

**Seasonal Stories
for
the Nepalese Himalaya**

2013

by Elizabeth Hawley

Spring 2013: A Nasty Brawl Breaks Out on Everest Between Sherpas and European Climbers

The Last Stand on Everest by an Aging Record Holder

The customary rope-fixers on Everest, who extend fixed lines all the way to the 8850m summit, expect the foreigners to wait—or perhaps in rare cases at least climb behind them—while they complete their task. They are experienced climbers selected by the leaders of a few big commercial expeditions and are accustomed to being the pioneers up the mountain while docile clients of the commercial expeditions wait for these hotshot Sherpas to prepare the route to enable just about anybody to climb Mount Everest.

This spring, however, on 27 April, a small party of highly skilled European independent mountaineers had gotten ahead of the rope-fixers several days earlier and had pitched a camp on the west face of Lhotse, well above the high point already reached by the ropes. They had descended to a lower camp, but now they wanted to return to the camp and move on up. They were in the acclimatization phase of their intended ascent of a new route on the southwest face on Everest.

Two of the Europeans were the well-known Swiss mountaineer, Ueli Steck, and the equally famous Italian, Simone Moro. With them was a Briton as their photographer, Jonathan Griffin. Steck seems to have a calm temperament, but the same cannot be said of his excitable Italian teammate, who unfortunately has visited Nepal often enough to be fluent in Nepalese swearwords. When confronted by angry Sherpas, an explosion was not very surprising.

There are several conflicting accounts about who set off the explosion, who did what, which European first punched a Sherpa, and who started beating a European with whatever came to hand. Moro helped to raise the temperature by casting aspersions in Nepali on some of the Sherpas' mothers. No one was seriously wounded, and the two sides were finally calmed down by the intervention of cooler heads.

One account by a very reliable Sherpa source who was at BC throughout the conflict, explained some necessary background:

1. There had been a meeting of Everest/Lhotse team leaders to discuss their climb; Moro was the nominal leader of his team and had not been invited perhaps because he and Steck were believed to be contemptuous of commercial expeditions, and perhaps because his team's permit for Everest was for its southwest face and this route does not ascend the Lhotse face; it was not generally known that they also possessed a permit to climb Lhotse.

At this meeting, it was agreed no climbers would move close to or across the rope-fixers' route on the west face of Lhotse while they were working on it because of the difficulty and danger for the Sherpas involved; it's an area

that makes Sherpas tense and nervous. Moro and Steck knew nothing about this agreement.

2. Moro knew how to swear fluently in Nepali and had a volatile temperament. After he was told to get away from the rope-fixers' route, he twice used unacceptable swearwords about the Sherpas and their parentage on the fixers' open radio frequency that just about all the teams were tuned into. This made not only the fixers, but also many of the other Sherpas on the mountains furious.
3. Several accounts say that the leader of large commercial team, Marty Schmidt, came along, saw a young Sherpa with a rock in his hand, and without knowing what the tense situation was all about, immediately threw a punch at the Sherpa. This, according to these accounts, set off the brawl. Schmidt has denied he struck first but claims that when he was kicked and beaten with a rock, he "stood up in self-defence and threw a punch at this [angry Sherpa] crowd."

The fight was on. A large number of young hot-headed Sherpas joined in. Moro and Steck were given an ultimatum to get off Everest immediately and threatened with death if they returned to their climb. They and Griffin quickly departed.

The highly experienced Everest climber and commercial expedition leader Russell Brice was at base camp while all this was going on. He has commented that his sirdar or head Sherpa, Phurba Tashi, has climbed Everest 21 times, is smart and a powerful person in his community (he comes from Khumjung in the Khumbu area just south of Everest), "but he's totally quiet. So when we talk about the current situation, his answer is, I have nothing to say. But I promise you, he'll have a huge amount to say within his own community." Brice added, "when older sirdars come to you to apologize for what younger guys have done, and they have tears in their eyes, I really take notice. I never see Sherpas cry, not even at funerals. When a Sherpa apologizes like that, it's from their heart and soul."

My own view of the underlying cause of the Sherpas' aggression was a collision between independent foreigners who were technically highly skilled mountaineers, nonconformists who never use fixed ropes or bottled oxygen, on the one hand, and Sherpas, who consider they are putting their own lives at risk fixing the lines in tricky places, felt a grave loss of face when some foreigners did not wait for them to finish their job but instead raced ahead.

