



## To the top of the world and back (Part 1)

### **Ian Stewart:**

I just started getting very thirsty and hungry, so I had been 12 hours on the mountain and had not had a sip of water or even a bite to eat. And by the way, on summit day, you can burn over 20,000 calories just on your summit push.

### **Brent Bachus:**

Ever since he was a kid, Consulting senior manager Ian Stewart wanted to climb Mount Everest. He accomplished this feat, scaling the 29,000-foot peak earlier this spring. Most importantly, he made it back down the mountain alive.

I'm happy to welcome Ian to our Who We Are podcast today and to talk to him about his near-death experience on Everest and his goal to climb the seven tallest mountains on each continent. Ian, first and foremost, congratulations on this amazing accomplishment, and certainly, on behalf of everybody at Deloitte, we're happy to have you back home safe. Maybe just as a stepping-off point for us today, can you talk a little bit about what first attracted you to mountain climbing and how you got started?

### **Ian:**

So I grew up in a very outdoors-oriented family. You know, lots of camping road trips all over the country, visiting our nation's national parks. And I think through that, that's where I really developed my love for the outdoors. Then as I got more into sports in middle school and high school, I realized I didn't have the greatest hand-eye coordination in terms of playing a lot of ball sports, but I did have an affinity for endurance sports. So you kind of take a love for the outdoors and an affinity for endurance sports. The two of them make for a pretty good base to get into mountain climbing.

### **Brent:**

The goals of saying "I want to be a good mountain climber" versus the goals of "I'm going to climb the tallest mountain on each continent" . . . That's a lofty set of experience. And when did you realize that you really wanted to take this to the extreme level, if you will?

### **Ian:**

You know, it sort of developed over time. I can't say that I was born with this innate desire to climb the seven summits. Where it really started was, I always had this desire to go to Africa and climb Kilimanjaro. And I can't really tell you why. It just always seemed really exotic to me.

So when I was beginning my career at Deloitte as a business analyst, I convinced a few of my friends who were also business analysts, two of which actually still work here, my senior managers, to go with me to a trip to Tanzania and climb Kilimanjaro. And we went, we had a great time. I'd call it a fairly transformative experience.

And then it was a couple of years after that where I was kind of sitting around with some of those same friends, trying to think about "What next?" The mountain that came up next was Aconcagua, which is the tallest mountain in South America. And I thought, "Why not go down there and give that a shot?"

And you know, went down, and that was successful. And I would say after Aconcagua was really when this whole seven summits notion really started to develop. And I also—similar to Kilimanjaro—I'd always known that I wanted to go and climb Everest at some point in my life. So once you kind of take the two you've already done, throw in Everest, and you're kind of halfway there.

**Brent:**

Lo and behold, you've got the lofty goals. So as you kind of get ready for one of these climbs, can you talk a little bit about the preparation, and both from a kind of a physical and a mental standpoint, how do you get ready for something like this?

**Ian:**

So I think on the physical side—this will be surprising to some people—it's honestly not all that specialized. There's a lot of mountains in terms of the seven summits. They're not super technical. Now there's some rock climbing on some, and some ice climbing on others, but for the most part they're fairly straightforward.

So it comes down to a lot of cardio and strength training. But the physical training for Everest is actually a bit funny, because when you leave the US, or wherever you're from, you're going to be in this excellent shape, but then it takes two weeks to kind of get up to base camp.

And then once you're at base camp, you're spending a week there kind of resting and recuperating from the hiking and preparing to start moving up the mountain. And you actually don't move up the mountain towards the summit until almost two months after you've left your home base.

And at that point from sort of existing and altitude and the rigors that takes on your body, you've kind of lost 90 percent of the base fitness that you came in with, which makes the mental part really, really important. And that part, I think, is all about experience, and you have to ladder doing progressively more difficult and higher mountains.

And that's where I think a lot of people get in trouble when they try and go straight to Everest too soon. So much of your experience up there, you're falling back on sort of that mental toughness. And I think not just mental toughness, but just that confidence of having done trips at least somewhat similar to what you're going through, and Everest, that's really what you fall back on. And so I think you only get that through experience.

**Brent:**

As I'm listening to you, one of the things—and for our listeners, Ian has an incredible blog post about his journey that honestly I read as almost like an ongoing drama movie, it's captivating and extraordinary—but it's interesting to listen to your tone in reading the blog

post about that notion of mental toughness.

I characterize some of your first installments as very light and airy and uplifting, and you could tell that the further along on the journey you went, that mental toughness really kicked in and the seriousness of the experience, I think, took it up a notch a little bit.

