



# START AT THE BOTTOM

**SQUASH FALCONER** is the 'ordinary person from Derby' who just conquered Everest, having set out to launch a paraglider from the summit. Here she explains her recipe for success: a spirit of adventure, refusal to shirk a challenge... and the right pair of knickers

An ascent of Everest requires the right gear: down suits to withstand the sub-zero temperatures; oxygen to cope with the altitude; and harness, crampons and ice axe to deal with the technical bits of climbing. But I also took 60 pairs of knickers with me, one pair for every day of the expedition. Everyone laughed at me for that: "Oh, you're the girl with all the knickers." But I think if you've got your pants right, everything else goes right. When you feel good about what you're wearing it's a lot easier to perform well.

I started climbing high mountains with an ascent of Aconcagua (6,975m) in Argentina in 2004, and then just set about taking on bigger things. By the time I summited Cho Oyu in 2008, I had an inkling I could climb Everest, which is just 600m higher. But that final 600m is exceptionally tough.

The trek to Base Camp is challenging enough, because it takes you to 500m higher than Mont Blanc, and you still have to face the Khumbu Glacier. You wake up at 2am to climb through the icefall, to minimise the risk. People don't like climbing there because you can't control your own safety like you can on other sections of the climb, but

you have to go through the icefall several times as you climb and descend while acclimatising.

Then, from Camp 3, things really get difficult. The climb switches from a physical to a mental challenge: you just have to keep convincing yourself to put one foot in front of the other.

To fly a paraglider from the summit we needed incredible conditions, and it looked like we had a window on 12 May. We started our final summit push at 8pm and arrived on the top at 8am, in -50°C temperatures and 60kmh winds. There was no way we were going to launch in weather like that, so the focus switched to getting down safely. It was very emotional: I came down thinking about all the people who matter to me.

I'm an ordinary person who likes new challenges. In 2009 I climbed Mont Blanc and launched my paraglider from the summit, becoming the first British woman to achieve that feat. Then once I'd done it I thought maybe I could copy the formula for Everest!

There's a certain amount of fear involved in a challenge like that, but you can use it constructively to think through exactly what's required. I've done most of my flying in the mountains, where the air is more

active and small micro-climates form. You have to be able to read the terrain to use thermals effectively, and you need a good understanding of wind direction.

A lot of what I've achieved outdoors comes down to confidence, willpower and self-belief. For me, that stems from having family and friends who believe in me. I grew up on a farm, so my childhood was very physical and outdoorsy. And I had parents who told me I could be anything I wanted to be.

Early on in my climbing life there was this guy who said: "You don't look like you can climb mountains." He looked strong and fit, but I made it to the top and he didn't. I think a lot of that comes down to mental strength.

I'm not a gym person but I maintain a level of fitness by running and biking. Preparing for Everest I stayed in the French Alps. I was living at 1,500m and walking up to 3,600m every day, often with giant Jenga blocks in my pack, to hike up and down the piste in snow.

I have a good awareness of my own body, of how far I can push it, and I think that's important. You don't necessarily need personal trainers: get an understanding of your own body and have faith in your ability to do the training and go for it.

**OPPOSITE**  
Squash on Everest: 'You can use the fear constructively, to think through what's required'

**THIS PAGE**  
Right: Squash shows off her secret weapon - and with 60 pairs on board, that's a lot of embroidery

Far right: Prepping the paraglider for the abortive flight from the summit