An Estonian team of man and wife went to Cho Oyu and declared afterwards that they had reached the summit together, making Mrs. Anu Noulik the first Estonian woman summitter. But the small mountaineering community in their country voiced great doubt about their claim, and the detailed report I received from my own source did raise serious questions. So I sent Anu Noulik an e-mail seeking her version. She was slow in replying because she underwent an operation to amputate her badly frostbitten fingers. But she eventually answered:

- Q. You had not wanted to have any Sherpas helping you on your climb, but you hired Roshan Dipen Bhattarai on the mountain. He had been on Cho Oyu twice before and had climbed up to 7500m in 2011. There was no fixed rope above C2, so he fixed the route up to 7500m, where you had your C3.
- A. We had planned to climb without a Sherpa, but we still needed to find someone who knew the route and the only person in BC who had climbed to the summit before was Roshan. He had also fixed the route until 7500m.
- Q. But when you made your summit climb, there was no fixed rope all the way from 7500m to the 8201m summit. Visibility on your summit day was no more than one meter ahead, and the wind was blowing at 100 km./hr.
- A. There were old ropes from the 3rd camp leading up to the plateau so we used those. Visibility was mostly all right on the road to the plateau. Getting there the visibility started to get worse, but it was definitely further than one meter. It might have been one meter when we started to go back and then the storm got to us.
- Q. How could you manage to stand up in such strong wind?
- A. It was really very hard. We held on to the ropes all the time. I couldn't stand up and got on my knees at the time, and my husband helped me.
- Q. How could you find the correct line to the summit in such conditions, especially with no fixed lines to guide you, and your Sherpa never having been higher than 7500m himself [according to the Himalayan Database]?
- A. We knew that our Sherpa had been on the summit twice before. and we strongly believed that it was so because he knew the way even in the dark. And he knew where the right place was to rise on the summit plateau. And there were several old ropes like I said before.
- Q. You of course could take no photos at the summit because of very poor visibility. Can you describe the summit area? For example, was it very steep uphill to the summit, or was there a final gentle slope to the top?
- A. We have one photo of the summit. Our camera was frozen and our Sherpa couldn't take our picture. I also tried, but couldn't. I already gave up trying when the camera took a crooked picture of my husband—the quality was poor. The last slope before the summit plateau was really steep and rocky. The plateau wasn't so steep and it was much easier to go there, no more ropes, also the snow wasn't so deep and only the rising wind was against and it started snowing.
- Q. Your and your husband's oxygen supply stopped after one hour's ascent from camp 3, but you could carry on without it for ten more hours' ascent to the summit and three hours' return to camp 3. Is this correct?

A. We only wanted to try the oxygen for future but there was no actual need for it (our acclimatization was excellent). I don't know how long my only bottle lasted but my mask was frozen soon and I gave up. When we climbed up the culuar [couloir] and went to the final slopes we put the masks in out backpacks. We never planned to use oxygen but decided to see how it goes.

Q. You climbed to the top with inadequate gloves protecting your fingers, leaving you with serious frostbite. Correct?

A. I wore big warm gloves, but there were no inner gloves. My frostbite was probably not caused by the gloves, but my body just gave up in such hard condition.

Q. Was this epic struggle rewarding to you and your husband?

A. No, it wasn't. I went in the hopes of fulfilling my dream and in the end it didn't turn out though. I wanted to go up there for the view. I wanted to see Everest, but we didn't see it. I was very disappointed. Thinking back I regret going to the top after it was clear that the weather was getting worse, but at the end it was the only accomplishment which we succeeded in. Our planning and training before the trip paid off because we did get to the top.

What to make of this claim? An answer from a member of an Austrian-German expedition who was on Cho Oyu at the time and who met the couple as they returned to their highest camp: "Maybe they were there [on the summit], maybe not... At least they believe that they were there (even if they were not)."

A new age record for summiting Everest was set on 23 May by the 80-year-old professional Japanese skier, Yuichiro Miura, but it was clearly a struggle, and it seems most unlikely that he will return.

His acclimatization in Nepal took place on nearby Pumori rather than the normal trial period on the lower reaches of Everest itself. This was to avoid his having to go through the Khumbu Icefall more than once.

He and his three teammates, who included his son Gota Miura, went in one continuous ascent starting from base camp on 16 May, when they occupied C1, a camp some expeditions don't even bother with. On the 17th they slept in C2, on the 19th in C3. On the 20th they made an unusual intermediate camp before the route traverses across the top of Geneva Spur, a major rock formation, to reach the South Col and the site for C4. On the 21st they were in C4 itself, and on the 22nd they pitched a very seldom final camp at the Balcony, a large ledge at 8500m.

