

# ALUMNA

CAL POLY ALUMNA MEGAN DELEHANTY joined a small sisterhood May 23 when, fighting extreme conditions and physical and mental fatigue, she reached the top of Mt. Everest.

Only about 200 women have ever climbed to the summit of the world's tallest mountain (making up about 5 percent of all Everest summits), and only about 35 were Americans.

It was an exhausting endeavor for Delehanty (GRC, 1985), a 47-year-old corporate international tax consultant from Sun Valley, Calif., who has climbed many of the world's tallest peaks in the last 13 years. But illness and injury over the two-month venture couldn't crush her resolve.

"I went through a tough time on this expedition," she said. "I let my injuries and sickness affect me mentally. But I was super determined. It was a strange mix. They say it's a mental game climbing Mt. Everest."

Everest had never been a grand goal, she said. She's never had a long-term list of mountain climbing objectives since starting with a 1996 backpacking trip that led to the 14,949-foot summit of California's Mt. Whitney.

Despite not having set objectives, she's found herself atop many of the world's tallest peaks, including five of the Seven Summits – the highest mountains on each of the seven continents.

"It's about traveling, seeing new people and cultures, and taking photos," she said. "It's seeing the world and having an obstacle to overcome – something unusual and spectacular."

It was in 2007 that she first considered Everest, when she was invited by a climber she met on Mt. McKinley two years earlier. That climb brought her within about 1,000 feet of Everest's top, via the north face. "I had a good experience," she said. "Over time, I felt like I had to go back."

That chance presented itself this year, with Delehanty and 27 other members of the Himalayan Experience expedition team

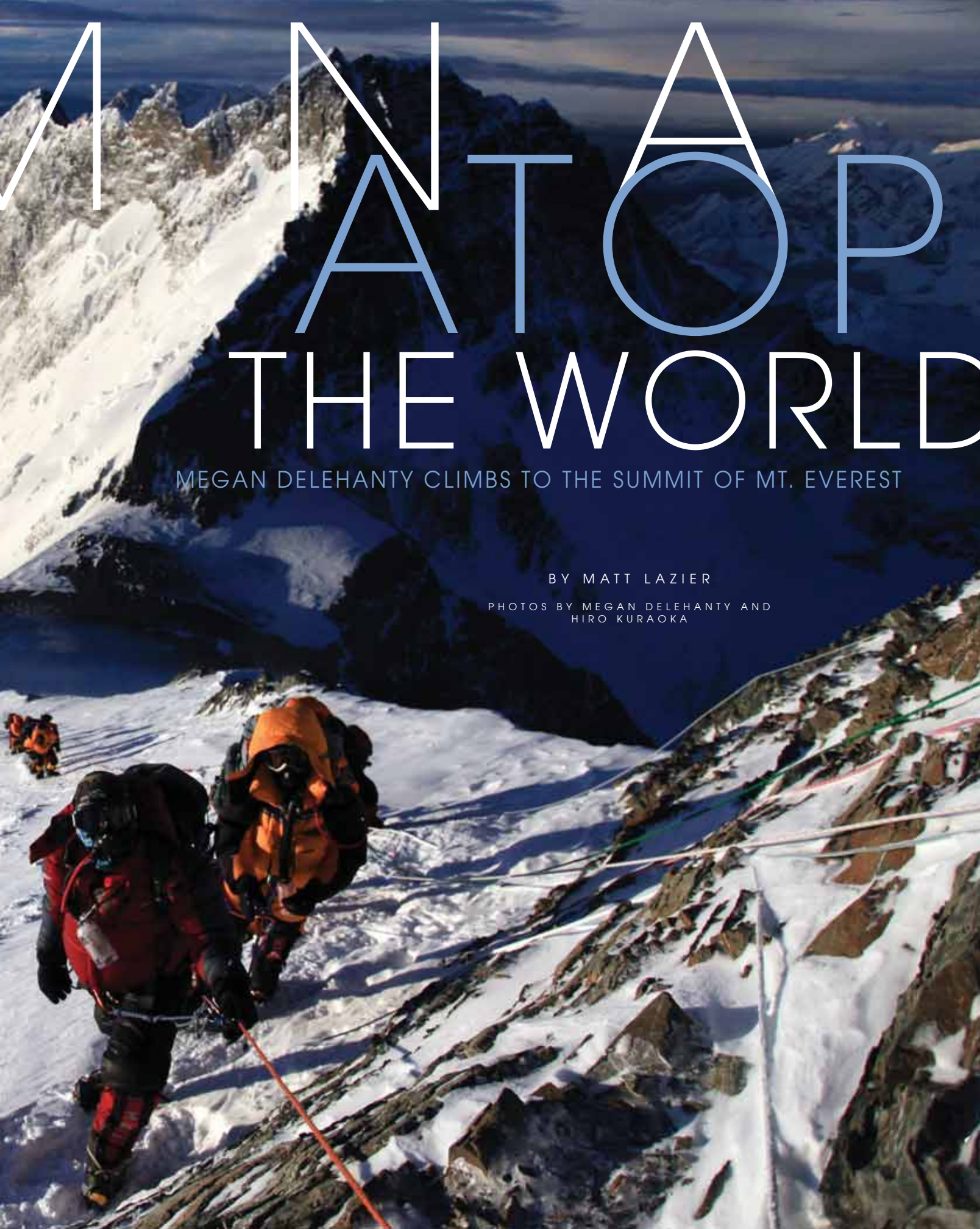
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# MINI ATOP THE WORLD

