

## 14ers Story by Danelle Ballengee

In July of 2000 I set forth on a journey that was to be the most difficult, most extreme, and most rewarding journey of my life. I was to be the first female to attempt this journey, and one of 7 people to ever attempt this feat.

My goal was to climb every 14,000 ft peak in Colorado continuously, attempting to establish a female speed record and possibly break the current men's speed record for climbing all the peaks. There are 55 peaks over 14,000 ft in Colorado. Some ascents require technical climbing. As a rule, I had to gain and lose at least 3000 vertical feet by foot on each peak. Basically, this journey would entail covering over 300 miles and over 150,000 vertical feet by foot.

But, that's not all. I was to spend most of my time at elevations over 14,000 ft. I would travel day and night up and down the peaks. The terrain is not a walk in the park either. While a few of the peaks can be walked up, most are fields of rock and scree, many requiring technical climbing skills. Those things were predictable. What wasn't predictable was the weather. Above treeline the weather can be extreme. It was. I encountered violent lightning storms that made the sky crack and deafening thunder, which caused the loose rock to tumble several thousand feet down. The electricity in the air caused a constant buzzing sound in the rocks and creaking in the air, leaving my hair standing literally on end and a burning sensation to my ears. I encountered heavy downpours, gale force wind, and even July snowstorms.

Despite the weather and despite the fatigue, I did it. I did it in 14 days 14 hours and 49 minutes. Standing atop Longs Peak, the final peak, peak #55, on August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000 was one of the greatest moments of my life. I had no idea how hard the journey would be. To put it in perspective, I did the equivalent in elevation gain and distance as one would climbing Everest 10 times from base camp, in 14.5 days. Many times I thought about quitting, but something inside of me wouldn't let me stop. The more peaks I summited, the more determined I became despite my aching muscles and tired eyes. Each summit was a mini victory in itself. Making it to the summit, looking across the skyline to the summits I conquered and the summits I had yet to conquer stirred my adrenaline, giving me the energy and strength to carry on.

I didn't do it alone. I had a support crew for which I am truly grateful. My crew not only transported me to and from trailhead to trailhead while I fell into a short but deep sleep, but they also gave me the confidence and inspiration to take on and complete this task. In addition to my transport crew, I had some wonderful climbing partners that took turns joining me on many of the peaks. I also had a home base crew that took care of much of the communication coordination and internet updates. I also had a group of friends, family, and local businesses that made financial and product contributions to help fund the effort. I knew that all my crew and supporters had so much confidence in me and just thinking about their support got me through many tough times.

The record took 14.5 days, but the real journey had taken me 29 years, a lifetime. It takes a lot of training, a lot of discipline, a lot of risk taking, a true love for the mountains, a true love for suffering, and a bit of craziness to take on a task like this. I suppose many of these traits are genetic, and the rest are developed through our experiences as we grow up. My training for this has been inspired by my love of

endurance competitions, and my drive to succeed in them. I compete in endurance events nearly every weekend. I have competed in hundreds of ultra-distance endurance events including 7 Ironman Triathlons, two Eco Challenges, and 18 Skymarathons. I've finished in the top 10 in 98% of the events I compete in, which include several World Championships. I hold the Sky Games World Title, was the '99 Mountain Runner of the Year, '97 Pro Duathlete of the Year, and have won 57 of the last 57 snowshoe races I have entered. I have a passion for endurance sports. I make a little money at it, but unfortunately I haven't been able to get rich doing it. Still, I wouldn't trade this passion and lifestyle for anything.

Competing has given me the fitness, endurance, mental strength and skills to make it through the 14ers. It has taken me many years of training and competing to build this base. I started climbing Colorado's 14,000 ft peaks when I was about 13. Over the next 16 years I climbed all but a handful, so I was familiar with most of the mountains. This past summer, squeezed between work and racing, I spent my time scouting out routes on the mountains, studying maps, and coordinating a support crew, vehicles, and the equipment I would need for the trip. Really, I had very little time to pull it all together. I definitely was not 100% ready, but the time was right and I was motivated. My belief is that I'll never be 100% ready for anything, and if I don't just go for it, it'll never get done.

And so, on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2000, my faithful crew and I packed the truck and headed for Silverton. We caught the train, the easiest way to access the first three peaks of the journey and before I knew it, I was on my way to what would be the most incredible experience of my life. It was 11:36 pm when the clock started.

I have 55 different stories I wish I could tell you about each of the 55 peaks. For these stories you will have to wait for my book. Each of the climbs was unique and special. Each was different. Even now, 5 months after the journey, the memory of every mountain is vivid in my head.

My first doubts about what I was doing came on peak #6, Wilson Peak. It was dark and cold. I had a poor flashlight, no food and no water. The climb was technical, class 4-5 climbing. I was alone and lost. The stars, my instincts, and my compass eventually got me back on course after a bit of panic. My survival instincts took over and I made it back to the trailhead safely, but exhausted, to very worried and proud crew. From that point I carried on strong for the next 5 peaks before I hit my physical low. At peak #12 I was so fatigue and so lifeless that I still don't know how I moved. I could not eat and could not drink. My body had shut down. I forced myself to eat and drink; chocking and keeling over in pain with each bite and sip. I put one foot in front of the other, focusing on each step, until finally I reached to top of Handies Peak. Handies, one of the "easiest" peaks (I had run up it a couple years before) was definitely one of the hardest peaks of my journey.

