

The Ledger
of
HIMALAYAN
Truth
ACCORDING TO
ELIZABETH HAWLEY

The ONE WHO Counts

BY DEVON O'NEIL

For going on 50 years, one thread has connected every major expedition to the Nepal Himalaya. Elizabeth Hawley has become a mountaineering icon, revered by the likes of Hillary, Bonington and Messner. Her words have changed Himalayan history. But now people wonder: As someone who does not climb, is she playing too big a role?

On April 27, tiny Oh Eun-Sun crawled to the summit of 26,545-foot Annapurna in Nepal, exhausted and exhilarated, her every wheeze broadcast live in her home nation of South Korea. The ascent ended a nearly 13-year quest and made Oh the first woman—and only the 20th person—to summit all 14 of the planet's 8,000-meter peaks.

Simultaneously, halfway across the Himalaya, the Spanish climber Edurne Pasaban was on her way to climb Shishapangma in Tibet, having summited Annapurna earlier in the month. Shishapangma was the only 8,000-meter peak Pasaban had yet to climb.

In the following days, as the world celebrated Oh's feat, a controversy began to boil. Pasaban claimed she had spoken to Oh's Sherpas and that they told her, contrary to what the record cited, Oh had not summited Kangchenjunga the previous year—an assertion that Pasaban said was further supported by Oh's summit photograph, which seemed to have been taken lower on the mountain. The dispute undermined a huge title in climbing, one of the biggest "firsts" still up for grabs.

In each story about Oh's climbs and the ensuing controversy, one name kept coming up: Elizabeth Hawley. Pasaban told the press that she had informed Hawley of her doubts by phone, leading Hawley to change her designation of Oh's Kangchenjunga summit to "disputed" in her Himalayan Database, pending another interview when Oh returned to Kathmandu.

It didn't matter that the Nepal Mountaineering Association had already anointed Oh. "If Ms. Hawley's further investigations lead her to change the status of the 2009 ascent to 'unrecognised,'" the BBC reported, "Ms. Oh would not be internationally regarded as the first woman to have climbed all 14 8,000ers."

When Oh returned to Kathmandu, on May 3, Hawley interviewed her for an hour, challenging every assertion. Accounts said she told Hawley she would send video and photographic proof of her Kangchenjunga summit, but that she appeared to have answered all other questions to Hawley's satisfaction. At the end of the debrief, Hawley posed a simple question: "Did you climb all 14 of the world's 8,000-meter peaks?"

"Yes," Oh responded without hesitation.

"Congratulations," Hawley said.

And just like that, Oh's place in history was confirmed. Hawley said she would still mark the Kangchenjunga ascent as "disputed," a nod to Pasaban's contention, but she credited Oh with summiting.

As the news made its way across the globe, reporters magnified Hawley's "judge-like" status in Himalayan climbing and how she is recognized as the sport's "arbiter"—a venerable American expat who seemingly discovers the truth when no one else can. What the reports largely missed was that Hawley never desired such a title, nor does she believe that she, a non-climber, has the right to fill it.

Elizabeth Hawley has been covering Nepalese climbing for nearly five decades, interviewing more elite mountaineers than probably any person ever will—from Bonington to Viesturs to Hargreaves

to Humar and House. Unintimidated by the male-dominated culture, she is famous for calling an expedition's trekking agent no sooner than the expedition has stepped off the plane in Nepal to set up the pre-expedition interview. She arrives with her native driver, a serious man who wears fatigues, in her bright blue 1963 Volkswagen Beetle. Every time.

She walks inside the meeting site, usually the team's hotel, sits down at a table and whips out her famously detailed forms, which cover everything from one's relationship status ("So, Alan, are we still divorced, single and living with girlfriend?" she'd chide the British bon vivant Alan Burgess) to where ropes will be fixed and camps set. If the intended route is remotely common, she knows about it and asks pointed questions about the team's plans. Last fall, when I accompanied three ski mountaineers on a 40-day expedition to pioneer skiing in western Nepal, Hawley presented a decades-old Japanese map of the area that none of the three knew existed—and they had done more than a year of research.

How climbing found her, however, is a story that began before most of today's elite climbers were born.



IT WAS THE SPRING OF 1963. For a nation populated by some of the greatest climbers in the world, the fact stood out like a black snowflake: 10 years after Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's historic first ascent of Mount Everest, still no American had stood on the same summit.

