

As Nepal considers age limits, NH mountaineers expect tallest peak's growing allure to continue

By JOHN KOZIOL Union Leader Correspondent May 14, 2017



Summitting Mount Everest has attracted more and more climbers every year. This month, the peak of the climbing season, an estimated 750 people will attempt the summit.

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THOM POLLARD



JACKSON -- The recent death of a Nepali man who was trying to again become the oldest person to climb Mount Everest reflects the expectation that an increasing number of mountaineers worldwide will remain active late in life, says local high-altitude videographer and filmmaker Thom Pollard.

Last May 22, at 2:40 a.m., Pollard, then a member of the crew shooting the film "Sharing Everest," reached the summit of the tallest mountain in the world at what he thought was the still relatively youngish age of 55.

On Monday afternoon, Pollard jokingly recalled that the exhilaration of that accomplishment was rapidly diminished when a friend, James Brooman, "looked up the ages of the people who summited and said that last year, I was one of the 12 oldest guys to do it, and he just ruined my day."

The question of how old one should be to attempt an ascent of Mount Everest has arisen since the death of Min Bahadur Sherchan, who died May 6 at the Everest base camp from still unknown causes.

At 85, Sherchan was trying to reclaim the age record he had first set at 76 in 2008 but lost in 2013 to an 80-year-old climber from Japan.

Since Sherchan's death, the Nepal Mountaineering Association has pressed the Nepalese government to consider setting the upper age limit at 76, but Pollard doesn't think that will happen anytime soon, given the importance of Everest expeditions to the Nepali economy.

The government currently charges \$11,000 per person to be on a permitted climb, "but that doesn't include any other expenses," said Pollard, "and that money doesn't filter down to the people. It stays in the government and in the Department of Tourism."

Heavy traffic

During this year's climbing season, from now through the end of May, nearly 750 people, more than half of them Sherpas, could potentially summit Everest, using the southern route from Nepal. "That's going to lead to absolute disaster, whether on a small scale or a large scale," said Pollard. "There's no way that many people can line up for getting ready to go to the summit without someone getting injured or killed."

Rick Wilcox, who is an owner of International Mountain Equipment in North Conway, summited Everest in 1991.

He recalled that back then, things were much different, with the most profound difference from today being that the climbers largely found their own routes and carried most of their own supplies.

Now, there are companies that will prepare rope courses in advance and even "carry your pack," said Wilcox, which raises the fundamental question of "who's really climbing Everest."

"There's too much money on Everest to make anything too strict" in terms of who is able to climb it, Wilcox said, adding that rather than an upper age limit, he thinks Nepali authorities may institute a requirement that climbers first demonstrate their ability by summiting a 6,000-meter (19,685-foot) peak.

Wilcox, who had met Sherchan on a past trip to Nepal, remembered that "his life was Mount Everest" and that Sherchan was "not modest" about being the oldest person to climb it.

"Talk about someone in their mid 80s, I'm 69 and I would have to think twice about going up Everest again. I did it in my 40s when I was peaking as an athlete."

"Everybody loves Mount Everest," said Wilcox, and that love will keep people, like Sherchan, coming back to attempt the increasingly dangerous.

"He wasn't the oldest guy trying to climb the third-highest peak," Wilcox noted wryly, "and the fact that he had been there before made him more qualified" than other climbers with less experience.

"He wasn't totally nuts," said Wilcox, "but he was a little crazy."

Plans to return

Pollard, who is also a founder of Great Northern Networks, a North Conway digital marketing and company, said he expects to see a higher number of older mountaineers in coming years — himself among them.

A graduate of Boston University where he earned a bachelor's degree in film, Pollard has been on Mount Everest three times.

In 1999, his documentary experience with Eyes Open Productions led to Pollard's being tapped by the PBS program NOVA to film a search for the bodies of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, who are believed to have summited Everest nearly 30 years before Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first documented climbers to reach the peak, in 1953.

Fifteen years later, Pollard was back on Everest to film the ascent of Jim Geiger, a grandfather from Sacramento, Calif., who at age 68 was hoping to become the oldest American to climb the highest peaks on each of the seven continents.

The Geiger expedition was canceled in the aftermath of an avalanche that killed 16 Sherpa guides. A year later, an earthquake devastated the country, but climbing resumed in the fall of 2015.

Despite the increased commercialization of Mount Everest and its many challenges, Pollard plans to return there, both in the near and distant futures.

"My goal is to go back, but only as far as base camp, in the next year or so. I would really like to take my son, Sam, so he can experience the culture and beauty of the Khumbu region." Sam Pollard is a 15-year-old sophomore at Kennett High School in North Conway.

The elder Pollard said he's also entertaining an offer from Brooman, who is on Mount Everest now, attempting to summit it without using bottled oxygen, for a rendezvous 30 years hence.

"He wrote me last week saying, 'When you're 86 I want to be there to climb with you,' and I wrote back that 'If you're rich and famous, will you sponsor me?'"

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