

**Seasonal Stories  
for  
the Nepalese Himalaya**

**2007**

**by Elizabeth Hawley**



## **Spring 2007: Two Men Surmount Everest's Second Step Without a Ladder**

### **After the Hordes Have Gone Home**

#### **Global Warming Makes Ama Dablam Dangerous and Difficult**

#### **and Cho Oyu May Be Similarly Affected**

Centuries ago European theologians debated the question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. The modern equivalent might be how many climbers can stand on the summit of Everest. We may soon find out as the numbers rise dramatically.

The authorities in Beijing said last November they would limit the number of climbers on the mountain this spring and raise their fees. They raised the fees, all right, by \$1000 per climber, but as to numbers, they allowed hundreds to move up and down throughout the season, even while a large Chinese team made a trial run to the summit with Olympic-style torches and tested the torches' performance at 8850 meters. (No problem.)

Only one climber is known to have been turned away: the mayor of Prague, Pavel Bem, was refused entry into Tibet at the Nepalese border. The reason was entirely unconnected with crowding on Everest, but was due to his having shown a Tibetan flag in front of the Chinese embassy in Prague and having met the Dalai Lama several times. So he and his teammates went around to the Nepalese side, and he climbed it successfully from there.

Back on the Tibetan side, two skilled climbers aimed to discover whether it is actually possible to scale the formidable north-side barrier known as the Second Step without its ladder. A Chinese expedition in 1975 fixed a ladder there on their way to the summit; a longer and wider one was placed there three years ago. Now a 45-year-old American professional climber, Conrad Anker, and a British professional rock climber, Leo Houlding, 26, wanted to help answer the ongoing debate among mountaineers and climbing buffs since 1924: could two British climbers, George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, have successfully surmounted this rock feature that June? Anker's answer after he and Houlding had scaled the Step is yes and no.

A big Chinese team reported in 1960 that they had reached the top after scaling the Step by one man standing on another's shoulders—and getting badly frostbitten in the process. At the time, there was widespread disbelief in the West, and when in 1975 another Chinese expedition climbed the same route, they put a ladder up the Step to make it easier to climb. Ever since, all summiters on this route have used it or its recent replacement.

Anker's yes is that not only can the Step be climbed without a ladder, but also he actually found it easier that way. After all other expeditions had left the mountain and the ladder and ropes had been taken away, he and Houlding climbed the Step in 20 minutes. Of course what is true for the highly skilled is not true for

the general public, who go to Everest's slopes in ever-greater numbers. But as Anker and Houlding showed that the Step could be surmounted without ladder and ropes, it is theoretically possible that Mallory and Irvine did so too.

But Anker's no is that he does not believe Mallory or Irvine could have gotten to the top in 1924. There were no fixed ropes, let alone any ladder, in place for them; their clothes were too thin for the extreme cold at the highest altitudes—he put some on at 7500m and had no desire to climb in them—and the gear available in 1924 was not nearly so good as it is today. He could have added another reason: climbing skills had not been developed to today's higher standards. He feels "it's incredible that they got to the Yellow Band" above 8,100 meters, where Irvine's ice axe was found in 1933. All the way? Not likely.

A vast number of men and women did summit Everest this spring: 597 compared to 458 last spring and 305 the spring before that. An experienced leader of commercial expeditions on the north side, Russell Brice, attributes the large number of successes on his side this season—287 climbers—to the fact that the trail was very fast, which enabled so many climbers to move up and down rapidly, in some cases to descend all the way from summit to advance base camp on the same day, and many unskilled climbers to reach high altitudes and even to succeed. The route was fast because Brice's Sherpas stamped it down when they were fixing the ropes to the top at the end of April; then light snowfall froze the route. When climbers came along after the Sherpas, they moved on top of a thin layer of snow covering the frozen trail.

Amongst the astonishing total 597 who managed to summit Everest was the newly crowned oldest person, Katsuske Yanagisawa of Japan, who was 71 years and 63 days old when he climbed to the top on 22 May. He dethroned another Japanese, Takao Arayama, who was a mere 70 years, 225 days old last year.

