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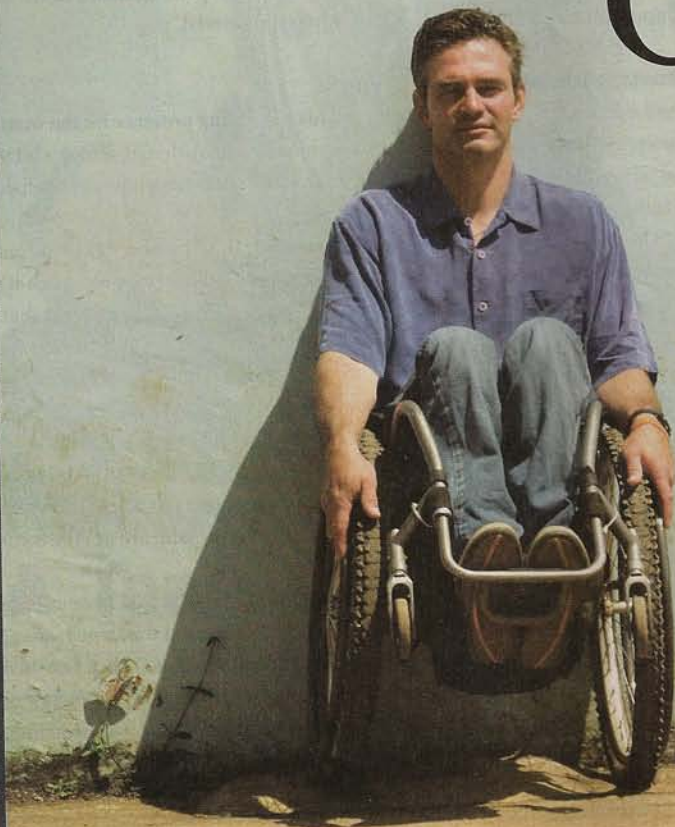
Chris Waddell trains
for Mount Kilimanjaro

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Of a Revolution

Monoskiing champ Chris Waddell finds another mountain to conquer – in Africa

BY LISA ANTONUCCI



Despite more than 30 years of ski racing, despite winning 12 winter Paralympic medals (five of them gold) and nine World Championship medals (three more gold), and despite spending a little more than 20 years in a wheelchair, Chris Waddell still has mountains to conquer.

The 40-year-old, paralyzed from the waist down at age 20 after a 1988 skiing accident, is taking his ambition to Africa's highest peak — 19,340-foot Mount Kilimanjaro — in an effort to break down barriers and promote his mission to dispel stereotypes about people with disabilities.

In March, Waddell hopes to be the first paraplegic to summit Kilimanjaro.

"When you have an accident like I had, you tend to look at it in cosmic, karmic terms," says Waddell, a Massachusetts native who began ski racing at age 6 and was a member of the Middlebury College ski team at the time of his accident.

The very next season, without instruction and with a \$2,000 monoski donated by the Friends of Middlebury Skiing alumni association, Waddell began his storied athletic career, which to date includes four Paralympic Winter Games — featuring his 1998 sweep of all four skiing disciplines in Lillehammer — and three summer Paralympics where he competed in road and track racing and won a silver medal at the games in Sydney, Australia.

"You wonder, 'Did this happen for a reason?'" says Waddell. "Truthfully, I don't know if it did or not, but I do feel like I have a platform from which I [think] I could change the world, change perceptions. I think I've been able to make that happen to a degree on a local and regional basis, and maybe even on a national level, but not yet on transcendent, global basis, and that's always been a goal of mine."

That goal was the genesis of "One Revolution" — Waddell's motto for his Africa expedition, and for his life.

On his website, www.one-revolution.com, Waddell writes: "'One revolution' means so many things to me. One revolution of the handcycle, one revolution of the earth, one lifetime, one moment, one chance to make a difference."

Waddell, who lives in Park City and retired from the World Cup after the 2002 season, says he decided to take his revolution to Kilimanjaro because he recognized that climbing a mountain is an endeavor most people can understand. He says that watching World Cup-caliber ski racing — by both able-bodied and disabled athletes — can be difficult for the masses to relate to, but pretty much everyone knows it's downright difficult to summit a mountain.

His overriding intention, he says, is to "shine the light back on the disabled," and to provide a counterpoint to preconceived notions about the world's 21-million-plus people with disabilities. But Waddell admits he has personal objective as well.

