
Chris Waddell, Athlete

Chris Waddell's world changed in 1988 when at 20 years of age the promising US skier became a paraplegic after a skiing accident and he began life in a wheelchair. He went on to master the mono-ski and win five gold medals at the Paralympics to become the most decorated Paralympian in history, competing and winning in both the summer and winter Paralympics.

In 2009, Chris became the first paraplegic to summit the world's highest standalone mountain, Mt Kilimanjaro, unassisted. Waddell used a hand-cycle to reach the summit and promote his charity foundation, One Revolution, which raises funds to bring wheelchairs to disabled Africans.

Rachael Oakes-Ash caught up with Chris in his hometown of Park City, Utah.

What was more exciting – winning your first gold medal or summiting Kilimanjaro?

Summiting was an opportunity that we created, whereas with the gold medal the opportunity was out there, I just needed to have the right race on the right day. The gold medal was a moment in time. I often say winning it equates to a lifetime of work in the hope of a moment of brilliance. With Kilimanjaro the attack was more oblique. I had to be prepared, but I had to be prepared for everything, for things to go wrong, for an extended push, and I needed to let go of the finish line.

As much as winning a gold medal will be a part of who I am for the rest of my life, the effect was as momentary as my performance. It didn't change my life. It didn't change the lives of others. It didn't take on a life of its own. With the summit, I think and hope that it will take on a life of its own and that it will change lives.

Do you ever get recognised when skiing?

I tend to stick out in the crowd and here in Park City I am what a buddy of mine calls, 'a small town celebrity'. The most common thing that people say to me is, "I can't even do that on two skis". I'm sure I'm guilty of exactly this kind of foot in mouth ignorance,

Chris Waddell became the first paraplegic to summit the 5,895-metre-high Kilimanjaro under his own power.



and I know that it's meant as a compliment, but so much of what I'm working towards is finding a way so that sentiment is not valid. I want to eliminate the separation that makes people see differences. The greatest compliment I've had was from a Swedish pro racer and former World Cupper who said, "I like your turns".

What is the most common misconception about paraplegics?

That our lives are somehow diminished – that my accident stole something. The biggest problem is that this misconception is fact in the minds of most people. Our lives are only diminished by a lack of imagination. I hope to challenge that fact so that people see me, but also so they see themselves and the limitations that they've put on their lives.

How did you train for Mt Kilimanjaro?

I trained about two years for the Kilimanjaro climb, though there were definitely breaks along the way. In January of 2009 I got a stomach infection that landed me in hospital for three weeks. I had to start from the



beginning again because I'd lost all my muscle lying in a hospital bed. For training I climbed a lot of the ski areas in Park City and Crested Butte (3,000 metres in town) for altitude training.

Mike Augspurger from One-Off Titanium invented the off-road handcycle with a three-wheeled version. He also built a four-wheeled prototype that we borrowed for the June 2008 scouting mission. Even with that head start it took us two years and three vehicles to refine the vehicle. A lot of our engineering was through the naked eye. My training partner, Dave Penney, and I spent a lot of time climbing and talking. His genius was turning these conversations into something that worked even when some of the engineers told us it wouldn't.

We did a scouting trip in June 2008 on the mountain. In November 2008 we returned to follow some stories for the documentary, but also did two-thirds of the first day of the climb to see how our speed was matching up. Speed and the altitude were the biggest questions. We had to do about 100 metres of vertical a day to reach each successive hut on the trail. That was a tough speed for me the first

Top: In 2008 Waddell and training partner Dave Penney tested a four-wheeled prototype of the handcycle.

Above: Waddell summited Kilimanjaro after six and a half days of gruelling effort.

time. Modifying the vehicle was a huge part of going faster. We made it lighter. Shortened the wheelbase to increase traction and went from internal gearing to traditional bike gearing.

What was everyone's reaction when you told them what you were doing?

I expected most people to tell me I was crazy. Instead most said they wanted to be involved. There were also definitely people who said I couldn't do it. They were necessary as well.

What was the reaction of the Tanzanians when you arrived ready to 'climb Kilimanjaro' on your handcycle?

At first the porters looked at me as someone they needed to help. We built relationships with a lot of these guys and over time they looked at it as a cool but difficult endeavour.

Did you ever think you couldn't do it?

On the mountain I never thought that we wouldn't make it. Sitting in my office I often thought we should quit.

My goal was always bigger than me. I wanted to use the climb as leverage to gain equality for people with disabilities. In that respect the mental side was easy. It wasn't about me, it was just about me applying a little muscle.

Money was the biggest issue as we picked the wrong time to try to raise it. My team and I made a tonne of financial sacrifices to make the trip happen. My sickness was a setback, but the biggest obstacle was tackling the financial side.

Was the actual climb easier or harder than you had imagined it would be?

Looking back it was more difficult than I experienced it. I was in a trance or in the zone or whatever you want to call it. Each day, each obstacle was something to be conquered. It was really hard. I realise that now when I look at the photos or the film footage, but I couldn't realise that then because it might have been too much to comprehend.

What was your first thought when you made it to the top?

After six and half days of climbing, my first thought was to thank you. Thank you for teaching me so much. Thank you for allowing me to reach the top. ❖