MEGAN DELEHANTY CLIMBS TO THE SUMMIT OF MT. EVEREST

BY MATT LAZIER

PHOTOS BY MEGAN DELEHANTY AND  
HIRO KURAOKA





(Left): Megan Delehanty practices climbing at one of the camps on Everest. (Right): Yaks used to transport gear between camps on Mt. Everest.

arriving at Mt. Everest on April 1 for a trip up the mountain's south face. The team hiked for 10 days to base camp at 17,000 feet, where they stayed for five days, acclimatizing to the altitude.

Delehanty had a rocky start, catching a cold, pulling her chest muscles twice in coughing fits, then tearing a muscle in her back. In the thin air, healing was slow.

The climbers spent the days and weeks practicing, getting accustomed to the higher altitudes and thinner air and climbing parts of Everest and nearby mountains. Delehanty's injuries sometimes kept her from climbing with her team, and she couldn't complete one of their acclimatization climbs. "Most of us arrive with pre-existing conditions, like ankle, knee or hip prob-

lems," she said. "But we're generally prepared to deal with them. It's the things we're not prepared for that make this tough."

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Over the next few weeks, the group ascended to camps 2, 3 and 4, adapting and practicing on treacherous parts of the mountain face, such as the rope and ladder crossings of the shifting Khumbu Icefall. Weather was unpredictable and extreme – sometimes cloudy and cold, others bright and hot. Climbers wore down suits but found their preparation backfiring when the sun burned through on the Lohtse Face.

Ascending to Camp 3, at 24,500 feet, proved the tallest order for Delehanty. "It was the toughest day of my life, bar none," she said. "It's a steep climb. It goes to the highest altitude without supplemental oxygen. We had on our down suits, and it could be 90 degrees in the sun. I would take a step and then

count to five slowly before I took another. My body was literally spent. But I made it."

After reaching Camp 4, at more than 26,000 feet, the team planned its final summit push. Delehanty's squad left around 1 a.m. May 23. Her legs ached as she pushed through snow and wind. Visibility was only about 10 feet as she traversed the Cornice knife-edge ridge, with falls of 8,000 feet off one side and 10,000 on the other.

After climbing more than eight hours, Delehanty heard her Sherpa, Lakpa Nuru, cry "Summit!"

"I saw my team members' smiling faces," she said, "and I was happy to be there with them."

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She was sure she'd weep when she reached the top. Once there, though, she found the overwhelming feeling was simply "It's about time!"

"It's so foreign and strange up there," she said. "It's a threatening environment. Your focus never changes. You still need energy to get down the mountain."

Russell Brice, her expedition leader, told her it would be a couple of months before the magnitude of her achievement sunk in. He was right.

"I was at the gym, where I had spent so much time getting in shape for the climb," she said. "It was the first time I went back, a couple months after. I was running on a treadmill, and I got teary-eyed. I realized I was there because I wanted to be, not because I had to be to get ready for Everest. I'd done it."