Norman Dyhrenfurth, a Swiss-born photographer who carried one of the biggest names in the nascent Himalayan climbing world, had been chosen to lead a National Geographic Society-spon-

A Lord John Hunt, leader of the 1953 British Everest Expedition that put Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay on the summit; Lisa Choegy of Tourism Resource Consultants, Kathmandu; Chris Bonington, veteran of over 20 first ascents in the greater ranges; and Elizabeth Hawley at the 40th Everest Anniversary, May 1993. Photo: Lisa Choegy Collection.

B Hawley and dear friend Tomaz Humar, of Slovenia. Humar would phone her the day before leaving for Langtang Lirung, on which his body was found. Photo: Sergeja Jersin / Humar Collection.

C Liz Hawley today, at home in Kathmandu. Photo: by Kris Erickson.

D Oh Eun-Sun of South Korea, who on April 27 summited Annapurna, last on her list of the 14 8,000-meter peaks. Photo: courtesy Black Yak.

E Edurne Pasaban of Spain atop Annapurna April 17, with only Shishapangma left to tick. She would challenge Oh's claim to a prior ascent of Kangchenjunga. Photo: RTVE Al filo de lo imposible.

sored team of the strongest mountaineers America could offer. The goal was not just to put the first U.S. man on the summit of Everest; Dyhrenfurth also intended a bold and creative full traverse of the peak, including a first ascent of the terrifying West Ridge.

"If we can pull it off," Dyhrenfurth was quoted as saying, "it would be the biggest possible thing still to be accomplished in Himalayan mountaineering."

The expedition, launched in February, employed 900 porters, required 29 tons of supplies and cost \$400,000 to stage—equivalent to \$2.8 million in modern money. But the siege style paid off: Not only did Jim Whittaker become the first American to reach the top of the world, on May 1, but three weeks later Willi Unsoeld and Tom Hornbein completed the first traverse of the mountain. After summiting late in the afternoon, they bivouacked at 28,000 feet, guided downwards by Lute Jerstad and Barry Bishop, who had climbed the South Col to meet them, where all endured temperatures of minus 20 and the uncertainty of survival as the first ever to bivouac so high. Bishop later lost 10 toes and Unsoeld nine to frostbite.

Upon the team's triumphant return to Kathmandu, Dyhrenfurth agreed to an interview with a former *Fortune* magazine researcher who recently had begun stringing for Reuters, covering Nepalese affairs. Her name was Elizabeth Hawley. She was 39. She had never climbed a mountain in her life.

But Hawley—who through her dogged dissection of Himalayan mountaineering would become a polarizing figure—was one of the few journalists who understood the historic implications of what Dyhrenfurth's team had accomplished. The two met one-on-one at a Kathmandu hotel, and Dyhrenfurth told her what happened: how they set their basecamp on March 21 just below the Khumbu Icefall; and how Jake Breitenbach, a 27-year-old Dartmouth dropout and mountain guide from Jackson Hole, had been crushed to death by a monstrous serac while establishing their route through the icefall. Dyhrenfurth told of how the somber expedition trudged on.

His details mesmerized Hawley, who still recounts the historic feat that defined the expedition.



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F Ed Viesturs, first American to climb all the 8,000-meter peaks of the world, calls seeing Elizabeth Hawley part of going to Nepal: "You don't want to blow her off." Photo by Jimmy Chin.



B

F

C Hawley with Sir Edmund Hillary, New Zealand High Commissioner to India, May 2003. Photo: Lisa Choegy Collection.



C



D

H Lydia Bradey of New Zealand at Everest basecamp in 1988. She was the first woman to climb Everest without oxygen, in a solo ascent that was disputed at the time but which Hawley supports with clarity. Photo: Lydia Bradey Collection.



E

"Two of them went up the West Ridge and came down the normal route on the southeast ridge, the south col," she said. "Well, two other members went up the normal route, because the West Ridge people didn't know the route down. And they were supposed to meet on the summit and they didn't. But they got together eventually, and they made it down."

Hawley's mountaineering interest swelled in the wake of her meeting with Dyhrenfurth. She got to know the thoughtful and questing, yet humorous, Unsoeld—who lived in Kathmandu with his family and became Peace Corps director in Nepal—particularly well.

