Climbing Kilimanjaro - Will and Desire

by Four-time Olympian Ruben Gonzalez

After about a 20 year wait on my bucket list, in June 2010 I was finally able to check off climbing the highest mountain in Africa, Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Mt. Kilimanjaro is a mile taller than any mountain in the Colorado Rockies.

Only half of the people who try to climb Kilimanjaro actually make it. The trail is not particularly steep or tortuous, but with every step you slowly leave behind the oxygen-rich farmlands and rain forests below as you push towards the arctic desert above.

Climbing kilimanjaro is a little bit like climbing a staircase 2 miles long - grueling.

Like I always do, I looked for a guide, a mentor, a coach who had already done what I wanted to do. Our guide for this climb was Dean Cardinale, one of the world's top mountain guides. Dean had actually climbed Mt. Everest a few years earlier.

Dean's game plan had us climbing the Machame Route, a tough route up the mountain but one with spectacular scenery and few other climbers. We took five days to get to the top - 40 miles of trails.

Another key to making this possible was our incredible team of porters. They carried all our gear up the mountain, cooked great meals for us, set up and broke down the camps and kept us going with constant songs of encouragement.

When you are taking on a big challenge like this one, you'd better have a strong support team in place. There is no way we could have made it without our incredible porters.

The first day we climbed through the rainforest to 10,000 feet. The next 3 days we traversed the mountain climbing high in the mornings and descending to 12,000 to sleep. This was done to acclimate to the high altitude. Every day we felt stronger as our bodies got used to the high altitude.

Camping above the clouds.

Acclimating is critical, because at the summit, each hard-earned breath contains only half the oxygen you took for granted at sea level, and you get winded just bending over to tie your shoes. Few people would imagine that simply walking could be so difficult.

“Pole, Pole” is a big key to getting to the top. Pole, pole means “slowly, slowly” in Swahili. Our porters constantly said those words to to us like a mantra so that we would take our time up the mountain. Slowly, slowly gives your body time to acclimate. You must pace yourself. If you try to rush it, you won’t make it. One step at a time. Pole, pole.

Making our way to high camp.

Dehydration is always a danger and above 15,000 feet breathing becomes extremely labored. I actually mismanaged my water on the summit day and was dehydrated at the top. Consequently, the last few hours were extremely difficult and exhausting for me.

On the last day we climbed 7 hours to high camp, rested a couple of hours, had an early dinner, slept for 4 hours, and were climbing again at midnight for a 7 hour push to the summit. We summited at daybreak, took a few pictures, and took 3 hours to get back down to high camp.

The snows and glaciers of Kilimanjaro.

There we rested for a couple of hours, and then descended another 4 hours to a lower camp. Summit day was the most exhausting day of my life.

Will and desire are the things that got me through the last day. I just kept thinking about how great it would be to get my picture taken by the big sign at the summit - on the roof of Africa.

How about you? Do you have a burning desire to reach your goals? If you want something badly enough, your will and desire will keep you in the game until you succeed.

At the summit with Greg Reid (19,340 feet)

Only when you've climbed Kilimanjaro will you understand why it's regarded as the most underestimated mountain in the world.

The biggest lesson I learned from this experience is just how much punishment the body can take. Your body can take just about anything. It's your mind you have to convince.

No matter what you are doing, no matter how hard it is and how tired you are, if you can convince yourself to take one more step, you can continue moving forward.

Take one more step towards your goals and dreams and make your life a fantastic adventure.

Come join me on our next adventure!

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