A Briton, David Tait, who intended to make a double traverse—up the north side, down the south, back up the south side and down the north—with a Sherpa, found he was too tired after descending the south side and would need a long rest before going back up again; he stopped there. He explained later that in his training for Everest, he had neglected to train for his descent, and his knees felt it. Anyway, his single traverse was "great, fantastic."

A party of three Filipinas and three Sherpas followed Tait the next day in their own north-south traverse. Now traversers are boasting of being first from their country, just as occasionally someone is still declared to be the first to the summit of his or her nationality. And in the case of these three women, Janet Belarmino, Carina Dayondon, and Noelle Cristina Wenceslao, they are correctly claiming to be the first females. They are also the first, unluckily, to be charged an extra fee of \$3000 per climbing member for the privilege of making a traverse from the Tibetan side, as per a sudden demand by the authorities in Beijing in mid-April. (Sherpas not charged.)

Amongst those who did not reach the summit this spring were:

- \* an ex-deputy agriculture minister of Malaysia, Khalid Yunus, who was defeated by the altitude at about 7200m;
- \* an Austrian couple, Wilfried and Sylvia Studer, who made their 11th attempt without using artificial oxygen, reached 8700m together, and declared they would not come again;
- \* a Norwegian, Cato Pedersen, with no left arm and a prosthesis on his right forearm, who got to 8600m before the weather began to look ominous, and who hadn't the strength to try for the summit a second time;
- \* a Dutchman, Wim Hof, known as the Iceman, who planned to go without bottled oxygen to 7250m wearing only shorts, socks and high climbing boots—"climbing in the cold gives a very powerful feeling," he explained—and actually reached 7400m before he reported to his teammates that his legs had started to freeze and he turned back; in Kathmandu he said he was completely satisfied.

Four Americans were forcibly removed from the base camp area in Tibet and expelled from the country in late April, but they were not there to climb the mountain. Their aim was instead to protest the Chinese government's publicizing Everest and Tibet in connection with the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. One American reportedly wore a t-shirt demanding "No torch through Tibet," and two others raised a banner calling for "Free Tibet." Not surprisingly, the authorities saw their actions as "illegal activities aimed at splitting China" and quickly removed them.

The Chinese came in for criticism from environmentalists who reacted to news reports about work scheduled to begin on a highway to base camp to speed the torch on its way. Some critics even understood that a road was about to be built up the side of the huge mountain, thus doing terrible damage to its presumed pristine character.

The possibility of putting a paved road up Everest boggles the mind; the Chinese certainly had no such idea. Actually, a road to base camp has existed for some years, and what the authorities were about to do was to improve it, to widen and hardtop it. This won't attract any more climbers, as the authorities seemed to hope, but it will speed up and make less uncomfortable the trip to and from base camp not only for Olympic torchbearers but also for people being evacuated to Kathmandu for medical care.

This season's death toll of seven was fortunately well below last spring's near record of 11, and even further below it in terms of percentage of people on the mountain. The body of one of last year's climbers, David Sharp, whose lonely death drew a large amount of outraged commentary at the time, was moved away from the trail this spring at his family's request. (The 1996 Indian body known as Greenboots, a macabre landmark when not covered by snow, was not removed; it was underneath the snow this season, and anyway it is so solidly frozen in place that earlier efforts to move it had failed.)

No new routes were put up, no virgin peaks “conquered” this spring. Two well-known climbers did try. Ueli Steck of Switzerland wanted to complete a route on Annapurna I’s vast south face that had been started in the autumn of 1992 by French climbers Pierre Beghin and Jean-Christophe Lafaille. They had been attempting an alpine-style ascent of the great face by a new line slightly to the right (east) of the 1970 Bonington route and had reached 7400m, then decided they should retreat in the face of snow and wind. Beghin’s rappel rope failed him, and he fell to his death.

