

The big why

BY LISA BALLARD

Humans are wired for fight-or-flight response. When in danger, our bodies produce adrenaline, which helps us confront a threat either head on or by quickly retreating.

Call it a survival instinct. I prefer “performance predisposition” particularly for people, like me, who are predisposed toward mountain adventures that are physically and mentally challenging. I’m not reckless. I know my skills and my limits. What you consider extreme might be within my comfort zone and vice versa.

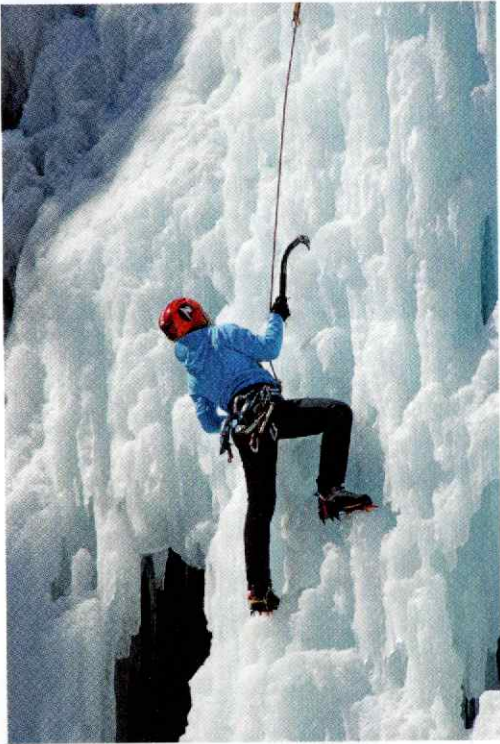
For example, several years ago, I admonished my son to be careful when I learned he was doing avalanche control work at a ski area in the Rocky Mountains. “You run downhill!” he said to me. “I should worry about you.”

Age 63, I still race in downhill on the masters ski racing circuit. I love going fast on skis, a passion I found in the 1970s in the junior racing program at Whiteface Mountain.

Different people tolerate different levels of risk. I’m on the higher end of that spectrum and not just on skis. The Adirondacks was my training ground for several risky pursuits such as ice climbing, rock climbing, even hiking, depending on the route. My High Peaks experiences not only tested me, but also gave me the skills and confidence to explore various places around the globe.

When climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania in 2009, I could have ascended one of the standard tourist routes. Instead, I opted for the Western Breach, a former ice climbing route that had just reopened. Now devoid of ice due to climate change, our team had to get through this precarious, vertical boulder field before the sun hit it, causing it to spit rocks like deadly, giant watermelon pits. Imagine my relief when I reached Africa’s rooftop.

Why do some of us do such things? When asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, the legendary mountaineer George Mallory responded, “because it’s there.” Mallory paid the ultimate price for his determination to be the first to reach the top of the world’s highest peak, yet his oft-quoted words live on as the rationale for adventure-seekers. The debate whether Mallory should have turned back just



Lisa Ballard climbs in Ouray, Col.

PHOTO BY ANGELA HAWES

below the summit as clouds engulfed him still rages 100 years later. Some consider Mallory a hero. Others say he was an over-confident egoist, blinded by his goal.

In 2002, when I was a reporter during the Winter Goodwill Games, my cameraman and I snowshoed up Owls Head near Keene for a story on the beauty of the Adirondack Park. Upon returning to the broadcast center in Lake Placid, my producer killed the feature and sent me to the hospital to report on four backcountry skiers rescued from an avalanche on Mount Marcy. All but one died. Were they reckless? Maybe, but sometimes accidents happen despite taking every precaution. Like Mallory on Everest, those skiers took a calculated risk and lost their bet with Mother Nature. It happens.

When I summited Kilimanjaro, luckily, there

were many rewards. I touched rocks that few others had. The views were jaw-dropping. I witnessed the eruption of nearby Mount Meru from above. The camaraderie among my fellow climbers laid the foundation for lifelong friendships. It was my first time over 19,000 feet. I stood on disappearing glaciers that future climbers won’t, and I photographed rare flora endemic only to Kilimanjaro.

Yet one of my climbing partners nearly succumbed to acute mountain sickness and had to immediately leave the summit while the rest of us camped there. I underestimated the cold and became dangerously hypothermic while trying to photograph the ashpit, the part of the crater that’s still active. Our remaining guide recognized my condition, led me back to a tent and put me in a sleeping bag, staving off another potentially deadly situation. We faced biting ants, pervasive volcanic dust, pelting hail, pouring rain, scorching sun and a quadricep-crushing 12,000 foot descent.

When backcountry skiing in Yellowstone National Park with a half-dozen other experienced skiers, I broke with Mallory. Our goal was to skin up Top Notch Peak without a guide, then ski back to the road. My mood was jovial, that is, until we reached the bottom of a cirque below the summit ridge. It looked inviting except some snow had recently tumbled down part of the cirque’s steep face. Everyone eagerly plowed ahead.

I turned around. Something didn’t feel right, causing the hairs on the back of my neck to itch. Another experienced Everest climber once told me to listen to those neck hairs. Luckily, everyone made it back. But, the bowl slid that evening.

There’s something in human DNA that urges us to explore and push our limits. I value the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction I get when I stand on a summit. My closest friendships are those with whom I explore the backcountry. Not everyone is going to climb Everest, Kilimanjaro or even Marcy. For some, stepping onto any trail is adventurous, but we usually go “because it’s there,” and because we fully intend to make it home again. ■

Last fall, the Outdoor Writers Association of America honored Lisa Ballard with the Joan Wulff Enduring Excellence Award for career achievements.



LISA BALLARD is a Chateaugay Lake-based author who contributes to numerous national and regional publications.