The ledge is large, but not large enough for all members and the seven Sherpas in the summit party. Two Sherpas slept there with the members while the other five stayed in C4 and caught up with the summiters early the following morning. The four members and two Sherpas left C5 for the top together at 2:00 am on 23 May and were on the summit seven hours later with the other Sherpas.

By now Miura was extremely tired and weak. In his descent, he was short-roped from 8700m, 150 vertical meters below the top, to C4 at 7900m on the South Col. He arrived at C4 at 7:20 pm, more than ten hours after he stood on the summit.

The next day he was still exhausted and took 13 hours to descend from 7900m to C2 at 6400m in the Western Cwm. But this was his last day of down-climbing, for on the 26th he flew by helicopter from C2 over the remainder of the climbing route directly to his comfortable Kathmandu hotel. (It was lucky that the team had not tried to descend through the Icefall: a sizable part of the Icefall collapsed on the 25th.) On the 28th he left for Japan.

As he entered his hotel and sat down near the entrance for photographers, he seemed tired but answered questions smoothly in English. He was non-committal about a return to Everest, but he didn't respond with a quick affirmative as he had five years previously. And his son's reply for him was also non-committal. The father was not egged on to try again as he had been five years ago when a Nepalese climber 15 months older than he got to the top the day before Miura was there in 2008. This time the Nepalese, Min Bahadur Sherchan, did not appear. Surely this was Miura's last stand.

An impressive first in the tightly controlled lives of the women of Saudi Arabia was the successful ascent of Everest by a 27-year-old art director from Jeddah, Ms. Raha Moharrak. Few climbers come to Nepal from the Arabian side of the Gulf, and none of their Everest summiters has been a woman. (Women from Iran, on the opposite side, which has a different culture and its own mountainous region, are no longer rare.)

Although it didn't take place in Nepal, also worth noting is the first attack by militants on an expedition in Pakistan. On 22 June, a murderous assault by Taliban men on a base camp for Nanga Parbat in the Karakoram Range indiscriminately killed a group of climbers including one Nepalese Sherpa. Sona Sherpa, 36, who came from Chheskam, a village in eastern Solukhumbu district. He had summited Everest with a Japanese woman in mid-May and in earlier years with Indian and South Korean teams, and also Makalu once, again with Koreans.

**Autumn 2013: Ueli Steck Makes a Dramatic Ascent of Annapurna, But As
Always There Are Doubters
First Ascents Are Still Being Made in Nepal**

Ueli Steck on Annapurna

Ueli Steck, a Swiss mountaineer well known for significant ascents in the Himalaya, outdid himself this autumn by making an astonishing rapid climb of Annapurna I by a new line up the vast south face near the Bonington route without supplemental oxygen and entirely alone from the bergschrund at 5650m.

He spent only 18.5 hours from his advance base camp at 5000m to the 8091m top, where he spent only a couple of minutes. He was back in his advance base camp at 5000m in a total of elapsed time of no more than 28 hours. His account of this spectacular climb was so astonishing that immediately voices were raised in disbelief.

Steck is a mild man, a very gifted Himalayan mountaineer who quietly gets on with his climbs, usually with one or two teammates. He is not given to flamboyant behaviour, and no one who knows him well doubts his word. That he was awarded the highly coveted Piolet d'Or after his Annapurna climb became known is evidence of this trust.

He lost his camera to a small avalanche during his ascent, so he had no photographs to prove his claim, although two of his Nepalese base camp staff stated that they saw the light of his headlamp perhaps 200 meters below the top. Steck told a German climbing magazine, "Of course I would like to have some proof. However this was not my priority when I was climbing the wall. ... I am the only one who knows that I summited Annapurna I. It was a liberating experience. If someone wants to doubt it, they can. ... On the face, I made my decisions without thinking about having to prove anything to anyone. I was exposed [during the climb] and the only important thing for me up there was to survive. In an adventure you cannot plan everything. If this was possible it would no longer be an adventure."

Chief amongst those who questioned Steck's success was Andreas Kubin, former editor-in-chief of a German climbing magazine and a highly skilled climber himself, who in an interview raised a number of points which he believed cast doubt on Steck's account.

According to Kubin, Steck had talked about tracks on the summit slope which turned out to have been made by avalanching; the night of his ascent there was a new moon, which meant no moonlight, but Steck kept switching his headlamp off during the dark hours to save its batteries; he sent a message to men at base camp saying he had returned safely to Camp 2 without mentioning his having reached the top; and so on.

