

Dan Jane (FH, 1981-86): On Top Of The World

If you are new to climbing and you're looking for a peak to conquer for charity you might be tempted to think that climbing a mountain in Africa that is only six times higher than Snowdon would be well within your comfort zone.

Imagine strolling up from the humid foot hills in shorts and a tee shirt, snapping pictures of wildlife and relaxing each balmy evening as porters serve dinner under gently twinkling stars.

These thoughts might have crossed Old Blundellian Daniel Jane's mind when he first set himself a fitness challenge after a knee injury ended his rugby-playing days.

For twelve months Dan put himself through a strict regime in the gym and saw his fitness levels improve to a point where he felt ready for the physical challenge ahead.

But to conquer Tanzania's Mount Kilimanjaro, the railway engineer had to contend with frost-bite, altitude sickness and the sight of a dead climber being carried through base camp in a body bag.

During the eight-day trek in October, temperatures soared to 30 degrees in the shade by day, but plummeted to 30 below on the mountain's exposed slopes at night.

Acute Mountain Sickness caused nose bleeds, chronic fatigue and nausea. Fourteen people set out on the expedition including a mountain medic who carried out regular "sat tests" on the climbers to test oxygen saturation levels and blood pressure. AMS, or altitude sickness, is the biggest killer of climbers attempting the ascent.

The party started their own climbing on the Friday and spent two days slogging up through the foothills. Altitude sickness began to affect members of the group from the outset, but symptoms became more acute with each passing day.

The first sign of the cold they were to encounter later came on the Sunday morning when the group woke to find their campsite covered in a thick frost. Three days later they had their chilling encounter with a body bag much higher up the mountain.

Just after 11pm on the night of Wednesday, October 12, the climbers set off by lamp light on what they knew would be a punishing fourteen-hour push for the peaks that comprise Kilimanjaro's summit.

But as they climbed up the temperature dropped rapidly and a biting wind battered the climbers, almost lifting people off their feet.

One member of the group turned back and started to descend with a guide and Dan started to feel sharp pains in his side.

“I was suffering from what I thought was stitch and was told to drink water,” recalls Dan.

“I took my water bottle out from inside my jacket to find it had frozen solid and was sticking to my side. It wasn’t stitch; I was starting to suffer from frost bite.”

Dan put the frozen water in his rucksack and pushed on knowing that in three hours first light would bring sunshine and some relief from the cold.

“When dawn did break it was a spectacular sight. Just short of Stella Point we could see down to the camp below and to the cloud base some 3000m below us. Small clouds were whipped past us by the wind, which was now dropping. Thankfully the temperature rose, but not enough to thaw the water bottles.”

At 9am Dan was one of six climbers to trudge through the desperately thin air on the final one-mile ridge walk to the highest point in Africa, Uhuru, which stands at 5,895m. The small group stopped briefly for photographs and to admire the magnificent view of the continent below.

The group had taken the longer Lemosho route to climb Kilimanjaro and were pleased their decision have given them more time to adjust to the altitude and the resulting lack of oxygen.

It took just a day and a half to retrace their steps.

The mountain was sooner behind them than the group squared up to their next challenge – using the money they had raised to help the needy.

The group’s members all work for the railway industry and their Train To Kili expedition was raising money for a charity called The Railway Children. It seeks to help the vulnerable youngsters who often drift towards railway lines and stations when they find themselves homeless in Britain, in Africa and in the Indian sub-continent.

Before they left, the group visited an example project run by the charity at Mkombozi where boys were taught to live in the community and given an education.

Dan funded the expedition himself and so every penny he raises will go to help children. His target is £10,000 and he has raised £7,500 so far.

You can help him by donating at <http://www.virginmoneygiving.com/DanielJane>.