This May Steck went to complete this line entirely alone, but he was defeated at only 5850m on 21 May when he was hit by a falling stone that smashed his helmet—but not his head, although he was knocked out and has no memory of what happened. He staggered away badly bruised on the back of his head and his spinal area, but no blood flowed, and as he wandered around not knowing exactly where he was, a member of his support staff found him. With a badly bruised body and his only helmet shattered, Steck abandoned the idea of climbing the south face of Annapurna just then. “This route is climbable,” he said, but he didn’t know whether he still wanted to be the one to climb it.

Another attempt to do something new was planned by the American Peter Athans, who wanted to have a look at, and if possible to climb, a more modest 6759m mountain called Khumjung, which despite its name, is not in Everest’s Khumbu area but is northwest of the village of Jomsom in north-central Nepal. The mountain was not known to have ever been attempted before—and it still isn’t.

Athans’ two-man team without Sherpas was hit by two snowstorms, its horsemen were late at their rendezvous, Athans had other commitments, and too little time. They saw the top half of their mountain from their base camp some distance away but did not get to it—they did no climbing at all. Athans said he wanted to return in the autumn with more time and more men. This trip had been a useful reconnaissance.

The Himalaya appear to be getting drier, so relatively easy mountains are becoming technically more difficult with more exposed rock and more danger from unusual avalanching. Ama Dablam, a 6814m neighbor of Everest, is no longer the mountain it used to be since last November, when a huge mass of ice broke away above Camp 3 (about 6500m), swept six climbers in their tents hundreds of meters down the mountainside and buried them in a mound of avalanche debris.

According to Giampietro Verza, a mountain guide who knows the area well and who led a small Italian team to Ama Dablam this spring, the ideal area for Camp 3 is still exposed to ice avalanching, and the large serac on the final ice slope is dangerously cracked. Sherpas refuse to camp under this danger, and to scale the mountain directly from Camp 2—that is, without the usual third high camp—makes the final summit climb too long for many climbers, setting aside consideration of the dangerous possibility of falling ice. “This mountain remains the desired one for many climbers, but now you have to consider that this beauty is demanding more,” Vera remarked.

Fourteen teams attempted Ama Dablam's standard southwest ridge route this season. For the first time since the spring of 1996, not one succeeded. Too many days of falling snow was the explanation given by some, but more said that bad snow conditions on the route caused them to abandon their climbs at altitudes between 5900m and 6100m.

The only success on Ama Dablam this spring was achieved by two Americans who were looking for difficulty, Aric Baldwin and James Cromie. They found it in their 100m-a-day ascent of the northeast spur without Sherpas in a series of bivouacs. They slept on the summit, waiting for daylight so they could see if anyone had already made the route to the top up the southwest ridge, which they weren't familiar with. No one had, but they managed to descend safely.

Some climbers back from Cho Oyu, the least difficult of the world's 8000m mountains and for that reason an extremely popular one, reported this spring that it too is becoming harder technically. The mountains, like their glaciers, are changing.

**Autumn 2007: Prospective Oldest Summitter of Everest Wary of Chinese  
Army Control Next Spring  
Ama Dablam's Normal Route Still of Serious Concern;  
No Climbing Deaths in Autumn Season for First Time in Decades;  
Tomaz Humar's Latest Great Face Climb**

The majority of climbers claiming recognition as the oldest summiters—as well as the oldest women summiters—have been Japanese. This seems to be explained by the fact that Japan has the world's longest-living population; this in turn is generally thought to be due to their diet based on fish and vegetables, their trim physiques, Japan's excellent health care facilities, and its well-developed activities for elderly people.

The Japanese climber famous as the “man who skied down Everest” when he made a dramatic partial ski descent in 1970, Yuichiro Miura, became the oldest Everest summitter in May 2003 at the age of 70, five years older than the oldest person before him. Now Miura aims at the age of 75 to be again the eldest of all Everest “conquerors.”

Miura scaled the mountain from Nepal's side in 2003; now he wants to summit it from Tibet. But he is not completely certain that he will be permitted to do so despite the fact that he has a “license” from the Chinese Mountaineering Association for the climb. Next year, as everyone on earth knows, is the year of the Beijing Olympics, and the Olympic torch is to arrive there via China's route to the highest point on earth. Miura plans to make his summit bid in June, well after the torch will have left Tibet, but he understands that the Chinese army next spring will be in “total control” of Everest with 200 soldiers posted there. He fears that the military may not honor the CMA permit.