"He got hepatitis after the expedition," Hawley said, "so he was not able to go to Washington to be greeted by President Kennedy and receive his award. So he stayed here. I knew the family, and I'd drop in on them, on him. He was a very interesting person to talk to. He was teaching comparative religion. He was one of the two who got badly frostbitten toes. In fact, he lost nine of them. And I remember going and seeing him, and it was a hot summer. He was lying on the bed with just a sheet on the bed, nothing covering him up, and he was wiggling one toe. Just like a child wiggles a loose tooth? Well, he was wiggling a loose toe."

Hawley has told that story a hundred times. That expedition began her career. As she put it last October in Kathmandu, 10 days before her 86th

birthday, "I started meeting expeditions, all the expeditions that came here, and I've been meeting all the expeditions that came here ever since."



EVERY NOW AND THEN, SOME OF the greatest alpinists in history ponder a question. What would we know were it not for Elizabeth Hawley? And then they wonder, what will happen when she is no longer around?

The climbs still would have happened—Reinhold Messner would hardly have stopped assaulting the world's 8,000-meter peaks if this slight, bespectacled and pugnacious woman weren't around to badger him about every detail on his way through Kathmandu. But mountaineering history would be different. There would be more exaggerations, more disputes, wiggle room in what actually happened.

"Without Miss Hawley, we would not have the history we have," Messner said by phone from Italy. "She knows more about the Himalaya than anyone else."

Despite being as imposing as a field mouse, Hawley is known for wielding a detective's interview style that has intimidated even high-profile profes-



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I Deep in conversation with Reinhold Messner, who with Peter Habeler was first to climb Everest without oxygen (1978), first to solo it (1980) and first to climb all the 8000-meter peaks (1986), in Kathmandu in October 2004. *Photo: Lisa Choegy Collection.*

J Hawley with David Breashears, five-time Everest ascentionist and filmmaker, and the British author and climbing historian Audrey Salkeld, 1996. *Photo: Lisa Choegy Collection.*

sionals like Ed Viesturs. Alan Burgess calls her “the dragon lady who interviewed you and asked what you were going to climb, and she probably knew more about it than you did.”

Hawley also has a knack for pissing people off. One of Steve House’s partners in the Himalaya, the Slovenian guide Marko Prezelj, believes, as many do, that she passes too much judgment on climbs with no personal experience to base it on. She tells climbers their routes are boring or, ever flatly, that they’ll kill themselves if they do what they plan to do. During our return interview last fall, she mocked an American guide who was taking a client up the standard route on 22,493-foot Ama Dablam. “I could climb the standard route on Ama Dablam blindfolded,” she said, “if I knew how to climb and I wasn’t so old.” She calls the renowned Everest guide Pete Athans’ kids “vermin” and won’t look at them—as Athans, who has met Hawley more than 50 times, relates with a chuckle.

It’s been said that Hawley puts too much emphasis on “showmen”—she adored the flamboyant Tomaz Humar, who kissed Hawley when he saw her and always remembered her birthday—and that she incorrectly celebrates lesser feats on big peaks over tougher climbs on smaller ones. “If she deems you as worthy,” Conrad Anker said, “you can do no wrong.”

What no one disputes, not even those who dismiss her, is that her mind contains memories and information you cannot buy.

“She’s an icon,” Burgess said. “There’s nobody else.”



IN 1968, FIVE YEARS AFTER HAWLEY met her first expedition, Chris Bonington was sleeping on a friend’s floor in Cheshire, England, when he conceived a plan that would change Himalayan climbing forever. Annapurna, the world’s 10th-tallest mountain, had a massive south face that was so sheer it put the fear of God into the bravest of mountaineers. Bonington, who once commanded 12 men and three tanks in the British army, had never led a major expedition. But his time had come.

He secured a single slide of the 12,000-foot, avalanche-raked face and projected it onto his liv-

ing-room wall to inspect the route. It was giant, like nothing anyone had ever tried; every significant climb in the Himalaya up to then had been a ridge ascent.

In the months leading up to the March 1970 expedition, Bonington assembled a team stacked with British climbing royalty: Don Whillans, Ian Clough, Dougal Haston, Nick Estcourt. Clough, in particular, was a key player, as much for his selfless attitude as his widely admired climbing ability. He and Bonington had climbed the north face of the Eiger together in 1962 and been close friends for more than a decade. “I’d done some of my best climbing with him,” Bonington said. But since their exploits in the early ’60s, Clough had settled down, gotten married, and had a daughter. Annapurna posed a huge risk to his new life.

