



THE DECISION—  
DON'T TELL ANYONE... YET

I was driving to the gym. It had been awhile, probably a couple of months since I'd worked out. It always helped me to have a goal—that motivated me to train. Before I went to Aconcagua in January 2001, I worked out three or four times a week for six months. I took it pretty seriously. But I'd been taking a rest. I was finally on my way back into the gym in March of 2001.

That's when I first, really, thought about going to Everest.

The pain from Aconcagua was far enough away that you forget it. As I was coming down from the summit of Aconcagua, I had a bit of what I would come to know as the Khumbu cough—that high-altitude cough. But you tend to forget the pain and remember the pleasure. If you focused on the pain, you wouldn't go back.

I remember thinking, as I was driving in my car, “It would be awesome to go to Everest.”

It is the biggie. The Big E. I decided I wanted to go there for the same reason I’d wanted to go to Cornell University after junior college, for the same reason I wanted to learn to fly in the clouds. It was one of those next-step kind of things.

I’d never been to Asia before. I’d read so much of the literature about Everest—from Hillary’s first ascent to *Into Thin Air*. I always liked the idea of being an explorer, even though I knew we weren’t exploring. Hillary and Tenzing Norgay walked off the map. But I thought it would be cool to retrace the steps of those who’d gone before me.

It’s one thing to have the dream and something else to go after it, to realize it. So I thought about it for a while. I didn’t just want to blurt out, “I’m going to go climb Everest.” I might as well have said, “I’m going to the moon.” I didn’t feel qualified. I felt like an amateur. I kept it to myself—just in case I came to my senses because then I’d be embarrassed. I wanted to let it sink in a little bit, let the hook set.

There were obstacles. Time. I’d never been away that long. Money. I didn’t know how much it would cost—other than the \$65,000 bandied about in *Into Thin Air*, a sum of money that not a lot of people really pay. Then I wondered whom I would go with—or more appropriately, who would go with me?

I let it roll around in my head to see if it would become real. I thought it was pretty audacious. Then I remembered a psychology class I’d taken in college. It was about goals. Some people set goals too low. They don’t stretch or push themselves. In some cases, people set unattainable goals just

to get approval. But it's something they have no chance of making a reality. I wanted to make sure this was attainable. I tried to project myself on that mountain. I imagined what it would feel like to be in the Khumbu Icefall or on the Hillary Step. What would it feel like to have an oxygen mask on?

I could see myself doing that.

So one day at home, sitting out on our deck, on one of the first nice days of early spring, I floated the idea past my wife. "Gee, honey," I said to Maggie, "you know what? I was thinking about climbing Everest."

She knew it was coming. I guess other people knew I was going before I knew. My brother, Chris, said he knew I was going after I came back from Mount McKinley in 1993. He said it was because I was a lister. Maggie knew because she was on her way to becoming an Adirondack Forty-Sixer and she knew the joy of being in the backcountry and the joy of getting to the summit of a mountain.

But she wanted to know the details. It's one thing to be there and know how you feel and what the conditions are, and another thing to be at home. The people at home don't have that luxury of knowing what's going on. In some ways, it's harder to be left at home than to be there actually climbing the mountain.

We talked about it and she said OK. I had FWA.