Hey, Ian, let's switch gears a little bit. One of the things that I thought was really cool about your story as well is that you are recently married, right? And had the opportunity to share at least a part of this experience with your wife, Katie. Talk to me a little bit about what that was like for the first few weeks, and then maybe leading up to the "Hey, honey, I'll see you when I get back down."

**Ian:**

So Katie and I have been dating for five or six years now. We've been married for about a year and a half. In fact, we almost celebrated our first-year anniversary on Everest, or at base camp at Everest. Unfortunately, she had to leave literally the day before our one-year anniversary to head back down on the mountain to catch her flight back to Kathmandu and ultimately back to the US, but Katie's always known that this has been kind of a passion of mine.

In fact, Katie and I were reintroduced to each other . . . We both went to college together, but then kind of went our separate ways for five or six years, and were reintroduced with one another as another friend and I were planning to go do the climb in Russia. And so I would say, from day one, Katie has always known that the mountaineering has been a passion of mine, and she's always, funnily enough, always had a desire to go to base camp.

And so when you think about doing something like Everest, it's quite a bit of life planning that goes into that. And it was probably back in 2016 when we decided that 2019 was going to be a good year for us to go, and we were getting married in 2018, so we didn't want to couple it with the year we got married. So we put it on the calendar.

It was amazing having her there with me, hiking up to base camp. It's awesome to have your best friend with you when you're kind of doing this otherworldly experience. And so we got up to base camp, spent three days there with me, I think. We got a chance to sort of get a feel for what life at base camp was like, but at the same time it's tough. You get to base camp and you're looking smack dab at the Khumbu Icefall, and you know, Katie, much like many other people, has read *Into Thin Air*, and watched Everest documentaries, and knows how dangerous the very first feature on Everest out of base camp can be.

The fact that you're going to spend eight hours climbing through tumbling blocks of ice the size of apartment buildings that fall over without warning. And so I think her seeing that in person really brought that to life for her. Which probably added more stress than maybe she or I would have wanted to have added.

But then after she left . . . It can be tough to communicate from Everest. At base camp, there was really limited Wi-Fi, so we were able to kind of connect via WhatsApp, usually at least via text, once a day. And every now and then we could get it working well enough where I could actually have a conversation over WhatsApp on sort of a Wi-Fi call. But then, once you leave base camp, and you go up the mountain, and you go up to camp one, two, three, four, etc., you lose all contact.

I mean, you'll be up there for seven, eight, nine, 10 days, and with no real way to contact one another. And I think those parts were really hard, because that's when she knew I was

actually in the most dangerous parts of the mountain.

**Brent:**

It's the fear of the unknown as to what's happening over that period of time.

**Ian:**

Exactly. And I've always said, I think it's much tougher to be the person that's back at home than it is to be the person on the mountain, because I know exactly what's going on. When we got stuck at camp two, as this cyclone came in, it was scary, but I wasn't actually terrified about my life. Whereas the news back at home is like, "The cyclone's hitting the flanks of Mount Everest," and imagining that thing you're reading about. So that's going on. So that part was tough. And not just for Katie, but your family and friends.

**Brent:**

Can you talk a little bit about the summit to Everest itself specifically? And I know some of the challenges that you specifically faced relative to that that blew me away when I was learning about it, reading your posts.

**Ian:**

So everyone has heard that there is an issue on Everest with overcrowding and that there's an issue with a lack of experience on the mountain. Before I went to Everest, I was aware of both of those things. But you wonder a little bit, was it a little bit overhyped? Is it really as bad as you think it is?

And you get up there and it turns out it's actually worse than you thought it was. Obviously, I don't know a specific statistic for how many people up there were underqualified to be up there, but it wasn't the 5 to 10 percent that I expected it to be. It was more like 70 to 80 percent, is what it seemed to me. And so when you're up there, everyone's going to the summit based on what the weather allows them to do.

The weather dictates everything on big mountains. And on average, you typically have 12 to 14 days, as the monsoon's coming in through the Bay Bengal and up in India and Nepal, it pushes the jet stream, which normally sits right on top of Everest, and sort of hammers it with 200-mile-per-hour winds.

As that monsoon comes in, it pushes up that weather system, that jet stream; it gives you about usually 10 to 14 days of summitable weather. This year, because there was a cyclone in the area, and just for other natural causes due to the weather, rather than having sort of that 10 to 14 days, we were down to only about two days.

And so everybody on the mountain, which, by the way, was a record number of people, got funneled into trying to summit on one of two days. And for the most part, everyone went on the same day that I went on, because it seemed like it was the better of the two days.