"Through physical pain and exertion, there is an opportunity for me to find some sort of enlightenment," says Waddell, who shakes his head and laughs almost in disbelief when talking about the extreme physical effort required for Kilimanjaro. "But it's the big reason why I am climbing mountains."

It's also why he is blogging about the entire experience on www.onerevolution.com. This firsthand account of his journey is a brutally honest and insightful look not only into Waddell's psyche, but also an authentic reflection of his experiences and reactions as a disabled person. In this from June 26, 2008, he articulates his purpose — and his vulnerability:

"...This trip is about my best or more than my best. It's about being naked. It's about being vulnerable. It's about being honest. Those sound like easy things until I try them. My journey is for others, and my journey is for myself. I've created an environment in which I will succeed or fail spectacularly and publicly. Realizing that I most likely will not reach the top — that I will not preserve this "ever successful" image of myself — is the first step in that journey, but that's not to say that I won't still try to defy the odds."

"My New Year's resolution last year was to not hide," says Waddell, who started his blog in November 2007. "To say, 'This is who I am,' and be OK with that. But to be exposed like that? Totally and thoroughly out there like that? It scares me to death. I'm trying to embrace it, though."

Kilimanjaro not only is the tallest mountain in Africa but also the tallest freestanding mountain in the world. Waddell will be accompanied by a team of experienced colleagues and a camera crew that will film the historic climb for a documentary. The crew already has started filming, joining Waddell, his expedition leader Dave Penney and several other expedition members for a three-week scouting trip this past June.

"The documentary is an important part of my climb, as my story is a visual one. People need to see to understand," Waddell says.

Kilimanjaro is considered a "walkable" mountain and the expedition will follow the Morangu Route, also known as the "Coca Cola route" because locals sell soda and snacks along with way. But it's wrought with obstacles such as logs, large rocks, steep pitches and slippery clay.

For his ascent, Waddell will use a one-of-a-kind, four-wheel handcycle propelled entirely by arm power and appropriately named "One-Off." The unique handcycle steers two ways, via traditional hand bars and a special pedal that is fixed under the chest. The One-Off provides impressive traction and control, with wheels capable of maneuvering over one-foot-tall obstacles.

The rig is the result of ideas that started with Mike Augspurger and One-Off Titanium. In the mid-'90s, Augspurger developed a vehicle that could climb steep pitches and traverse rough terrain. Intrigued by the idea of being able to go "off-road," Waddell was the first disabled test rider.

Penney and Waddell spent the past summer brainstorming ways to im-

prove the vehicle and took their ideas to Rod Miner and Lightfoot Cycles in Darby, Mont. In less than a week, they created "Bomba," a vehicle, says Waddell, "that makes me dream and believe that we can access the mountains, the beaches and who knows what else."

But when he was put to the test on Kilimanjaro in June, Waddell says he was blown away by just how arduous it all was — physically and mentally. The extreme exertion and relentless terrain took an unexpected toll — and way more time than anticipated. What's more, the altitude proved difficult for sleeping and exacerbated Waddell's slight sleep apnea.

Upon realizing he would not make the summit, but still hoping to see as much of the mountain as possible, Waddell said he experienced a fleeting



Left: Chris Waddell uses a unique handcycle named the One-Off to climb up obstacle-ridden terrain. Above: Waddell helps to shine the light.

but piercing internal struggle. Deflated at the idea of having to ask for help, his seeming failure brought even greater reward, as articulated in this blog post from July 10, 2008:

"For the first time our porters and guides share in my climb. I sit in the middle of the circle [at camp] wondering how obvious defeat could turn so quickly into victory... I had started with the aim of climbing unassisted. I figured that the mountain would teach me something I needed to know. Unassisted could mean isolation. My independence could keep me separate. By asking for help I brought the team together."

"I had summit fever," says Waddell, "and as an athlete it was definitely akin to that top-step-of-the-podium fever, where nothing else existed and success was only measured by a win. The reconciliation for me was the realization that that thinking can be so hollow. Winning is the most ephemeral thing in the world, it is gone in a moment. That single-minded goal of getting to the top can cause you to miss so many of the other things going on around you, and those things are really the lessons that stay with you for a long time." **SR**

▶ Waddell has targeted March 13, 2009, as his summit date. The date marks his "half-life" — when he will have officially spent half his life walking and half in a chair.