

Future Heroes

SQUASH FALCONER

Squash Falconer is going for the big one – heading to Everest to climb and fly the world's highest mountain

Talking to Squash I begin to feel that actually, maybe Everest wouldn't be such a big deal after all. She has it all broken down into stages: "I'll go to Kathmandu at the end of March. Then we fly to Lukla airport on the second of April, from there we trek to Base Camp at 5,600m – 1,000m higher than Mont Blanc.

"For acclimatisation you then go up to Camp One and back down again to rest a day or two. Then you go up to Camp One and maybe stay the night, come back down again, rest, and so on until you get to Camp Two or Camp Three.

"Then you come back down to Base Camp. And then you come back down even further and you rest there a good week or so."

That brings you into the first week of May. "Then you start looking at going for the summit push. It's a night at Camp One, a night at Camp Two, a night at Camp Three and then you get to Camp Four where you have a few hours and then you push through. It can be anything between four and seven days."

Historically there is a seasonal sweet spot in the Everest climbing calendar around 20 May when the weather is warmer, the jet stream rises above the summit and the winds get lighter. Squash wants to be on the summit on such a day, because she wants to be the first woman to fly a solo paraglider from the summit. French tandem pair Claire Bernier and Bertrand (Zebulon) Roche flew from the top in 2001, and before them French alpinist Jean Marc Boivin was the first when he did it in 1988, but since those legendary flights, nothing. A surprise perhaps, given the now ultra-lightweight paragliding gear available and the number of people who climb Everest. "I think it's not very often that you get mountaineers who are paragliders who want to do it, or have the choice to do it," she says.

Squash's enthusiasm is infectious – even, I think, for her. We talk on Skype for an hour, the second interview we've done in just over a year. (She speaks so quickly she must surely say in 10 minutes what most people say in 20.) The first time was late 2009 after she climbed and flew from the summit of Mont Blanc. Before that we'd met at the Coupe Icare where she was doing the sponsorship rounds with Anancy flying guide Irwyn Jehu, a long-time ex-pat pilot from the UK. She had plans to ride a motorbike down from her home in Derby, England, climb the mountain and fly off. She did that, with Irwyn, and by default became the first British woman to fly from the summit.

When she got home she was interviewed by a local BBC radio programme, and when the reporter asked, "What's next?" she found herself saying, "I'd like to fly off Everest." The words, she says, just fell out.

Squash (the name is a childhood nickname that stuck) learnt to fly in 2006 and flies mainly in the Alps. She is aware that some pilots might splutter into their frothy beers over the idea of this young woman thinking about flying from Everest. "I wouldn't even call myself

an advanced pilot, not even necessarily an intermediate pilot," she says. "A lot of people have opinions about that, but if I'd listened to what people said to me about Mont Blanc I wouldn't have even got out of bed to go. I think there's a lot to be said for just believing in yourself and just going for it."

She adds, "If everything falls into place then I stand a chance."

It's an attitude that has seen her already clock up several high altitude ticks. She discovered the Alps aged 18 while working her first winter ski season. She abandoned plans to become a vet, and instead developed a career as an events organiser, getting into skiing and snowboarding and then adventure racing before the mountaineering bug bit.

In 2004 she joined a team of adventure racing

buddies on Aconcagua, South America's highest peak at 6,962m, and reached the summit. "I was very fit and I trusted the people I was with."

Three years later she reached 7,400m on 7,546m Mustagata in the Pamirs, turning back from the summit because of bad weather but still managing to snowboard back down.

Then in September 2008 she climbed Cho Oyu, at 8,201m the sixth highest mountain in the world. "It was then that I thought, maybe Everest isn't so far away."

In April 2009 she co-led a trek to climb Lobuche East, a 6,145m 'trekking peak' overlooking Everest, before climbing Mount Rainier in the USA that summer and climbing and flying Mont Blanc that autumn.

Since then she's had her sights set on the big one and now it's for real. Her Everest trip


will be lead by Dan Mazur, a US climber and a total legend in mountaineering circles. (He has climbed K2, numerous 8,000m peaks, and in 2006 famously abandoned his own Everest summit bid to help rescue collapsed Australian climber Lincoln Hall who had been given up for dead by his team.)

Flying-wise she started in 2006 in the Alps. She got into it through her best friend Kat Staniland, whose boyfriend is Mark Hayman, the PWC and British team comp pilot. "Together with Irwyn the three of them taught me." It's been go, go, go ever since. In training for the Everest flight she took herself to Pokhara over winter for six weeks of flying and fitness training. "I was flying with Jamie Messenger, Bella Reibling, Adam Hill and that crowd. They were amazing."



"He said the take-off is slightly below the summit, and the biggest wind comes from the west. He said he didn't think I'll have any trouble making it all the way to Base Camp if I make the take off. My initial worry was that I would land quite high."

Zeb and Claire, she says, did a reverse launch when they were up there. "Obviously you need quite strong wind because it's so high you need much stronger wind than you do at sea level." She adds, "Zeb said get fit, practise your take-offs and at the end of the day it's your decision. Make the right choice."

So will you be able to do that? Will you be able to make the choice not to fly? "Yeah definitely," she says. "I'm definitely someone who goes for things and I can be quite brave in some situations, but I'm not stupid, I definitely don't want to die. I feel fear. I've turned back because of risk before. For me, it's not the be-all and end-all. If something doesn't feel right then there's no way I'll do it. But if I'm happy that there's enough wind and I can sensibly give it a go then I'll go for it." Bravo! 

Squash is raising money for three charities. To follow her progress or to donate visit www.squashfalconer.com

She did SIV over the lake and liked it. "My full stall training was courtesy of Bella. I have to say, I absolutely love the acro and would like to get into that more. She's a really inspiring pilot."

Another inspiration are those who've gone before: Zeb, Claire and Jean-Marc. "I was chatting to Zeb about it yesterday actually," she says. "It was nice. He said, 'You will know how you feel about flying when you get to the top. It will either be right for you or not. At the end of the day you make your decision and you go or don't go.'"

They also discussed equipment. "He said what I was thinking, you have to take the bare minimum." All up she expects her kit to weigh 10-12kg, including climbing gear, oxygen, her Ozone Ultalite 19m2 wing (2.5kg) and Ozone Oxygen harness (1.3kg).