

Squashing misconceptions

You might think that, for someone who'd climbed Everest, riding the length of Britain would be a cinch. But you'd be wrong, as Squash Falconer explains

Words Hannah Reynolds Photos David J Spurdens



Squash Falconer is a very determined woman. This was immediately apparent in the way she single-mindedly pursued this interview. When Squash first contacted the magazine to say she was riding from John o' Groats to Land's End, I was very dismissive. Here was someone who had just climbed Everest, the highest mountain in the world, a task that requires huge amounts of determination and physical endurance, looking for coverage of an 'End-to-End' charity ride that is completed by thousands of riders of all shapes and sizes every year.

My words were along the lines of 'Go away and come back when you are doing something more interesting'. My opinion was that, for someone who had climbed Everest, LeJog was not challenging enough. Squash set out to show me that it was indeed tough, that many of the challenges were similar to climbing Everest, and that for a novice cyclist such as her, no amount of physical conditioning in other sports had prepared her for a cycling challenge.

Once I'd reversed my thinking, I realised I'd effectively implied that, because I had done a few big cycling challenges, I was capable of climbing Everest. So the story took on greater interest for me. I met up with Squash to compare the similarities and differences between the two endurance challenges.

One woman's molehill...

"The definition of the word 'challenge' is actually relative to whom you are and what you are already doing. If you are someone who hasn't done any exercise for years and has a terrible lifestyle with a bad diet and all the rest of it, a 15-minute run is a big challenge, a big achievement. Whereas, if you are someone like me, who has just climbed Everest, and then do something like LeJog, everyone is really underwhelmed by it. But as I tried to explain to everyone, I am a mountaineer, not a cyclist. For me, it was really difficult, and it was a big challenge," Squash explained.

It seemed I'd not been the only person to have suggested that, after the enormity of Everest, a big ride across Britain was fairly low-key. Squash agreed: "The responses I got were difficult. People were saying, 'What are you doing? That's not hard enough'. I found those responses really interesting."

So why, then, choose LeJog as the next challenge? Normally, after completing a big goal, people go one

of two ways: they either start searching for something even bigger and harder, or they go quiet for a while to recover their enthusiasm and energy. Squash used LeJog as an interim goal, and I suspect there will be something bigger in the not-too-distant future, but post-Everest LeJog filled two vital purposes, as Squash explains: "It gave me an answer to what's next, and it gave me a reason to get my fitness back up. Often, after you have done a big expedition, the temptation is to come back and just sleep and eat. When you get back, you are really thin, you have wasted away a lot of your muscles, so you come back very skeletal. You've not just lost fat; you have lost muscle, so it is super-important that you want to train again. In the past, I have fallen into the trap of thinking I deserve a good rest and then put on loads of weight, and it's not been good weight. You need to build your muscle back up, and I thought LeJog was perfect."

Achievable feat

Those who undertake the LeJog challenge are not all cyclists by any means. Here in the *Cycling Active* office, we are constantly bombarded by charity press-releases and requests for advice from riders who have taken up cycling in order to ride LeJog and raise money. While many who do so are of course already committed cyclists, there seems to be something in the simplicity of the goal that appeals to many people, cyclists or otherwise. The satisfaction of saying "I have ridden from one end of the country to the other" is high, and it is a challenge that needs little explanation.

Squash, like many of those who write to *Cycling Active*, had little cycling experience before deciding to tackle this ride. "I had wanted to do something on a bike for ages because I liked the idea of it, but I had never done any cycling. For me, the challenge was, 'Can I get myself ready for an epic journey in 10-11 weeks?' I went from non-cyclist to cycle-fit to doing the journey, the complete thing. The whole concept was a challenge; not only could I get myself fit and do the journey, but I could also find out about bikes and everything else I'd need to know."

Compared with climbing Everest or parascending off the summit of Mont Blanc (one of Squash's earlier achievements), riding End-to-End is accessible to many more people. It is a dream goal that is within the grasp of anyone with the determination to buy a bike and get fit. You can do LeJog in a two-week holiday from work. It **▶**

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needs no expensive kit, technical training or even a guide. This was another aspect that appealed to Squash; it was unlike her other adventures, which, however inspiring, are difficult to emulate. This is one that anyone can do. "I am forever yakking on to people about 'follow your dreams' and saying 'you have got to go for it'. I want to inspire people. I talk to them about Mont Blanc and Everest, but they aren't going to do those climbs, but actually they might just get a bike and cycle from Land's End to John o' Groats."