This autumn Miura tested his current tolerance for high altitude by climbing from the northern base camp up to 6800m. Since he had had two heart operations since last December, doctors in Japan were monitoring him throughout the climb by means of a tiny device attached to him. Their report was that he was just fine. Even so, he is 75. He says, “My stamina now is 50% of what it was when I was 35 years old.”

Every year, Everest's neighbor in Nepal, 6814m Ama Dablam, attracts hundreds of foreign climbers who see it while on trek and are attracted by its beauty. But last year it became a death trap when six people were swept to their deaths by an avalanche that took with it half of the constricted site for the highest camp on its normal route, the southwest ridge, and is still subject to occasional mini-avalanching of ice.

This autumn there were 56 teams on its standard route, and they came even from Bosnia, Iceland and Israel, countries not noted for their mountaineers. Some expeditions skipped camp 3 altogether, others pitched what they called Camp 2.7 or

2.8. Still others did pitch a camp at the traditional altitude, 6300m, but as far to the right of the avalanche path as possible.

The leader of a commercial expedition who used the old Camp 3 site was Luis Benitez, an American leader of an international group. He explained why: if his clients had tried to summit from Camp 2, a large proportion of them would never have made it to the top. They were just not strong enough to go all that distance up and back in one day.

A South Korean team did skip Camp 3. They left their Camp 2 at 6100m at three o'clock one morning, were on the summit 15 hours later, stayed there half an hour, and did not get back to Camp 2 until 1:00 a.m. the next day. They were moving up and back down for a grand total of 21 and one-half hours.

Benitez himself, who has led groups on Ama Dablam before, was not happy about the continuing danger of falling debris. Not all leaders agreed with the degree of his concern, but he felt "the hazard level is significantly higher" even if Camp 3 is skipped. He believed that "clients need to be made aware of the increased hazard because of the ice seracs threatening the route." There was a release of ice while his members were in Camp 3; they were far enough to the right of the seracs' path not to get hit, but they "felt the blast" of wind from the falling ice. "The whole Dablam is calving, and eventually all of it will come off," he said.

In the meantime, until all of it has fallen off, perhaps commercial teams should not use the southwest-ridge route. But if another route were substituted for it, a higher degree of technical skill would be required of the clients. Pumori, also in the Everest region, used to be included in commercial organizer's offerings, but its southeast face came to be known as fatally avalanche-prone, and few venture to it now. The mountain's safer ridge routes present technical challenges not suitable for commercially organized groups.

In 1967, when only two expeditions attempted Nepalese Himalayan peaks over 6600m in the autumn, there were no deaths amongst climbers. Every autumn since then there have been deaths—until this autumn, when none of its 183 teams suffered any fatalities. Why? Why none now, after 40 years of fatal falls, pulmonary edema cases and other kinds of illness, and climbers freezing to death at high altitudes?

Certainly there has been increased understanding of the causes of high-altitude sickness and what to do about it, and this knowledge is more widely shared. Clothing, sleeping bags, tents, climbing rope and other gear have improved and become more widely available, notably in Eastern Europe. But do these factors fully account for the difference? The weather has gotten no kinder. Has it been all of the above plus climbers' better judgement and better weather forecasts on which to base their judgement—plus sheer good luck? Whatever the reasons, it's a nice surprise.

Any account of the seasons' best climbs begins with the Annapurna I south face effort by Tomaz Humar, the Slovenian expert in ascending the great mountain faces solo. Eight years ago Humar displayed his remarkable skills on the world's seventh highest mountain, Dhaulagiri I, when he made the first serious attempt by

anyone to forge a direct line up the middle of its formidable south face and succeeded in gaining the impressive altitude of 7900m on that great 4000m wall solo.

