

RUTH ANNE KOCOUR

EXCEEDING THE LIMITS

BY MARIANNE M. PORTER

At age 39, she was recruited by a friend to climb Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro. Never having climbed at high elevations before, she decided to go just for the experience of seeing Africa. But her unanticipated love for the sport turned her into a high-altitude mountaineering addict who can't seem to get enough of that intoxicatingly thin air. Now, one year after being stranded on Alaska's Mount McKinley in the worst snowstorm in recorded history, she talks about her life, and her brush with death.

Ruth Anne Kocour loves mountains — especially climbing them. Her love affair began when she moved from the Midwest to Colorado to attend college, followed by two seasons of ski instructing at Vail.

Her decision to go to graduate school pushed her even farther West to Salt Lake City, Utah, where she met her husband and later moved with him to northern Nevada. It's apropos that she makes her home at the base of 10,300-foot Mount Rose, one of several Sierra Nevada peaks surrounding the Lake Tahoe Basin.

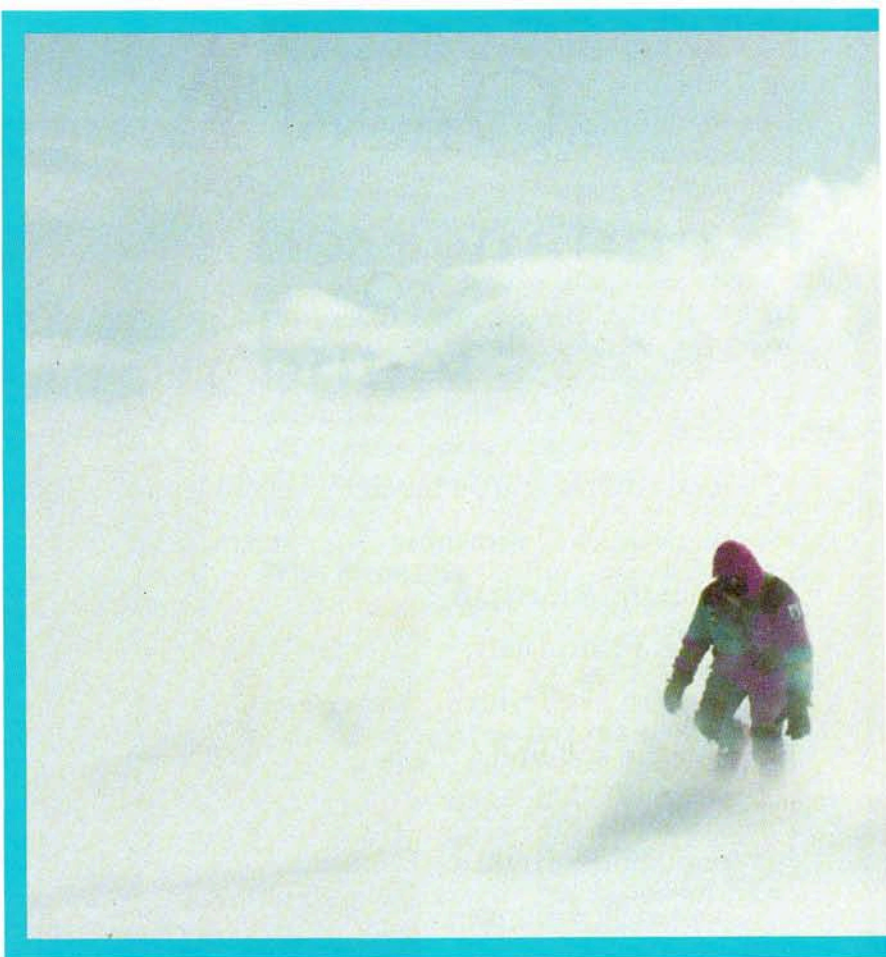
Sitting in her sunlit redwood home in the Galena National Forest, Ruth Anne emanates confidence, determination, and a sense of worldliness. These are the characteristics that have helped pull her through several life-threatening situations, the worst of which was her experience on Mount McKinley one year ago.

McKinley is the last mountain she has climbed to date. But it won't be her last, because Ruth Anne is filled with such an unusual inner strength that she's already planning to climb an 8,000-meter peak, perhaps Mount Everest, in late '93 or '94. If she succeeds, she will not only be the oldest woman to have ever done so — she is now 45 — but she will be in line to be the first woman to have conquered the Seven Summits. So far, she has vanquished four of the seven: Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania, 19,340 feet; Mount Elbrus, Russia, 18,510 feet; Aconcagua, Argentina, 23,085 feet; and Mount McKinley, Alaska, the highest peak in North America, 20,320 feet.

Her recent brush with death happened last May when she and her group of nine started out on their McKinley expedition. Headed by renowned mountaineers, Win Whittaker and Robert Link, she knew that whatever happened, she was in the company of the most experienced guides. "Their decisions were to be trusted, and the results speak for themselves," she says.

