and to staff really qualified guides. There's very well-published safety records and summit records for Denali.

Everest is a bit looser. It's kind of hard to do your due diligence, because you don't always know how safe an outfitter is, or summit success factors are hard to gauge sometimes. Something that's really crazy about Everest is that if someone dies on their expedition, won't even register that death under the outfitter's name. They'll have a shell company that they'll register the death under, so that if you look up a safety record for an outfitter, they actually look like they've got a perfect safety record, when in fact they don't really. There's just a lot of things that sort of come with climbing a mountain and in that part of the world.

Brent:

What's next for you? I don't know about the summits that remain, but are they equally as dangerous? Does this factor into your mind in terms of your next challenges that you want to take on?

Ian:

It certainly does. I kind of, after Aconcagua, made this goal of doing the seven summits, right? Which is the tallest mountain on every continent. I've now done six of the seven, so I've only got one to go, and that's Antarctica, a mountain called Vinson Massif. The nice thing about Vinson Massif is that it's actually a pretty easy mountain, and it's a pretty safe mountain. Obviously, if things were to go wrong in Antarctica, it's very tough to get extracted from Antarctica. So there's always that dangerous . . . I don't want to downplay it too much, but in terms of the skill level required and all that, it's just not that bad. The downside to Antarctica is that it's really expensive to get to, so it'll probably be a few years before I go there, unless someone listens to this podcast and magically steps in and wants to sponsor.

Brent:

This is a call for sponsorships.

Ian:

That's right, we take all donations. But yeah, we're probably a few years away from trying Antarctica. In the meantime, I'm not going to stop climbing. I'd like to do stuff that's shorter in duration and a little bit more technical. So stuff in the Alps, or even stuff here in the US in the Rockies or the Sierras. I think I am done doing any of these 8,000-meter peaks. They take two months. It's not a pleasant existence.

Living on the side of the mountain for two months while your resting heart rate is more than double what it is at sea level, and you're struggling to keep on weight and not get sick, and you're eating just not pleasant food. You're cold every day. That's just not fun for two months.

Brent:

Well, and Ian, I intentionally avoided the story about the broken pee bottle, because I think that would help really illustrate exactly what you're talking about here.

Ian:

That's right. Yeah. All of those unpleasantnesses of living life on the side of the mountain. I think I'm done with doing that for months at a time. Maybe a week or two at a time. But yeah, I'm done with the two-month trips.

Brent:

Good for you. Hey, just a couple more questions, Ian. You mentioned the extreme amount of time and energy that goes into the preparations for this. I also recognize you have a day job in a professional services firm, that it's not easy to always integrate that degree of preparation versus work. Can you talk a little bit about how those commitments were balanced and how the training and the climbing came into existence with the work side of things as well?

Ian:

I guess two things. I mean, one, fitness has always been part of my life, and I've always enjoyed running or cycling or going to the gym, etc. So I've always tried to find a way to weave that into my life, no matter how busy things get. Now the challenge with client work is that not only is it demanding, but it can also be highly unpredictable at times, which does make keeping a consistent training regimen pretty difficult. In my particular situation, I had the advantage of being on a long-term project coupled with the fact that I've been here at Deloitte for 12 years now, or almost 12 years now. It gives you a little bit of flexibility in dictating your own schedule, both from a seniority standpoint and also just from being on a project that's long-term in nature.

I also had a client that was extremely supportive of this endeavor. They actually . . . My clients, they mailed me a flag, which I carried to the summit. I think my clients may have been some of my most avid blog followers. I got back, and there were all these emails in my work accounts that were people posting about where I was on the mountain and what was going on, and just having them sending me messages is extremely uplifting.

Brent:

And you had thousands of fans that were along with you on the journey and you didn't necessarily even know it.

Ian:

Exactly. Having been at the firm for a while, a long-term project, a client that is extremely supportive, not to mention a project team that's supportive, I kind of just had . . . We talk about a perfect storm in terms of what made Everest dangerous this year. I had the perfect storm of support that made this possible in preparing for it.

Brent:

Oh, that is great. I think your story is amazing. I think what you've accomplished is extraordinary, and congratulations to you on all of your accomplishments. I wish you the best of luck as you get that little one done down in Antarctica here in the years to come. So we can call it seven for seven.

Ian:

All right. I hope so.

Brent:

All right, Ian. Hey, thanks again so much for the time today, and appreciate you sharing your story with us today on the Who We Are podcast.

Ian:

Absolutely. Thank you guys.

Brent:

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