

ONE MAN'S EVEREST

HOW A SPINAL CORD INJURY INSPIRED
NORTH AMERICA'S ONLY 24-HOUR SKI EVENT

BY AMANDA FOLLETT

FOG HANGS AROUND SMITHERS, BC's Hudson Bay Mountain as skiers begin ascending, a mass of Gore-Tex and ski poles swishing its way upslope underneath the chairlift.

It's a little past noon and the start of the second-annual Extreme Everest Challenge. Some will go all night, solo climbing up and skiing down a total of 8,848 metres — the height of Mount Everest. Others participate relay-style on teams of two or three, taking breaks throughout to snooze in the lodge or socialize around a firepit.

One skier quickly falls behind. Flanked by friends, Rod Leighton doesn't seem to notice, his attention focused on manipulating each muscle as he puts one ski in front of the other. He isn't new to challenge. Leighton legends are rampant around these parts.

THERE WAS THE TIME LEIGHTON got lost in a Honduran cave for 12 hours with no water (he chalks it up to stupidity). Or the time he biked from Calgary to Whitehorse in the dead of winter (blame that on stupid love). Or when he volunteered for a grueling five-day hike back to civilization when a buddy lost his kayak on the Alsek River (dumb luck).

Then there was the evening, four years ago, that Leighton — 53 at the time and a self-confessed cardio addict — quietly packed a backpack, strapped skis to his bike and set out from his home in Smithers to do the Everest Challenge.

Traditionally, the Everest Challenge was

to complete the 8,848 metres (29,029 feet) of skiing, or 18 runs, between the chairlifts opening and closing at Hudson Bay Mountain ski resort. But Leighton wanted to do it self-powered.

After last-minute approval from ski area management, the general practitioner finished work and biked several kilometres to the bottom of Hudson Bay Mountain's run into town. At about 7:00 p.m., he began skiing the four kilometres up to the chairlift, and from there he skinned up and skied down under clear skies all night and most of the next day.

Just after the lifts closed, roughly 24 hours after he began, Leighton completed his 18 runs and was met in the lodge by congratulatory friends and a cold beer. He then skied unceremoniously back to his bike, rode home and went to bed.

Leighton says his crash in the Whistler Bike Park four months later wasn't the stupidest thing he's done — it just wasn't his day. He tried the jump once, but didn't like the landing. He tried again. This time, he *really* missed the landing.

"I woke up on the ground knowing immediately this is the beginning of my new life," he says. He remembers a "not unpleasant tingling feeling" throughout his body. With his left arm in sight, he tried to move it — and was able to slowly pull it toward himself. There was hope.

Leighton's injury is described as an incomplete spinal cord injury, or central cord syndrome, which crushed his spinal cord and compromised sensory function up to

his C-1, or topmost vertebrae, and motor function to C-4. Several days following the accident, he was told he had a 50-50 chance of walking.