Now also on Annapurna I, the world's tenth highest, he did not reach the very top of the 8091m mountain. But, climbing entirely alone again, he pioneered a new line up the eastern end of its huge south face to its very long east ridge and climbed and crawled to the east summit, 8026m. He moved without the benefit of bottled oxygen or fixed ropes as well as any climbing partner on the face and the ridge.

Humar selected the far eastern end of the face because there are not so many falling stones here as elsewhere. But his first major problem was to find a feasible way to get to the face among very confusing rock towers and wide crevasses. It took him five days to find the "key," a small hidden plateau near the foot of the face. He then rested at base camp and waited for a snowstorm to come to an end before going for his climb.

At 6:00 p.m. on 24 October, he made his first bivouac at 5800m on the "key" plateau. He had developed a toothache the day before, so he stayed at the bivouac an extra day to acclimatize and nurse his toothache, but he also spent three hours to look for the way to cross the plateau to get to the face. A fierce wind pushed his tent for 20 meters when he was inside it, but no damage done.

Finally, on the 26th, he left the bivouac and began his push up the face. He took with him food for five days, a stove and two gas cylinders, a bivouac sack, a small sleeping bag, two ice screws, two Prusiks and an ice axe, but no helmet and of course no oxygen. At first the face was bare rock, then covered with snow, then rock, again snow, and his second bivouac at 7200m was a large snow hole he dug out of deep snow. He stayed here for two nights while rocks fell down the face beside his snug hole; he was not hit.

On the 28th, he resumed his climb. He left his snow hole with the "absolute minimum" of gear. He started up at 6:00 a.m. despite strong wind and his not having slept the previous night while thinking about what to do the next day. It was very cold. After two hours he had gained the east ridge and began to move along the ridge to the east summit; most of the way there he actually traversed a few meters below the ridge on the north face, moving carefully, very conscious of the danger of cornices breaking under his weight. Furthermore, he had very strong wind to contend with: while moving from the point where he gained the ridge to the east summit, he often had to lie down on the snow and crawl forward on his hands and knees between the gusts.

He had expected to reach the east summit at noon, but it was 3:00 p.m. when he got to this 8026m point. He very soon began his descent down the way he had come up. But this also was not easy. The wind had obliterated his tracks, and after it became dark, the light from his headlamp lasted only briefly. He had to wait for the moon to rise at about 7:00 p.m. to give him sufficient light to climb over the mini-peaks on the ridge. At 8:25 p.m. he was back in his second bivouac's snow hole. He brewed some hot drinks and slept there until 2:00-3:00 a.m. of the 29th before

completing his descent. By now his toes had become slightly frostbitten, but he had successfully scaled the face and next day was safely sheltered in his base camp.

Another hotshot eastern European mountaineer is Valeri Babanov of Russia. He and his climbing partner, Sergei Kofanov, went to the formidably difficult and bitterly cold north face of Jannu (also called Khumbhakarna), 7710m in far eastern Nepal. From base camp at 4700m on the Khumbhakarna Glacier on 14 October, they began their ascent.

They took only a small tent, a light sleeping bag for two, two short ropes but no rope at all for fixing the route, five gas cylinders, a stove, food for eight or nine days, only 12 snow pitons, seven nuts, seven or eight "friends," and four snowbars. Their packs weighed 20 kgs. Their route took them across the upper glacier on its right side through a small gully, across a large plateau to the Yamatari La (Pass), up the west pillar, to the southwest ridge and made their fourth bivouac just 100 m. below the west shoulder at 7300m.

Finally on the 20th, they took the absolute minimum of equipment for the last part of their ascent, where some of the pitches were very technical on mixed rock and ice. They slept at 7600m and next day woke very early, at 4:30 a.m., because they were very cold after having spent the night without a sleeping bag. They completed the ascent of the summit ridge and at 9:45 a.m. were on a snow tower, the summit, slightly beyond a false summit, a 20m lower point that at first they had thought was the top. It was like climbing to the top of a skyscraper, Babanov said. He called their route "a very logical line," a "beautiful" line, and the climb "a great challenge altogether."