I eventually came back strong, and efficiently climbed 12 more peaks, getting many of the technical peaks out of the way. I chased and dodged many thunderstorms and snowstorms. I was on record pace, and even got special permission to climb Culebra, a private peak, a few days earlier than my scheduled climb.

It was peak #25, Lindsey Peak, where I had my emotional low point of the journey. A storm had set in early in the day. I put my raincoat on, and Kevin (one of my incredible climbing partners) and I set off to climb Lindsey. We climbed to just before

treeline and waited out the lightning storm in the safety (or should I say, safer) of the trees. The lightning receded and we continued on to 13,000 ft, just 1,200 ft from the summit. The lightning came back, striking all around us. The air was buzzing and rocks were tumbling down around us from the force of the thunderheads. I had to make a decision. I might have made it to the top alive, but instead I decided to turn around. I decided that it wasn't worth risking my life, and dying, just to get the speed record. Death is a reality in these mountains. At least six lives have been taken in the last year. Several by lightning. I wasn't ready to die. I admit that I am a risk taker, but this time something deep inside me told me, "No, don't go on." Kevin and I turned and ran back to the trailhead. When we got back I told my crew that I didn't make it. I saw disappointment in their face. All their confidence in me was shattered. I had failed. We drove away, defeated. As I watched the storm tumble around Mt Lindsey, tears of defeat were flowing from my eyes. But then something happened. As I stared at the mountains, the mountains seemed to speak to me. They were calling me back, "Don't stop, you're journey is not over. Come back, we invite you back," the mountains echoed. "Yeah," I thought, "my journey is not over. I am not going to quit!" I decided that I would carry on, no matter how long it took, even if it was necessary to drive myself around to the trailheads. My journey up to this point was the hardest effort I had ever put into anything, and I wasn't going to let that go because of one lousy peak and one nasty storm. I was going to finish the task, and finish it alive!

My true friends and climbing partners, Eric Black and Kevin Mastin, for whom I am grateful, came through with enormous support. They were going to stand by me in my effort to continue the journey by providing transportation and climbing support for the rest of the mountains. We got a good night rest that night, and started strong again the next morning. The storms continued to be a nuisance. In effort to avoid the worst of the storms, the plan for the next several peaks was to summit the more technical peaks in the early morning hours when the weather was better, then drive between trailheads during the afternoon thunderstorms, and summit the easier peaks at night. The plan made the going a little slower than desired, but was working fine and it was a relatively safe approach. I even went back and got Mt Lindsey. This time with no weather problems. I summited just in time to watch a beautiful sunrise!

As more days and peaks passed by the crew was minimized; leaving myself, Eric, my running shoes, one set of clothes, and my 2wd truck pulling a trailer with an ATV. We recruited some great mountain runners to join me on some of the peaks, and Erin Wallin graciously volunteered to drive the last couple days, which was a savior since Eric was just as tired as I was.

None of these mountains can be taken for granted. I had just completed the last of the real technical climbs and started to relax when I suddenly found myself on a class 5 climb, in the pitch black of night, trying to find a route around an icefield. It was on Castle Peak. I had raced up Castle Peak the last 6 years in a Skymarathon competition with no problems, but this time was different. The cold of night caused the snowfield to freeze, forming a steep, slick icefield. I attempted to skirt around it and found myself climbing steep cliffs instead. After several hours in the dark, trying to find a safe route to the summit, I had to recede. I lost several hours waiting for the first light of the day. When the mountain became visible I could see an ice-free route, and then climbed to the summit in under two hours.

Castle Peak was the last of the Elk Range. I had only a few of the Sawatch and the Front Range mountains to go. For some reason I was feeling stronger as the peaks went on. I was certainly well acclimated to the altitude. A dry, blood-producing cough didn't slow me down. Each peak was a mini victory. The closer I got to #55, the more confident I became. The nasty thunderstorms became the norm. I was getting used to being battered by rainstorms in the dark of night and running away from lightning storms every afternoon. I ignored the aching in my knees and the pain in my feet because reaching the summit was so sweet that the pain didn't matter. In the last three days I climbed the last 15 peaks.

On August 4<sup>th</sup> I stood atop Longs Peak. My emotions at that time were something I cannot explain. The journey was so hard and so long that I was thrilled and relieved to be done. I never imagined it would be as hard as it was. I lifted my hands in victory. At the same time, my journey was over, and in a funny kind of way, I was sad. I was in need of a lot of rest, a warm shower, and some good food. At the same time, I would miss the mountains. I would miss the rock, the scree, the thin air, the cool temperatures, and the gusts of wind. I would miss the physical challenge, mental challenge, and the views. I would miss the feeling of success and accomplishment of reaching the top of each peak. The clock officially stopped when I descended 3,000 feet from the summit. I was met by my support crew and my family for the celebration.

The feat that I accomplished is something that can never be taken away from me. Someone will eventually break my record, the female speed record, but what I learned about myself and about self discipline and perseverance will last me a lifetime. The memories will last a lifetime too. I will always respect the great mountains and their power. I am fortunate to have made it those two weeks without injury or illness. I am fortunate to be fit enough to have persevered and enjoyed every moment of the journey. I am fortunate to be alive and be able to explore the wonderful world we live.

I encourage everyone to reach for their dreams and goals, however wild they may be. The preparation will be worth it. The journey will be cherished.

I want to thank my wonderful supporters. This was a team effort. I could not have done it without you. Your assistance means so much to me. Thank you!