Just because it is accessible doesn't mean it is easy, though. That many people have completed it does not detract from each and every individual achievement. If you are not used to cycling, it is hard, even if you are an Everest mountaineer. "One of my friends said to me, 'Squash, I cycled 40km the other day. I cannot believe what you have just done, but I didn't really notice it at the time'. Anyone who thinks LeJog isn't great, you go and cycle back-to-back every day. On a mountain, you get rest days, except for when you go for your summit push, when it is full-on, but even on Everest that is only four or five days. LeJog was 10 days, nine hours and two minutes, to be precise, but every day I was doing 100 miles. I couldn't think, 'Oh well, tomorrow is a rest day'. Especially at the beginning when my ankle was hurting, I thought 'Wow, this is mental as well'. I had to draw on the skills I had learnt on Everest, to push me through. By day four, I was thinking, 'There is a chance I may not do this, my ankle is hurt, maybe I've kind of pushed too hard; I might have to retire from this early'. Then I thought, 'Hang on a minute;

how can I who has just climbed Everest pull out of my bike ride that people keep telling me is really easy?' Actually, it isn't easy, it just isn't."

Undertaking a new challenge is difficult for everyone, regardless of background, simply because it is new. It is naive to think that, because you have conquered one physical challenge, a completely different one will be easy. "It was out of my comfort zone. I know how to be on mountains, I know when to rest, and I know how it should feel. I know I am going to have down days, I know what they mean. But on a bike it was a new thing for me and I didn't know I was going to be all right. I didn't know I would be able to cycle through the pain barrier. I had an idea that I would, but I didn't know for sure. It was amazing that I could find cycling so tough physically after everything I have done endurance-wise before."

Enduring agony

Long-distance cycling is very much about repetition and trying to stay comfortable when you are on your saddle for eight hours or more a day. "Our average speed was 15-17mph. It was a fairly good pace, but even so it meant we were in the saddle for a long time, and so that was tough on its own. I hadn't been cycling long, so I did suffer with the saddle hurting. My ankle was hurting from the repetition and my shoes rubbing. After about day five, everything stopped hurting and aching, and I really got into it. I had kind of gone through the pain barrier. It was interesting. If anyone had said 'You have to do this every day for a month,' I think I could have done it. It took till halfway through the trip to really believe I could finish it."

Falconer camping on the summit of the Grand Motte in the French Alps at 12,000ft, in preparation for her successful Everest assault



KEEPING IT SPECIFIC
Training for Everest

"I put myself out in the Alps. I'd put a rucksack on with at least 15kg in it and at least two or three times a week I would hike up the mountain and back down again for a few hours. I think the best way to train is to replicate what you will actually be doing. For mountaineering, the best thing you can possibly do is go to the highest mountain you can and practise in the conditions you expect to experience. I was also doing a bit of swimming and a bit of running because I like to mix it up a bit to get the all-over fitness, but really the core of it was up and down, up and down the ski slopes in Tignes. I had giant garden Jenga blocks in my pack to make up the weight. When I first started doing it, I was carrying my skis and skiing back down, but actually you need to get your muscles right for walking back down, so I started doing that. The discipline and training was similar."

Whatever endurance activity you do, fuelling your body is key to feeling good and keeping going. For Falconer, her mountaineering experience paid off. "I'm pretty good at just eating loads and with the discipline of taking on water. On a mountain, you have to constantly take on board fluids. You have to drink six litres a day; on a bike, it's not dissimilar. For me, that was just my normal habit. When I'm on a mountain, I try and put something in my mouth every 20 minutes. When I'm on the move, I try and eat as much as I can when I can. When I was on the bike, I was an eating machine; I was so hungry, hungrier than on a mountain. On a summit day, you can burn up to 9,000kcal, but that is a big day, so anywhere between 4,000-9,000 [is normal], depending on where you are in the climb. Even at base camp, you are burning around 3,000-5,000kcal, depending on the person. Those things were very similar. Some of the guys I was with would forget to eat or forget to drink; they didn't have that endurance background, whereas that helped me out."

