

Woman on Top

Extreme high altitude mountaineer Ellen Miller on life above 23,000 feet

By Jayme Moye



As she approached the final stretch along the narrow ridgeline, Ellen Miller felt a rush of adrenaline. After two months in the Nepalese Himalayas, she was about to summit 25,970-foot Nuptse, an extremely difficult peak called the “last great problem” in the Everest region. Fewer than twenty people have ever stood atop Nuptse. Ellen would soon join their ranks.

Then she saw it. The wind had swept the snow higher than the summit, forming a cornice. Ellen stopped. She looked around at the other members of her expedition team. Each was surveying the formation. She knew they were all wondering the same thing: *Can we climb it?* Ellen’s gut, and her 25 years of mountaineering experience, said no. Cornices are notoriously

unstable, giving way and dropping climbers to their deaths thousands of feet below.

But the competitive athlete part of Ellen’s brain reminded her of the rules of her sport. Earning a summit means standing on the high point. If the wind had built the snow into a cornice, she would need to climb to the top of it. “Maybe it sounds unreasonable to someone who hasn’t been there,” Ellen says, “but that extra ten to twenty feet of snow at the top was a serious mind game.”

The summit wasn’t supposed to be perplexing. It was meant to be both the highlight and the grand finale of Ellen’s career. Once the 54-year-old bagged Nuptse, she’d become the first American woman to complete the Everest Triple Crown, which includes Everest (29,029 feet)

and Lhotse (27,940 feet). After that, she planned to announce her retirement from extreme high altitude climbing.

Ellen estimates that she stood there with her team for about thirty minutes, deliberating how to handle the corniced ridge. British mountaineer Kenton Cool tried to walk on it, but his feet started to punch through. The snow was rotten—making an already potentially dangerous situation an obvious hazard.

In the end, a Sherpa put the situation into perspective. “The snow is not the earth, it is not the land,” he said. “We are already standing on the top of the earth. There is no need to go any farther.”

With that, the team felt satisfied with where they stood. “You always think there’s going to be a

high-point summit, and that it will be clear,” Ellen says. “Nuptse was a poignant lesson. A lot of times we think we have things figured out in life, and nature has a different plan.”

The mountaineering community regarded Ellen and her team’s ascent of Nuptse as legit, cornice or no cornice. So, on May 16, 2013, she became the official first American woman to earn the Everest Triple Crown. Bittersweet, Ellen’s accomplishment also sealed her decision to retire, ending one of the most storied American careers in extreme high altitude mountaineering.

“Mountaineering has given me some of the most beautiful days in my life, but it’s time to let the younger climbers have the life above 23,000 feet,” Ellen says. “Part of being a good climber is knowing when to stop.”

GETTING TO THE TOP

Ellen’s fixation with high elevation started shortly after graduating high school. Unsure about what she wanted to do with her life, Ellen moved to Colorado where her older brother lived. She’d always enjoyed hiking and climbing in her hometown of Asheville, North Carolina, and soon started climbing Colorado’s “fourteeners,” 14,000-foot mountains. She enjoyed it so much that she decided to do all 55 of the state’s fourteeners. “My outdoor world just really opened up in Colorado,” Ellen says. “There were more opportunities, more access, and for whatever reason, I adapted really well to altitude.”

She took a job at Alfalfa’s Market and continued to pursue mountaineering. In 1988, she traveled to Alaska and climbed 20,237-foot

Mount McKinley, also known as Denali, the highest peak in North America. Over the next decade, she honed her skills by summiting notable mountains like 22,837-foot Aconcagua in Argentina, 24,757-foot Muztagh Ata in China, and 26,906-foot Cho Oyu on the Tibet-Nepal border.

By the late '90s, Ellen was hooked on extreme high altitude mountaineering. She knew exactly what she wanted to do with her life. She left Alfalfa's and set her sights on Everest. As she trained to climb the highest mountain on Earth, she also got certified to coach. "Mountaineering, to me, is home. It's where I feel the happiest, and the strongest," she says. "A big part of that is the experiences I share with other people on the mountain and the relationships that develop, which is really what drew me to coaching."

In May 2001, Ellen summited the northeast ridge of Everest. Her summit made headlines—she was the first American woman to succeed on the north route. But Ellen wasn't done. She went back the following year to climb the southern route, and added another accolade to her resume: first North American woman to summit Everest from both sides. Afterward, she was named Colorado Sportswoman of the Year.

Ellen's been mountaineering, coaching, and even dabbling in adventure racing, ever since. She's the Vice President of the American Trail Running Association, a Coach and Outdoors Fitness Manager at the Vail Athletic Club, and a USA Track and Field Level 1/2 Certified Coach. Ellen returns to Everest nearly every year to lead treks to Basecamp.

QUEEN OF THE MOUNTAIN

You wouldn't guess Ellen was a mountaineering powerhouse at first glance. Friendly, demure, and small in stature with chestnut brown hair and brown eyes, her build and



personality are more akin to those of the Sherpa than of an American über athlete.

The first time I met Ellen was in 2010 while on assignment in Breckenridge to cover a story on women's ski mountaineering racing for *Outside*. A group of us were skinning up Peak 10, and I was struggling to keep up with the elite athletes. Ellen fell back and encouraged me to slow down. She stuck with me, and helped me maintain an easy conversational pace until we'd regrouped with the others.

Ellen's awareness of the need to slow down is something she learned at extreme elevation, where not respecting boundaries can mean the difference between life and death. "People always talk about pushing yourself, following your dreams, reaching your goals—our culture is really enthusiastic about pushing the limits," she says. "But you shouldn't always push."

Ironically, it's the lessons that Ellen learned way up high that



inspired her to retire from life above 23,000 feet. "Some people say you start to feel the fragility of life at my age," she says, "but I think it's more that the mountains taught me to finally pay attention to it."

You can still find Ellen on the mountain—hiking, running, and

skiing in her hometown of Vail, Colorado (elev. 8,150 feet). She plans to continue coaching and climbing—but only in what she calls "relaxing" mountains, like the French Alps. "And I'd like to climb in Mongolia and Morocco," she says. "You know, fun stuff."