The expedition began terribly. The boat carrying all their gear broke down in the middle of the Indian Ocean, so they had to borrow rope, crampons, axes, tents and food from a British army expedition on the north side of the peak. “It was Ian Clough who actually escorted and brought our gear up from Bombay through Kathmandu and then up through the mountains,” Bonington recalled.

After a treacherous ascent of the wall that lasted more than a month and a half, Whillans and Haston finally reached the summit in late May. The entire expedition rejoiced—they’d completed the hardest climb in Himalayan history. However, as they evacuated the mountain and headed back toward base camp, Annapurna lurched back. A massive serac dropped off the wall and crushed Ian Clough.

Bonington, so filled with joy by the team’s success, left the mountain with a broken heart. (By the end of the decade, most of the expedition’s other climbers would also be dead from separate climbing accidents.) When he arrived back in Kathmandu and met Hawley to tell her about their spring on Annapurna, he broke down. “He told me, ‘Never again a big mountain, never again a big expedition,’” she recalled.

But sure enough, Bonington couldn’t stay away. *(continued on page 74)*

K Through the ages, Hawley has known them all, such as the great team of Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker. In 1976 they climbed the West Wall of Changabang, India, probably the hardest Himalayan wall yet done. The two disappeared in 1982 on the unclimbed Northeast Ridge of Everest. *Photo by Chris Bonington.*

L Sir Edmund Hillary, Elizabeth Hawley and Inger Lissanevitch (wife of Boris Lissanevitch, who opened Nepal’s first hotel and the Yak & Yeti restaurant) at the informal opening of Phaplu Hospital in 1976 or 1977. *Photo: Lisa Choegy Collection.*

M Steve House is one of the current crop of climbers still interviewed by Hawley before climbing in Nepal. Their first meeting was no picnic, however. *Photo by Ben Moon.*

N Hawley in 1975 meeting the British SW Face Everest expedition, led by Chris Bonington. Dougal Haston (in blue bandanna), Doug Scott, Peter Boardman and Pertemba Sherpa would summit, with Mick Burke to disappear on a solo bid. The man in rust is unknown. Just out of the photo is Nick Estcourt of the team, who would be killed on K2 in 1978. *Photo by Chris Bonington.*

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(continued from page 45)

"He came back to Everest, led expeditions at least twice"—including the historic first ascent of the southwest face in 1975—"and went around and climbed it himself on somebody else's team," Hawley said.

"I don't believe mountaineers when they say never again. Mountaineers forget. They forget the bad parts. They remember the interesting parts and the exciting parts and the successful parts, but they forget the rest of it."



ELIZABETH HAWLEY LIVES IN A second-floor Kathmandu apartment that is smack in the center of Dillibazar, one of the city's liveliest neighborhoods. She moved into the two-bedroom apartment in October 1960 after leaving New York City, which she found too predictable. A lover of scotch, she was known in Kathmandu for hosting quite the cocktail party—affairs that drew everyone from colorful expats to world-famous climbers to Nepalese royalty. Now she spends most of her time huddled over her desk scanning forms or typing

up reports as the horns blare and the locals screech on the street below.

The ski mountaineer Kris Erickson and I walked in to our interview 15 minutes early. Hawley was grumpy. One of her Nepali assistants came to ask a question but paused at the door when he saw us. She waved him in. "Don't mind them. They're foreigners."

All of Hawley's furniture sparkled with the same sheen, as if just polished. A glass of ice water sat on the edge of her desk. Her shelves were lined with books by the likes of Rowell, Messner, Krakauer, Bonington and Boukreev. She seemed uncomfortable being on the other side of the interview, fidgeting and loudly blurting out answers.

I asked her about some of the climbers she'd covered, the famous ones. She has at least some recollection of everyone, though many of the interactions she shared with them have been blurred by time.

Aside from Hillary, whom Hawley counted among her closest friends, she has always been most enamored by Messner. The first time she met him, in 1972, two of his climbing part-

ners had disappeared during a savage storm on 26,759-foot Manaslu—his first 8,000-meter peak since losing his brother on Nanga Parbat two years prior. He spoke no English, but he'd been the only one on a strong Austrian team to reach the summit, so the leader brought him along to the interview with Hawley.