Unforeseeable anger

Any endurance challenge requires you to manage your mind and emotional state. Endurance cycling gives you a long time to get lost inside your own head, so you need to understand and control your thoughts. "I think you go into different places in your mind. Sometimes you can be really upbeat and really happy; other times, you can be really cross. During LeJog, I found I was getting really cross because I was uncomfortable. I was getting cross because I was tired. In mountaineering, when you are having bad times, you are on your own, even within the team, so you don't have the pressure to talk or share that with anyone. No one noticed my bad days or my hard times because I kept it to myself, and equally I was conscious not to share my highs too much because I was aware someone else might be having a low. The last thing you want when having a bad moment is someone cycling past you saying, 'Isn't this great? I feel fantastic.'" Mountaineering is a high-risk sport. Deaths on Everest are well publicised; most people are aware that

bodies of climbers who didn't make it lie undisturbed on the mountain. Cycling, on the other hand, is a low-key activity that many of us do every day without considering its dangers. "The perceived dangers are very interesting. Everyone was worried about me going off to climb Everest, but they weren't so fussed about me doing the cycling, but with all the cars and the traffic, I'd say there were just as many dangers. You do have road accidents; there is that danger there if you don't pay attention. Sometimes when we were cycling through the towns, cars would round the corner unexpectedly and I'd have to swerve. I'd be thinking 'Oh my God!'. On a mountain, you do a lot to minimise risks, but an ice fall, an avalanche, a crevasse or weather is out of your control. A car driver coming into you is like not seeing a crevasse and falling down it."

No one particularly enjoys cycling in bad weather, and certainly if you are taking part in an epic ride you have your fingers crossed for dry days and sunshine, but while weather on the bike can be an inconvenience, on a mountain it is a different story. "[Bad] weather on a mountain will kill you, but weather on the bike is fine. One day we had a really long day, we were all tired, we were really grumpy; it was getting dark, it had rained all day, but I had a grin on my face. Inwardly, I was thinking, this is nothing compared with a bad weather day on a mountain. On a bad weather day on a mountain, you have to get to your camp or you are dead."

Many people, having successfully completed a big cycling challenge, might feel that the box has been ticked and head off for the next thing, but Squash assured me she is now a cyclist. "I really love cycling. A lot of people said to me that what I am doing now is enough to put me off, but it hasn't. It's the same as doing Everest. When I got back, I didn't want to climb the stairs, let alone another mountain, but you get over that. I really like road biking. It surprised me how much ground you cover, and how much you see; it was fantastic. I loved it. It is so accessible. I will definitely carry on. I think it is a great way to stay fit." **End**

COMPARISON FACTS

Land's End to John o' Groats versus climbing Everest

Fastest LeJog on a conventional bike is held by Gethin Butler: 44 hours, 4 minutes and 20 seconds

Fastest ascent of Everest: The fastest ascent via the north-east ridge was accomplished in 2007 by Austrian climber Christian Stangl who took 16hrs 42min for the 10km distance from Camp III (Advanced Base Camp) to the summit



LeJog: 874 miles official route. 1,020 miles completed on Squash Falconer's route

LeJog: 20,000m total elevation
Everest: 8,848m above sea level

Oldest person to climb Everest: 76-year-old Min Bahadur Sherchan, on 25 May 2008 from Nepalese side

Oldest person to cycle LeJog: Unrecorded

Youngest ascent of Everest: Jordan Romero, May 22 2010, Age 13

Youngest completion of LeJog: Henry Cole, June 2006, Age 4. Completed LeJog in 31 days

Cost of summitting Everest: budget for £25,000-£35,000 including travel costs, a visa, and a guide

Cost of riding LeJog: £199 + £2,600 minimum sponsorship with charity Action Medical Research www.UKend2end.com. Self-supported, staying in small hotels and B&Bs including travel to and from start and finish points, approx £1,000

Squash Falconer rode End-to-End with James Gundry, Lee Wellington, and Matt Davey, assisted by Ade Gundry. The ride raised money for Macmillan Cancer Research, The British Heart Foundation, Dorset and Somerset Air Ambulance and Treetops Hospice. For more, visit: www.thebigbikeride.org. To find out more about Squash's mountaineering exploits, visit www.squashfalconer.com