So if I go to my actual summit day on Everest, I got up to camp four, which is about 26,000 feet. And at that point you're on oxygen. It's a very barren, cold, extremely windy existence up there. And you get up there, and you realize how many other people are then positioned at camp four to go for the summit.

And camp four is not a place you want to stay for very long. Your body is not even really slowly dying, but rather rapidly dying at that altitude. A lot of your body functions shut down, you don't digest food, etc.. And so you get up, and you realize there's a ton of people up here, and you kind of hear people chattering about when they're going to leave for the

summit. And in the absence of a lot of people, I was anticipating about eight hours to the summit and four hours down, and kind of deep down I thought I'd hit it a little bit faster than that, but that, to me, seemed like a good conservative estimate.

But you started hearing about when people are leaving and there's tons of people up there and they're starting to plan for trips to leave at like 7 p.m., and so you start doing the math in your head like, "Okay, well if I left at 6:30 p.m. right before everyone, that would get me to the summit at 2:30 in the morning," which is not when you want to be standing at 29,000 feet.

**Brent:**

No, I can imagine.

**Ian:**

Not only from a temperature standpoint, when it's the coldest time of day, but also just the view standpoint. Who wants to summit Everest and not be able to see anything? So you're kind of trying to time this around when you want to go. And we ultimately decided, well, let's leave around 10:00 p.m.

So let's give the rest of the people about a three-hour head start on us, and we know we'll eventually catch them, but we'll deal with that when we get up there, and maybe some of the people turned back, etc.. So we left around 10:00 p.m. When we left camp four it was . . . I mean you couldn't ask for more perfect weather conditions.

It was absolutely no wind, which is almost an eerie thing to have when you're used to almost hurricane-force winds battering your tent, to step out of your tent and it's just an eerie stillness in the air.

**Brent:**

And I would imagine that's just as much from a sound standpoint is the feeling of not having the wind. It had to be eerie, quiet, I would imagine, almost.

**Ian:**

Extremely quiet. And you look up the mountain, you see this long trail of headlamps of people that left several hours before you, and it's just like this dotted line of ants that just extends on for God knows how long, hundreds of yards.

So we left camp. In fact, because the wind wasn't blowing, it was almost warm. I took off my largest down jacket as soon as we left camp because I was hot within five minutes of climbing. Even though we left at three hours after everyone, we caught up with the end of the line, probably an hour, hour and a half into our climb.

**Brent:**

And Ian, is that because of . . . I mean, you mentioned the overcrowding, but I'm just thinking to myself, perfect storm here of limited time from a weather standpoint, the overcrowding, and then add in that lack of experience. I'm guessing it's that latter part that was probably the biggest contributor to catching up to people that fast.

**Ian:**

It is, yeah. You have a lot of people that aren't experienced. And actually, there's another kind of sinister actor at play here, and that is, you've got a lot of people that not only are they not experienced, but they're not even really fit enough to be up there.

But when you're on the mountain, you can basically pay Sherpas to literally drag you to the summit of Everest. And these Sherpas stand to basically double the amount of money they take home in a season by getting what's called a summit bonus. So if they get you to the top, you pay out a pretty hefty sum of money to these guys. And that, in some cases, can be as much as they're making for the entire season of guiding on Everest. So they are very much incentivized to get you to the top. And what they'll do is, they'll do a thing called short-roping, where they'll basically tie a rope around their waist and tie a rope around your waist and literally just drag you.

So as long as you can still stand up, they'll do basically all the work to get you up there. They'll hop you up on as much oxygen as you can take down, and they're really strong climbers, and they're very motivated to get you to the top.

**Brent:**

Oh my.

**Ian:**

So you run into that. So you've started catching up to people that . . . You can just look at them. They're kind of glazed over, honestly don't really have much business being up there, but they're just being dragged to the summit. Now, the reality is, as strong as Sherpas are, you can only drag a human so quickly. So you catch up to these people really, really quickly.

And then the problem on Everest, especially on summit days . . . It's very difficult to pass people, because you basically kind of kicked in a path up towards . . . up the mountain, but to walk outside of that path . . . And there's only one fixed line that you're roped into.

So to unclip and pass around people is A, dangerous from a safety perspective, but B, becomes extremely taxing to break trail up some of these really steep sections on summit day. And so you might pass one or two people, but then you find yourself extremely winded, having to step out of the trail and also again, be unclipped from the rope, that it's just not really a feasible way to move up the mountain. So you end up resigning yourself to staying behind people and just trying to conserve energy and just kind of hope that either they step off to the side and let you go around them, or they eventually just decide to turn around.