"He was—there's a word for him; not yahoo, but yokel," Hawley said. "There was just nothing special about him. His clothes were not very good clothes, nothing special about them. His hair was just what was traditional in those days, very plain. Now he comes back occasionally for a visit, and he's a member of the European parliament, he speaks good English, he even speaks good Italian, which I don't think he did very well in the early days. His nationality was Italian but he was from the south Tyro, which is German speaking.

"His clothes are the latest style, pink stripes, flared, all that stuff. His hair is magnificently coiffed. He has a small castle in northern Italy, and there's yaks grazing on the grounds. Now he's got a museum for himself. He's just a very sophisticated man, from this yo-

kel. And I saw that progression. I interviewed him maybe 30 times."

Messner, who was never an easy subject for a journalist, actually defers to Hawley in some cases.

"I respect her very much," he said, adding: "She's quite a cynical person. Very intense, cultured, very strong lady. In the beginning, she was very critical of me, said I was risking too much by trying to do the 8,000-meter peaks alpine style."

In 1986 Messner was on the verge of becoming the first to summit all 14 of the planet's 8,000-meter peaks—narrowly ahead of the Polish alpinist Jerzy Kukuczka, who had been gaining fast. Hawley, of course, was right in the middle of the race, scooping the details and playing it up as much as anyone.

Messner ended up summiting Makalu, the fifth-highest mountain on earth, on his third try of the autumn, then took a helicopter to the basecamp of Lhotse, the world's fourth-tallest peak. He summited in October, completing his quest.

In addition to his "fair means" mantra and disdain for supplemental oxygen, it was Messner's summiting

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multiple 8,000-meter peaks in the span of a month that impressed Hawley the most.

“He pioneered a lot, but that was his greatest feat,” she said. “He proved that you could keep going, for God’s sake.”



DURING HER CAREER WITH Reuters, Hawley covered Nepalese politics, disasters and news that was typical fodder for a foreign correspondent—a story she wrote on former prime minister B.P. Koirala’s death (“the best scoop I ever had”) ran on the cover of *The New York Times*. But for her, nothing matched covering expeditions. She got to know the athletes she interviewed and, for a handful—including some women, notably Alison Hargreaves, whose 1995 death on K2 Hawley mourned—served as a “grandmotherly figure,” said the British climber Adrian Burgess. “She was like that to a lot of us young climbers. She really cared, but she also knew the harsh realities of Himalayan climbing, that we might not come back.”

While climbers of so many nationalities—Brits, Poles, Czechs, Russians,

Slovenians, Japanese, French, Swiss, Americans—existed in their own pods and crossed each others’ paths only occasionally, Hawley was the common denominator: She knew everyone. She helped celebrate their achievements over drinks but also investigated hundreds of their deaths. She was one of the last people to speak to such luminaries as Jerzy Kukuczka (who died on Lhotse in the autumn of 1989), Marco Siffredi (who disappeared while snowboarding the Hornbein Couloir on Everest in the fall of 2002), Iñaki Ochoa de Olza (who perished on Annapurna in the spring of 2008), and Jean-Christophe Lafaille (who vanished on Makalu in the winter of 2008) before they ventured off to their tragic fates.

One afternoon last fall, Hawley received a phone call from a local trekking agent who told her Tomaz Humar was embarking on a covert trip to climb Langtang Lirung the next morning. There was no time to meet in person, but he said Humar had insisted on speaking with her before he left. During their talk, she was surprised to learn Humar had not told anyone in Slove-

nia he was making this trip, and that he would have just one (non-climbing) cook at base camp—a self-reliance that ultimately may have contributed to his death. But nothing in the conversation foreshadowed what was to come.

“He sounded his usual cheerful, friendly, confident self,” Hawley said.

Hawley still has never climbed a mountain—“What for!” she bellowed when I asked why—but many don’t think it matters. Bonington went so far as to call her “one of the gang” and a “good spokeswoman” for climbing. “So many journalists don’t really understand what climbing is all about, but she was absolutely plumb accurate,” he said.