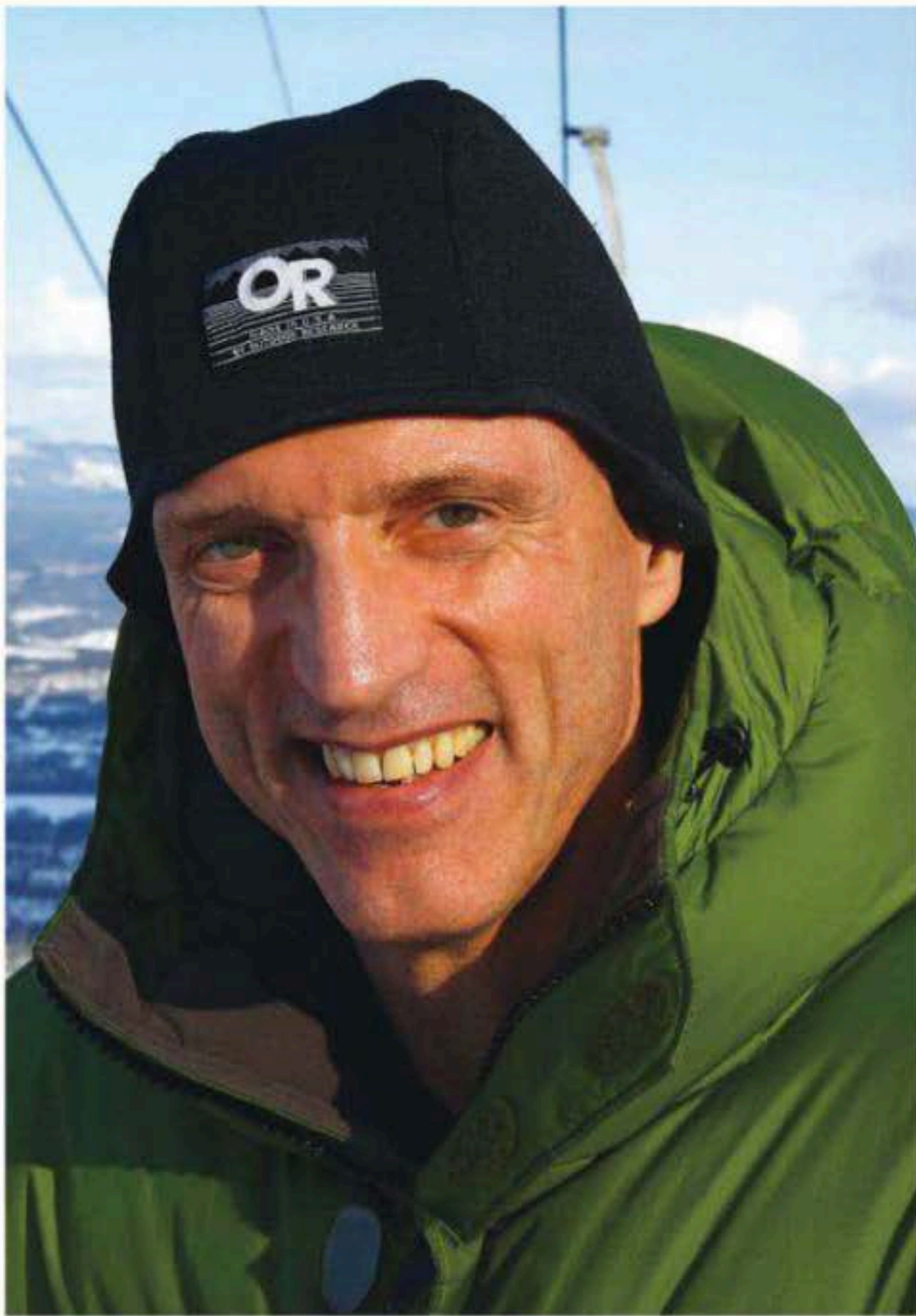
ON THIS MID-MARCH AFTERNOON, voices shout down from the chairlift, "Way to go, Rod!" and "You're my hero!" as Leighton continues his steady upward pace. About 100 metres into his ski, other participants begin lapping him on the four-kilometre course. For many, he's the reason they're here.

After Leighton's accident, organizer Dave Walter began thinking about a way to pay tribute to Leighton's Everest Challenge accomplishment. The result was North America's only 24-hour ski event.

"I thought, 'Man, I wish we could do something to expand on what Rod did,'" he says. He began floating an *Extreme Everest Challenge* and the idea gained momentum.

Instead of riding the lifts, participants could start the day before and skin up, then ski down, continuing all night and the next day, with 24 hours to complete their laps. He made it a fundraiser for the Rick Hansen Foundation and spinal cord research — a cause that holds a special place for Walter, whose father, Rainer, is in a wheelchair after undergoing surgery in his 60s to remove scar tissue that resulted from a car crash decades earlier. "He walked into the hospital and couldn't walk out," he says.

Thirty people participated in the inaugural 2012 Extreme Everest Challenge. Only one participant, Smithers resident Lisa Perry, took up Leighton's challenge to do it solo, ▶



Dr. Rod Leighton (centre) inspired North America's only 24-hour race.



Ski up and down 8,848 metres in 24 hours; equivalent to the height of Mount Everest.

completing her laps in less than 24 hours. In 2013, 80 people participated, with eight participants attempting it solo.

One was Al Gamble, a friend of Leighton's who visited him at G.F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre in Vancouver following the accident. After witnessing the patients' day-to-day challenges, he decided to do the event solo — because he could.

"[G.F. Strong] is full of people who have hard limits on what they do. Every day they're struggling just trying to walk, just trying to eat, just trying to rebuild their lives," Gamble says. The retired IBM hardware tech told himself, "At the age of 56, you kinda got one ski boot in the grave here, so you'd better get this thing done sooner than later."

He obsessed over training. He gave up alcohol. He contacted competitive ski mountaineer Greg Hill for advice, and was told

that training was all about convincing himself he could do it: "Once you're convinced, it'll be easy," Hill emailed back. Gamble still has the encouragement taped to his computer monitor.

"I was never convinced," he laughs. "But once it was on, I felt good. All the worrying was over. There was nothing to do but *do it*."

As the event began, the solo participants held back, allowing the teams to take the lead. At the top, Julian Stoddart and Ross Mailloux, both sales reps from BC's Lower Mainland, headed down first.

Gamble had made a pact to stick together with Eric Dufresne. By the third lap, Dufresne was hitting a wall, fatigue and lethargy replacing the Grade 7 French teacher's usual drive for uphill endurance. The previous year, Dufresne and Stoddart had partnered on a team. This year, by the time

Stoddart had done six laps, Dufresne was on his fifth. But into the evening the new father rebounded.

"I think it helps that I just had a baby. Sleep deprivation was no problem," says Dufresne, 38, who trained alone after school, skiing from town to the top of the lift and often not returning home until midnight.