**Brent:**

I've seen some of the images, and you say overcrowding, and I don't know that anything does it justice until you see some of the photos of literally that line of . . . It looks like a line of ants to the summit, and it's clear there's no way around it. What's your patience like during that piece of time? I can imagine I'd be losing my mind.

**Ian:**

Well, so the interesting part . . . So you have to think about in two ways. So on the way up, I actually didn't mind it that much, because it was quite honestly rather easy, right? You're not really that unimpressed. You're moving so slowly that you're just kind of taking in the surroundings around you. It's night, but you're looking across at Lhotse, which is the fourth tallest mountain in the world.

You're taking the views of all these Himalayan peaks around you and it's really emotionally overwhelming and awesome. And the fact that you're not really working that hard enables you to sort of enjoy it. But problem with that is, you know when you leave camp four, you're only taking so much oxygen with you, and you're trying to budget how much you're

going to need to get up to the summit and get back down.

**Brent:**

That's your eight-hour, four-hour planning that you had said. Right?

**Ian:**

Exactly. And then the way it works is, about halfway up from camp four, there's this feature called the balcony, which is this kind of flat part before you get to the summit region on Everest, where you'll basically carry up two bottles of oxygen. When you get to the balcony, you'll swap out the one that you were using, which is now probably half-empty, bury it in the snow, put your name on it so that it's marked as yours, and then replace it with the full one, and the full one will take you from the balcony up to the summit, back to the balcony. And in that phase, you probably use that entire full bottle, and you'll swap it out for the one that should still be half-full that you left at the balcony.

**Brent:**

To take you the rest of the way back down.

**Ian:**

Yeah, exactly. And it's a pretty basic line graph on the amount of oxygen you're letting out of the tank and how many hours of oxygen you have, so you study the charts before you go and you say, "Okay, if I'm going to take out one liter or two liters or three liters a minute, whatever it is, I know that corresponds to four hours or eight hours or 12 hours of oxygen."

So you budget this, and you obviously give yourself some contingency, because you know this is your life you're talking about. But you don't necessarily budget for the massive lines that you're going to have up there. And so for me, that ended up taking me over 12 hours to get to the summit, when I thought it was going to take me less than eight.

But one of the craziest things about climbing Everest is, you can't actually see the gauge on your oxygen tank while you're climbing. It's in your backpack, it's on your back. It's kind of buried under a bunch of other stuff you have draped over it. So you have no idea how much oxygen you have. So if there was a leak in that tank, you're actually not aware of the fact that you could be running out faster than you expected to be running out.

**Brent:**

But you do have that mindset of where you are on the clock. So it's got to be a little bit nerve-racking, because you know that this is taking longer than you had anticipated.

**Ian:**

Exactly. But what's also weird . . . I was wearing a watch and stuff, but your watch and everything's buried numerous layers deep under all your jackets, and you're wearing mittens, and it's really tough to pull stuff back and see what time it is. So you think that you've been going for four hours since the last time you swapped oxygen, but you're not really sure if it's been four hours or if it's been three hours or if it's been six hours.

So you're kind of guesstimating, and every hour or two, you ask someone that's around you to look at your tank, just to double-check. But the way people get spread out on the mountain, it ends up not happening probably as frequently as it should be to be safe. So I guess, to get back to the original question, on the way up, I wasn't super concerned about it. I was aware of the fact that we were taking longer than I wanted to take, but I felt pretty good.

Just due to that, I was not that concerned. I just started getting very thirsty and hungry. So at this point, it's been 12 hours on the mountain, and I'd not had a sip of water or even a bite to eat. And by the way, on summit day you can burn over 20,000 calories just on your summit push.

**Brent:**

Oh my gosh.

**Ian:**

So if you're not drinking any water or eating any food, you quickly find yourself in a very depleted state. So I got to the summit and the first thing I thought was, "Man, 12 hours later, I just want a sip of water more than anything in the world. I just want a sip of water and a bite of food or an energy gel or something." And we got to the summit, and that's when I realized that I was down to about two to two and a half hours of oxygen left in my tank.

**Brent:**

Oh goodness. So, so much for basking in the glory of the summit, huh?

**Ian:**

Exactly.

**Brent:**

Hi, everyone. This brings the first part of my conversation with Ian to a close. Tune in to part two, when we'll hear about Ian's turbulent trip down Mount Everest, battling the elements and the clock as his oxygen levels ran life-threateningly low. All of this, as well as Ian's post-climb reflections, on the next episode of the Who We Are podcast, coming to deloitte.com and your favorite podcatcher soon.