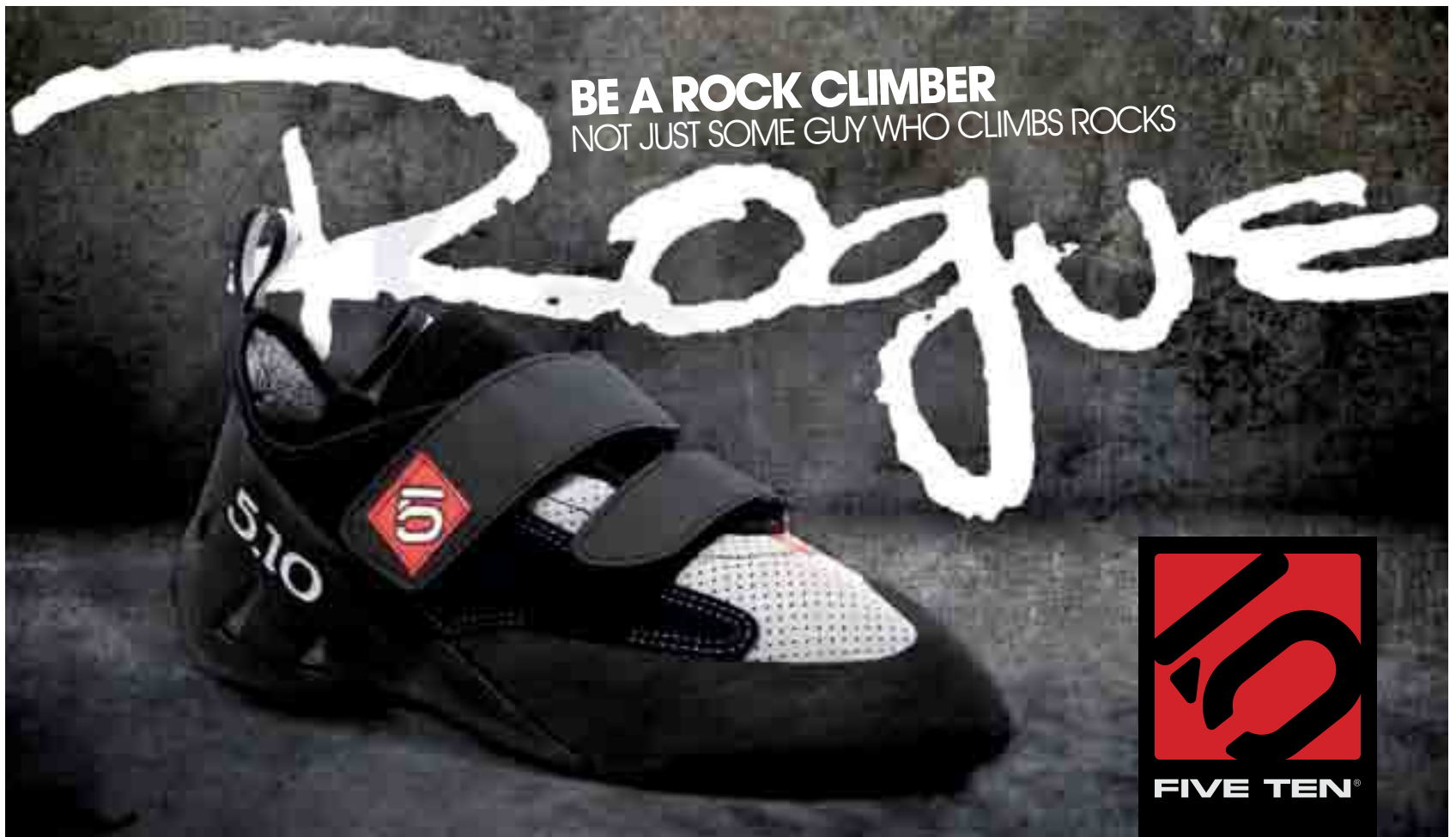
Of course, not everyone shares that view. In 2000, after the Canadian climber Byron Smith claimed to have summited Everest, Hawley saw inconsistent video evidence and heard an account from Smith’s cameraman, Tim Ripple—who stayed at Camp IV—that conflicted with those of Smith and his seven Sherpas. She listed Smith’s (heavily sponsored) Everest summit as “disputed” in her annual report published by the American Alpine Club.

Smith unsuccessfully sued the AAC, which backed Hawley.

