

18 NEWS SATURDAY FEBRUARY 19 2011 DERBY TELEGRAPH

'I'd love to be the first woman to jump solo off top of world'

Adventurer Squash Falconer is to take on her most daring challenge yet - on Mount Everest. **Sue Williams** reports.

SQUASH Falconer wants to jump off the top of the world - literally.

The 29-year-old, from Thulston, will co-lead an expedition to the 8,848m summit of Mount Everest and then will solo pilot a paraglider back down.

It is the latest in a series of Squash's daring feats but this is a life which had not always been mapped out.

"When I went to Ockbrook school, I wanted to leave at 16 and be a farmer, like my uncle," she said. "Then I decided to become a vet. But around 17, I changed my mind again and went off to do a ski season."

Squash found herself in the heart of the French Alps with a view of Mont Blanc from her

bedroom window. It was a sight which would stay with her forever and sparked her great passion - big mountain climbing.

"I've always had a sense of adventure," she said. "When I was young, my parents and family always encouraged me to do things, to believe nothing was impossible."

So when, in 2004, some friends suggested Squash join their expedition to climb Aconcagua in Argentina, the highest peak in the western hemisphere, she naturally said yes.

"I had no experience of high mountain climbing but I'd done a lot of extreme sports with them, so they were confident I was fit enough to do it and I knew they were all experienced and would look after me."

After that first climb came Mustagata in western China, bad weather forcing her to turn back 146m from the 7,546m summit. She snow-boarded down.



Next was Cho Oyu in Nepal, the sixth highest mountain in the world at 8,201m. After she had climbed it, she bum-boarded down, becoming the world's highest bum-boarder.

It was on the slopes of Cho Oyu that she had her first climbing scare.

"I was with Dan Mazur, who is going to be the leader of the Everest expedition," Squash said.

"We were abseiling down a vertical ice wall, stabbing

crampons into the face. One of my crampons got caught in an old rope left there by a previous climber.

"I couldn't get free. I was hanging horizontally with heavy oxygen tanks on my back. Every time, I tried to get free, I fell lower.

"Eventually I was hanging upside down, passing in and out of consciousness.

"Luckily, Dan managed to get to me and unravel the rope from the crampon. That was a scary moment."

There were more to come. After Cho Oyu, Lobuche East (also in Nepal), Everest base camp and Mount Rainier in the United States were relatively simple.

But the vision of Mont Blanc was always there - and, in 2009, Squash decided to tackle a treble whammy.

"I have had friends die on mountains and I know I need to be responsible."

SQUASH FALCONER

A biker and a paraglider, she planned to motorcycle 900 miles to the foot of the mountain, climb it and then fly down - all of which she did, only learning afterwards that she was the first British woman to paraglide from the summit.

Squash's feat attracted a lot of media coverage and the obvious question was what could she do to top it.

"After I climbed Cho Oyu, a friend said: 'That's the sixth highest mountain in the world. That qualifies you to climb Everest'. When, after Mont Blanc, I was asked about my next challenge, I found myself saying, half joking: 'I'd love to be the first woman to jump solo off the top of the world'."

Having committed herself to the expedition, Squash can't wait to get under way. "I'm really excited. It's such an amazing challenge. I'm not mad. I have had friends die on mountains and I know I need



Squash Falconer during her climb of Mont Blanc, top, and after jumping from the summit, above. Now she plans to leap off Mount Everest.

to be responsible.

"I can't imagine doing it if I had children or some significant other person in my life. But while I can, I believe passionately in following my dream."

Squash will be climbing with a 15 to 20-strong team led by Dan, who has his own company organising expeditions and with whom she has climbed since 2006.

If they do succeed in reaching the summit, it will be Squash alone who paraglides down - and she will only do it if the conditions are right.

Squash's Everest expedition will be climbing the Nepal side of the mountain.

"There is no way I can land in China. If it happens, I'll probably be shot," she laughs, though she is quite serious. "I have no permit for that side and they'll most likely think I'm a terrorist."

"The direction and speed of the wind is all important. I need wind to inflate my wing. To run at that altitude needs a lot of energy. I will have to use my judgement and make a decision about the conditions on my way to the summit and once I am at the top."

Ideally, Squash would like to land at base camp but she is expecting she may come

down at a higher site.

"Just so long as I don't land on the Khumbu ice fall," she said. "It's a huge glacial area with deep crevasses. It's one of the most dangerous parts of the climb."

Squash will have radio and GPS but she's hoping she won't need them.

"I'm going to do all I can to avoid a bad situation," she said. "There's no doubt I do feel fear but I am able to use that fear to focus my mind."

Squash will be tackling the Everest challenge for three charities - Teenage Hospice, where her mother works as a volunteer; the cancer charity Scis, as one of her friends is battling the disease; and the Mount Everest Foundation for Sustainable Development in Nepal.

She said: "When you work out there, you see so much poverty. So a little can make a huge difference."

"I'm passionate about encouraging people to follow their dreams and I think you should lead by example. Even if I don't achieve my goal this time, I will have been going for my dream."

If you would like to sponsor Squash's expedition, visit www.squashclimbs.com

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