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Special

How to climb Mt.Everest with one arm?

By putting one foot in front of the other, says Gary Guller, mountaineer and motivational speaker, who holds the record for being the only man minus a limb to scale the tallest mountain in the world

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1986. Dawns a glorious day. Three young friends – Gary, Jerry and Dave were doing what they loved doing in life – climbing a mountain! This time around it was the Pico de Orizaba, the highest mountain in Mexico. The adrenalin rushed to warm their hearts in the icy cold mountains and stretch their snow flecked faces into perfect smileys. The summit was a mere 100 feet away!



Tethered to each other, the mountaineers were making their way to the top, when one of the friends slipped and all three climbers plummeted down, more than 1,500 feet! And they lay, on the unforgiving lap of the cold mountains, connected to each other by a thick climbing-rope, friendship and courage –for three days! Finally, when the rescue team arrived, Jerry was dead and Gary’s neck was broken.

After two years and many painful surgeries, Gary’s broken neck was fixed. But his paralyzed left arm was amputated. And he was fast hurtling into the dark abyss of life, littered with broken dreams – his dream of climbing Mt.Everest.

The Present

2010. The auditorium at the SAP Labs in Whitefield is filled with energy synonymous with youngsters. Their eyes are trained on the man in the spotlight - wiry hair, broad shoulders and an imposing demeanour, clad in jeans and a blue blazer. In the middle of a line, the man casually removes his blazer and continues talking, knowing well that there isn’t a single eye in the crowded room that isn’t gawking at the `empty’ left sleeve of his blue shirt, flapping in the air conditioned room. Gary Guller, the only one-armed mountaineer to have scaled the peaks of Mt.Everest is unperturbed. He continues without missing a beat. For, this internationally renowned motivational speaker knows a thing or two about `focus’.

Even as a teenager Gary dreamt of climbing Mt.Everest “one day”. However, he (for a short time) and the world around him (for a longer time) thought it was to remain a dream forever. “After I lost my arm, I felt like climbing was taken away from me,” Gary recollects. “I hit rock bottom. I did my fair share at the local pub and experimenting different paths before I came to grips with what had happened to me. I realized that there were a lot of other people out there who had it worst than me.” So, he recalibrated his dreams, and put strategies in place to beat the adversities in life.

Scaling mountains

In 2003, not only did Gary realise his dream but he also led the biggest group of disabled people to the Mount Everest base camp at 17,500 feet. “That was one of the most important moments in my life for sure,” says Gary. “The group consisted of paraplegic, quadriplegic, leg amputee, arm amputee, mentally challenged and so on.” It took them 21 days to complete the trek. From then on, Gary and a Sherpa carried on summiting the world’s highest peak. On May 23, 2003, Gary stood on Mt.Everest, proving a point – Dreams have no limitations, physical or otherwise!

“Everybody in the world thought I had lost my mind putting this expedition together. The expedition took two years in the making. It’s all about having a vision, focus, determination and hard work. A one-armed guy shows up and says ‘I want to climb Everest with a bunch of people. How about you write me a quarter-million dollar cheque?’ You knock on 300-plus doors and somebody finally understands that it is about opportunity, growth and showing the world that anything is possible. When you look beyond everything, real chance can happen. My job is to get people to understand that we are all the same, sharing the same planet. I just have one arm instead of two, that’s all. To me it is so simple,” says Gary. The journey was documented in the film Team Everest: A Himalayan Journey.

Gary has been climbing mountains all over the world and challenging himself by pushing his boundaries. In April 2010, he completed the Marathon des Sables in Morocco – a 6 -day, 250-km endurance race across the Sahara Desert, the runners had to carry food, clothes, medical-kit, anti-venom kit, sleeping bag and other things they needed for the duration on their backs. Gary was the only one-armed runner in the race, which attracts thousands of runners from around the world. Now Gary is preparing for a triathlon. “I am sure people are wondering how is going to swim with one arm for the triathlon involves a leg of swimming too,” laughs Gary.

Lessons Learnt

Gary travels across the world as a motivational speaker. Talking about the lessons that he has learnt from the mountains, the Sherpas and his life he says, “Integrity, yes, that’s what the mountains have taught me. You have got to be honest with yourself and the others around you. Generosity is what I learnt from the Sherpas. Give without expecting anything in return. And my life has taught me to treat people fairly and equally.”

When Gary concludes by saying, “Think Big. Act bold. Treat people fairly. Play to win. Be the best you can be, every day,” you are unable to discard it as yet-another-motivational-speaker-giving-his-spiel-to-clients-with-fat-purses, simply because the `empty’ left sleeve of his blue shirt flaps, and you can almost hear it say to life, “Gotcha!”

For the `sleeve’ belongs to a man, who two decades ago, lay on the hard icy floor of Pico de Orizaba, with a dead friend on one side, and an uncertain future ahead; it belongs to the man who climbed the world’s tallest mountain and it belongs to a man who says with a broad smile, “Always make others greater and success is guaranteed.”

Garyisms

- » For professional and personal success it is important you practice equality, determination, teamwork and integrity.
- » Always look deep into yourselves, motivate yourselves to set goals to maximize your potential.
- » Place fear and doubts aside to achieve success in life.
- » Mix passion with goals.
- » Seize upon opportunity.
- » Work collectively
- » Lead by example
- » Share the lessons learnt in life.
- » Respect and value all people
- » Continue to raise your own standards, for your organizations and your society.

(Gary Gueller was in Bangalore at the invitation of SAP Labs, as part of its Leadership Talk Series)

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