Peter Hillary, who grew up with Hawley playing the role of his Kathmandu aunt (she is the executive officer for his late father’s Himalayan Trust and lives upstairs from where the Hillarys stayed in Nepal), told me he is still disturbed by the influence she had relative to Smith, whom he counts as a friend. “I have absolutely no doubt he was on the summit,” Hillary said. “There’s only one way to interpret [disputing his claim]: it’s really based on pure racism. If the seven on top of Everest that day had been Americans, there wouldn’t be an issue about his ascent.

“What worries me here is that Liz, who lived upstairs from the Himalayan Trust flat in Kathmandu, who never climbed a mountain, has moved on to become this arbiter of success in the Himalayas. ... Her personal analyses, opinions, and her rulings on what constitutes a successful climb are just downright inappropriate.”

The debate is fundamental and has followed Hawley throughout her career: Should a non-climber, even one



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as knowledgeable as she, he allowed to judge a feat's or a climber's worthiness?

To Messner, the answer is, in her case, yes. "Men and women who did not climb should not have the right to criticize climbers. But she's a historian and has spoken with all the Sherpas, all the climbers. She has the right."

The Canmore-based alpinist Carlos Buhler doesn't believe so, though he feels she plays an important role. "Her job is to transmit information," he said. "It's almost like the little black box that they send along in airplanes that records all the conversations and all the little vibrations, and 99 percent of the time, it's useless. But every once in a while, it's crucial to have that information."

"She does judge," Conrad Anker allowed, "but don't forget, she's never made herself out to be a climber. I see her as a trove of knowledge and this wonderful thing. Any faults she has, I overlook those."

Hawley doesn't like the controversy and took the diplomatic route in an e-mail: "I quite understand the view that my opinion is of no value since I have never climbed. I try to make as few judgments as possible, but having met so many climbers and chatted with a good number of them about climbing, I do have some thoughts, which anyone is welcome to disregard."



AS ALWAYS, HAWLEY REMAINS involved with cutting-edge climbing, and among the daunting "firsts" that still exist in the Himalaya, none is more prized than the west face of Makalu, which Steve House has eyed for years. In the fall of 2008—seven years after meeting Hawley on his first trip to Nepal, when he summited 26,864-foot Cho Oyu—House returned with Marko Prezelj and Vince Anderson to attempt Makalu's west face, a 7,000-foot, El Capitan-esque feature above huge ice fields that House calls one of the top three big-wall climbs on earth, along with K2's west face and the Rupal Face on Nanga Parbat.

House was three years removed from his historic ascent (with Anderson) of the 15,000-foot Rupal Face, but Hawley still didn't know who he was—"I don't follow the Karakoram," she freely admits. The fact that the three were climbing alpine-style elicited doubt, and when House wouldn't speculate on where he

HAWLEY SPEAKS ON ...

CHRIS BONINGTON

"I remember being very much impressed when he took along a laptop with him to Everest basecamp. And he was working out the logistics at basecamp with his laptop. That was the first time I ever knew of anybody doing that. It might've been the first time I knew about a laptop. Very pleasant fellow. He had a temper, all right. But he usually calmed down and forgot about it."



REINHOLD MESSNER

"I have found Messner a charming man with original ideas about how to go about climbing, and with valuable insights into such subjects as what motivates climbers and the problems to be solved when climbing. He was outstanding in many ways, obviously. But one of his attributes that I admired was quite often he'd go and see the mountain before he'd go and climb it. He studied his mountain, either looking at it or reading about it. He knew what he was going to. I've met teams that I'll ask them, 'What route are you going to climb?' And they'll say, 'We don't know. What do you suggest?'"

ALISON HARGREAVES

"She didn't exude toughness, but she was clearly determined to achieve her difficult goals. I don't remember her speaking about her husband, but she did talk about her children, whom she dearly loved."

ED VIESTURS

"He was always very friendly when I met him, and willing to take time chatting with me about his plans or his climbs after his return; he's a pleasant, likeable man. I have never thought of him as a superman, but there is no doubt that he is an excellent mountaineer. He didn't mind retreating."

DON WHILLANS

(who was rumored to be romantically involved with Hawley, a rumor she has long dismissed) "He was always too fat when he arrived in Kathmandu. He slimmed down a little bit during the climb, but he loved his beer. One time he poked his head out his tent and thought he saw a yeti. He must've been tight as a coot."

