

This month, Derbyshire-born Squash Falconer will co-lead an expedition to climb Mount Everest – and when she reaches the top she will leap off. **Sue Williams** reports.

Squash Falconer was busy packing for the biggest adventure of her life when I called. For, at the end of this month, she intends to become the first solo woman to jump off the top of the world.

Where's that? Everest, of course. First, the 29-year-old from Thulston, will co-lead an expedition to the 8,848m summit of the world's highest mountain – and then, she will solo pilot a paraglider back down.

Five years ago, despite her reputation for being an adventurer and lover of extreme sports, it was something, she admits, that she had never even considered.

"When I went to Ockbrook school, I wanted to leave at 16 and be a farmer, like my uncle. 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 to be the start of one of her greatest passions – big mountain climbing.

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

"I was brought up on my family's farm at Draycott and my Uncle Charles, who was only 14 years older, was my absolute hero. He taught me to drive a car and do wheelies on small motorbikes when I was six.

"I used to leap from trees and swing from the barn. I had no fear."

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 snowboarded 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. 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.

"The following day, a Polish climber, on his own, did exactly the same thing that I had done. He went upside down and died hanging there with no-one to help.

"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.

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.

But the climb again was to have its hair-raising moments. Roped to her partner, Squash was half-way up the mountain, using her crampons and ice axe to climb, when she fell. The force of her fall also ripped her partner from the face, sending them both racing towards a huge crevasse.

"Sometimes fear can paralyse people and I've often wondered if it would happen to me. But during that incident on Mont Blanc, I had complete clarity. I told myself I had to stab my axe into the ice to stop my fall – and I did. Somehow we managed to stop.

"I thought I would go to pieces in a situation like that but I was calm. It showed me that you can use fear in a positive way."

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

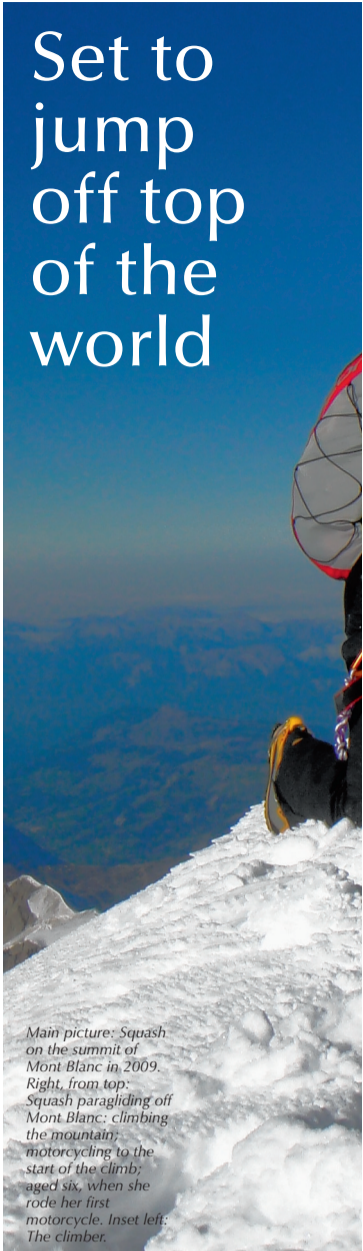
"After I climbed Cho Oyu, a friend said: 'That's the sixth highest mountain in the world. That qualifies you to climb Everest'. The seed was sown and when, after Mont Blanc, I was asked about my next challenge, I found myself saying, half joking: 'I'd love to be the first woman to jump off the top of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

When she told her family of her plans, their immediate reaction was "You're not serious".

"But after the initial shock, they've been very supportive. They know I've got the relevant experience and trust my judgement. If mum had her way, she would wrap me up in cotton wool but they're all very proud of

Set to jump off top of the world

Main picture: Squash on the summit of Mont Blanc in 2009. Right, from top: Squash paragliding off Mont Blanc; climbing the mountain; motorcycling to the start of the climb; aged six, when she rode her first motorcycle. Inset left: The climber.



what I've done. I did say to my dad that I wouldn't do it if he didn't want me to. I know it's incredibly difficult for them."

Having committed herself to the expedition, now 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 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 Mazur, 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.

On Mont Blanc, it was touch and go after the weather deteriorated.

"The wind wasn't looking good as it was blowing very strongly from Italy," she said. "That meant there was no way we could take off in the direction of France where we wanted to fly. So we decided to wait. The wind eventually dropped and we could go."

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. At that level, the atmosphere can change dramatically and the wind can be very, very strong. I will have to use my judgement and make a decision about the conditions for flying 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. It's a huge glacial area with deep crevasses. It's one of the most dangerous parts of the climb."

"We have to climb through it, up and down the crevasses, on the way up. I will only fly over it if I am positive I have enough height to clear it."

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."

"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 – Treetops Hospice, where her mother works as a volunteer; the cancer charity Solea, as one of her friends is battling the illness; and the Mount Everest Foundation for Sustainable Development in Nepal.

"When you work out there, you see so much poverty. They need schools, hospitals, all sorts. So a little can make a huge difference."

She supports her passion through co-leading expeditions, sports model photography, giving motivational and inspirational talks, making films of her adventures for TV companies, presenting and sponsorship.

"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 Everest expedition, go to: www.squashfalconer.com