Kubin states that "the doubts and controversies about this ascent will remain" despite the Piolet d'Or award. ... We as mountaineers have to ask these questions; otherwise we would kill mountaineering. If, in the age of GPS, GO PRO cameras and

wrist computers, you are unable to document your climb properly, you did not do a good job. ... Don't give this award to the people with the most innocent eyes, but to those who have proof of their achievements. This is the only way this prize will keep its value and mountaineering keeps its credibility.”

First ascent of Bamongo

The majority of people who come to climb in Nepal go only to the well-known peaks, Everest, Cho Oyu and Ama Dablam on paths well worn by hundreds of earlier climbers. However, an obscure 6400m mountain east of Kathmandu in the area of Gaurishankar called Bamongo seems to have become an obsession with an Austrian climber, Josef Einwaller, who led the only previous attempts, two unsuccessful teams in 2010 and the following year, and was set to lead one more this autumn until a health problem prevented him from reaching base camp.

This season's climb was made in his absence by a small Austrian-Chinese-Nepalese team in a quick ascent via its steep southwest face up a ridge or pillar to its top, then on the face itself to the final southwest ridge to the summit. On 29 October, Liu Yong, a seasoned Chinese climber and guide, and two Nepalis, Mingma Gyalje and Pema Tshering Sherpa, climbed to 5440m with a tent, and bivouacked there. The next day, they left the tent at 5:00 am, reached the summit at 2:25 pm and were back down in base camp (4800m) at 9:30 pm that evening. They climbed so fast that “we didn't even have time to eat and drink,” Liu commented.

It was by no means a stroll up the mountain. They climbed without fixed rope; the three summiters tied up in one 60-meter rope. The face generally slanted at 40 to 60 degrees with the last 30 meters to the summit ridge at almost 80 to 90 degrees. The final stage was on a sharp knife-edge ridge with very soft snow; they climbed five pitches with little protection “then another more than one hour running belay without protection because of soft snow,” according to Liu. They had accomplished the first ascent of Bamongo.

Himlung's popularity increasing

An increasing number of organizers of commercial expeditions are offering Himlung, a 7126m peak in central Nepal in the general area of Manaslu, to fill the gap in their catalogues between 6814m Ama Dablam (spring and autumn climbs) and the 8000ers, Everest (a spring climb), Cho Oyu and Manaslu (either season). Altogether 9 teams were on Himlung this season, which was not at all a large number compared to those on the favourite peaks, but it may well increase in the near future.

Himlung is not difficult technically, it just requires perseverance. An indication of this was provided this autumn by a huge 72-member medical research group with 25 climbing Sherpas, which was organized by a Swiss enterprise and led by a Swiss physician, Urs Hefti. With 5000 meters of rope fixed along the route to the top, 30 of its members accompanied by 17 Sherpas ascended the southwest ridge from their third high camp to the summit between 10:00 am and 4:00 pm on 22 October; 33 other

members managed to reach their second high camp at 6500m. The only serious health problems were hypothermia and altitude sickness which caused the evacuation of two members; there were no injuries due to falls or any other accidents.

Ama Dablam's ropes

At 6814m, Ama Dablam is not very high by Himalayan standards, and it attracts many climbers because of its close proximity to Everest and its shapely figure. It is listed in every brochure of commercial organizers and is a magnet to independent alpinists as well. But its normal southwest-ridge route does present some technical difficulties; the climbers who flock to it do not venture to its summit without the aid of fixed ropes. But who fixes the ropes?

This autumn 20 teams quit after reaching at least 6000m, even 6350m. Many of them gave as their reason to turn back and go home the fact that there were no fixed ropes ahead. None of these teams had rope-fixing capability.

Then along came a commercial team led by Adrian Ballinger that did have the capability. His three rope-fixing Sherpas took ropes to the summit on 15 November and his clients were on the top on the 16th. Thereupon seven other groups in the next seven days followed to the summit and none gave up below the top.

By contrast, not expecting to depend on someone else's ropes, an eight-member South Korean expedition to the west face of Lhotse via the Khumbu Icefall, led by Hong Sung-Taek and assisted by four climbing Sherpas, brought along enough rope to fix the Icefall and to safeguard the route on the face between C2 and C3 (7300m), well beyond the treacherous Icefall. In the end, the team was forced to abandon their climb at 7900m because of a fierce storm, but not for lack of rope.