"I did it for two reasons. One was Rod," he says. As someone who thrives on exercise, he relates to the need to seek solace in the mountains — something he describes as being "profoundly in the moment" — as well as the horror of having that escape taken away. "This is the most extreme thing Rod's ever done, for sure. And he's done a lot."

The second reason is his two-year-old daughter, Charlotte.

"I want her to be proud of me," Dufresne says. "And I want to be fit for her."

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It was after dark, at the end of their seventh lap, that cold and tired began to seep into Gamble's bones. His energy flagged. Dufresne made the difficult decision to carry on without him, expecting he wouldn't finish.

Gamble persevered. He continued alone throughout the night, kept company by the Northern Lights that danced overhead and the far off sounds of music pumping from the staging area.

SHEENA MILLER HEARD ABOUT THE Extreme Everest Challenge from friend Lisa Perry shortly before she moved to Smithers. Leighton's story and the event's uniqueness resonated with the professional announcer and event coordinator.

She added what she describes as "the buzz" to the event: music, tents, a firepit — an all-night party. She took to the microphone

between her own laps to cheer on other participants. Plans for future challenges include a 24-hour concert stage, athlete expo and kids' events.

"A tent village — full-on Everest Base-camp!" she enthuses. "I want it to be really inclusive so that people who aren't even skiers can come up, cheer Rod on."

Despite the lights and energy of the staging area, a ski hill can be a lonely place in the wee hours. Although Stoddart and Mailloux had expressly agreed not to wait for one another, their paces matched and they found themselves skiing in close proximity into the night. By midnight, they were well ahead of the other solo skiers.

But Stoddart's body wasn't responding well. Hydration became an issue as the tube on his water bladder froze in the -10-degree-Celsius temperatures. Cold and nauseous, he decided to take a break. At about 1:30 a.m., he and Mailloux turned in for a nap.

"Eric did four laps in the time I was asleep," says Stoddart, who headed back out

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with Mailloux at 4:00 a.m. With one-third the vertical of Mount Everest still to go, the task was daunting. "But I started trudging with the goal of finishing six more laps."

It was just after dawn, on his 15th lap, that Dufresne reunited with Gamble. Realizing his former partner would finish rejuvenated Gamble's spirit.

On his 18th lap, Dufresne joined Stoddart, then on his 17th. It should have been his final top-out, but he wasn't ready to quit. Before skiing down, he turned to his former teammate. "I said, 'Julian, I feel like doing an extra lap, but I can't think of a reason why,'" Dufresne remembers. "I was scared people would think I was weird."

Stoddart gave him the reason: break the 30,000-foot mark. It was all Dufresne needed to complete an extra lap, well under the 24-hour cutoff.

Gamble was still two laps behind. Through the morning, he remembers feeling like the only person on the mountain. At the staging area, the coffee maker was broken. He satisfied himself with lukewarm coffee and cold pizza and set out again.

"The last two runs were pretty good. I did them with a couple of pretty women talking to me and coaxing me along," he says. Perry, the first year's only solo par-

ticipant, joined him on his final lap.

Gamble finished his 18 laps with no time to spare. The first thing he did: "Went to the bar and dove off the wagon head first. People were buying me beers and women were hugging me."

Out of eight solo competitors, four finished, including Stoddart and Mailloux. Dufresne and Gamble were the only two to ski steadily throughout the night.

"For me, it was because of Rod," Gamble says. "Rod's been doing extreme before it was popular. He didn't tell anybody about it, he just did it. I'm a so-so athlete. I'll go to an event, come in 23rd and hope I get a good draw prize. But this is different. You race the man in the mirror."

LEIGHTON JOKES THAT HIS FIRST Extreme Everest Challenges, a year-and-a-half after his crash, was the "height of a small compost pile."

Last year's objective, Tower Seven on the chairlift, was 460 metres from the start line.

He arrived in the late afternoon as clouds lifted, blessing Leighton and his crew with golden sun just before it dipped behind the mountain.

Using poles modified with runners and tethered from behind, he skied one of the course's steepest pitches, making wide arcs back to the staging area. The one-kilometre lap took five hours.

"It was a challenge," he conceded as he greeted friends with a wide grin. "If anybody thinks this is a race, how much satisfaction did you get from going faster and farther than I did?"

"In a race, I would have been in last place by a serious margin, yet I came away feeling that I was the biggest winner of all."

Leighton continues to push his boundaries. In the past year, he's re-learned the kayak roll and rides a recumbent bike around town. The Extreme Everest Challenge has also evolved. Proceeds now go to the Live It! Love It! Foundation, an organization focusing on adaptive sport for the disabled.

"That's the evolution of Rod," Walter says. "He's come back to just being an athlete." ■

THE 2014 EXTREME EVEREST CHALLENGE IS SCHEDULED FOR MARCH 7-9.