TOMAZ HUMAR

(recorded before his death) "I think he's very honest. For example, when he went to do a solo ascent of Dhaulagiri's south face on an unclimbed route, he didn't claim he got to the summit. He got to about 7,500 meters, and he said, 'If I kept going I knew I would die.' So he didn't keep going, he traversed over across the east face, which isn't very wide at that point, to the normal route on the northeast ridge and came down that."

LYDIA BRADEY

"She [is] an unforgettable woman, a non-conformist, a strong climber with a strong character. In October 1988, she became the first woman to summit Everest without supplemental oxygen. Her summit claim was disputed by New Zealand compatriots, who had mixed motives when they told the Nepalese tourism ministry that she did not get to the top, but a Spanish climber who summited the same day as she, confirmed to me that she definitely had."

CHANTAL MAUDUIT

"Chantal was a very different person from Lydia and also unforgettable. She was very attractive, named each of her expeditions after a flower (her tents were decorated with it), and was almost casual on her climbs—a characteristic that proved fatal when she stayed at a camp on Dhaulagiri I when the other teams evacuated it in the face of a snowstorm."

BABU CHIRI SHERPA

"Several Sherpas have impressed me, among them Babu Chiri, known as Ang Babu. He was a pleasure to meet, modest, full of energy till his accidental death in 2001, when he was only 36. He summited his first 8,000-meter mountain, Kangchenjunga, at the age of 24, scaled Cho Oyu three times, twice in one season, and when he made his 10th and last ascent of Everest in May 2000, he set a speed record from BC to top."

—D.O.

ABOVE: Hawley has known Sir Christian Bonington since 1970, when he led his first expedition. This photo from Changabang, India, 1974. Photo Chris Bonington Collection.

intended to place his camps, the interaction grew testier. Hawley finally stopped, handing the form back to him and left.

In the end, sickness and poor weather doomed the trip. House, Prezelj and Anderson made two attempts but never came close to the summit. "It was a very difficult route," Hawley conceded later.

The following spring, House returned with the climber-photographer Cory Richards for a solo attempt on the same face. At the pre-expedition interview, House figured Hawley had done her homework and checked out his background, because her tone had changed. "Nothing in particular, except when I said I may be going up this wall by myself, she didn't start laugh-

ing, which had been her attitude before," said House, who reached 6,500 meters before retreating.

Various mountaineers who meet Hawley now say she is not as sharp as she was five or 10 years ago, but she still has the badger's snarl, as evidenced when she ordered me out of her office mid-interview—without looking up from her desk—because she didn't want to answer any more questions. In a strange way, however, that very feistiness has always drawn her subjects in. Alan Burgess, who received his mail through Hawley for years and often took her out to dinner with his brother, put it this way.

"It's like when the dragon smiles—

it's not very often, but when she does, it's a jewel."



UNSURPRISINGLY, HAWLEY SHOWS

no sign of decreasing her workload. On a busy day in the spring or fall, she meets with up to four expeditions, hopping from hotel to hotel like a concierge. The majority of teams are guided and large, but, unlike some, she doesn't hold the commercial climbing boom in contempt. "I think everyone should have a chance to climb a mountain," she said.

She employs two assistants, a German woman and a Nepali man, to help meet the ever-growing number of teams. She still gets almost no resistance.

"I think you meet her out of courtesy," Ed Viesturs said. "She knows you're in town, you don't want to blow her off. For me, it's just been part of the process. I know I'm going to Nepal, and I'm going to see Liz Hawley."

Hawley said she will probably interview expeditions until she dies. She has no plans to groom a replacement, which has left Himalayan insiders quietly wondering what will happen.

"There are people out there who are shouting the odds about what is and isn't kosher [in mountaineering], people who are essentially self-appointed," said the climber and journalist Ed Douglas. "Will it be left to them to fill the vacuum? Or should official bodies fill the gap? Like the UIAA?"

Aside from a nephew and his family in Colorado, Hawley has no close relatives. She never married and no longer likes going out after dark. She lives alone in a two-bedroom apartment, surrounded by Kathmandu's chaos—and it is where she belongs.

Before leaving, I asked Hawley how she wants to be remembered, and she pondered her place in the world—a life lived among giants and heroes, mortals all.

"I don't really expect to be remembered," she said. "God knows I'm not world famous."

"But," she added, "a lot of climbers know me."

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