Known as Denali, or "The Great One" to the native Athapascan Indians, McKinley is the prerequisite mountain to climb before going to the Himalayas, because of its snow, ice, and unusual weather patterns.

One week into their trip, they became trapped in the worst snowstorm to hit the





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The red medical tent served as a beacon of hope at the 14,000-foot camp where severe storms whipped stranded climbers.

mountain this century. At the 14,000-foot advanced base camp, where most of the stranded climbers waited, they spent 11 days fighting to stay alive in the eye of a storm that came off the Bering Sea, bringing with it 120-mph winds, raging snow and a wind-chill factor of -150 degrees. During the first few days of the storm, the chalkboard at camp bore the message: "Today's storm same as the first, a little bit colder, a little bit worse." In the following days, humor was rare and the sign no longer carried a message.

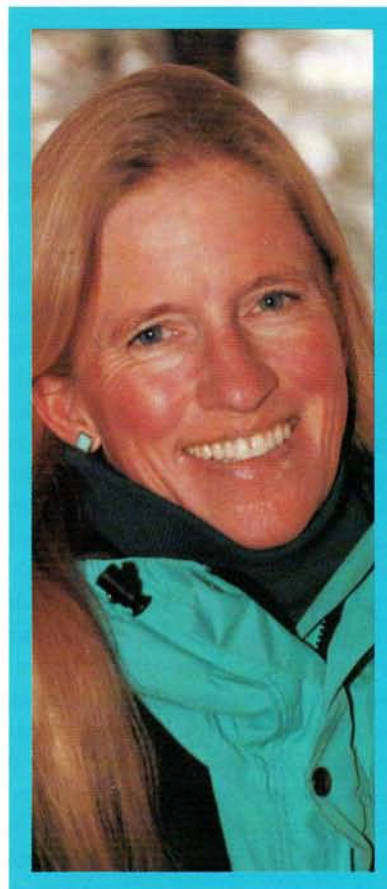
Ruth Anne's six-foot frame matched the length and width of the tent she shared with a partner; she was forced to sleep with her feet touching its nylon side. When she woke up on the morning of May 12, 1992, her legs were numb from her knees down. Her toes were frozen together. Down booties, wool socks, and a sleeping bag with a rating of -40 degrees couldn't protect her from the paralyzing cold.

"I was so shocked that it happened without my knowing it," she recalls. "It was very alarming. My legs were so cold, it was like feeling a glass that had ice water in it. And they were attached to me!" Her first thought was to sit on her feet, because body warmth was the only source of heat. Her quick thinking worked, but her feet stayed numb for two months and the frozen blackness in her toes finally disappeared. Outside her tent, the wind rumbled like a freight train. There were avalanches which she says sounded like sonic booms, like "bomb blasts."

"I was never really afraid during all this. What happens to me in life-threatening situations is that time slows down. Like people who experience a car accident; tons of things happen in a short time, but you think and act with clarity, precision, and efficiency. At these times, I become very calm and I know the exact right thing to do to deal with the crisis." She theorizes that man's natural survival skills have become dormant.

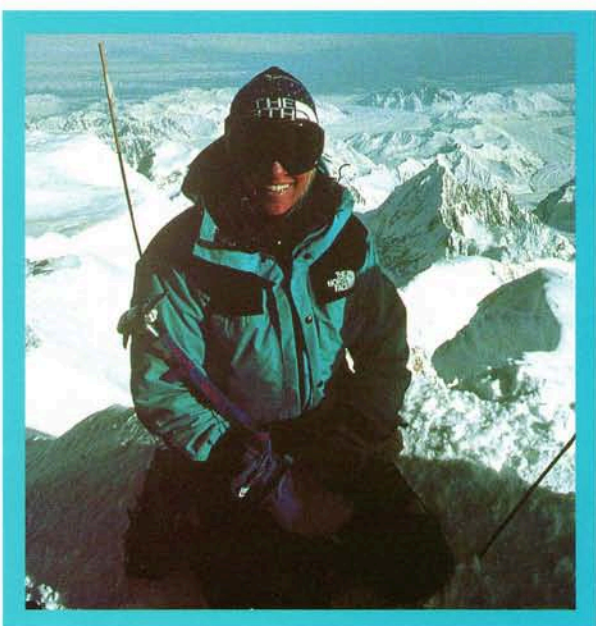
"What I've learned from my experiences is that we all have this stuff inside us, and that if you're subjected to these kinds of experiences, you have to learn to pay attention to yourself. You go into a sort of autopilot mode that carries you through."

Ruth Anne strongly believes that reacting fearfully in a crisis distracts from the moment. "If you're anticipating or projecting a scenario that hasn't even happened yet,



Bob Hall

Ruth Anne atop the true summit of McKinley at 20,320 feet. After only 30 minutes of reveling in their success, her group began a rapid descent before the next series of storms.



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If you're ready to take that first step toward high-elevation mountaineering, contact Rainier Mountaineering Inc., 535 Dock Street, #209, Tacoma, WA 98402; (206) 627-6242; FAX (206) 627-1280. The address from June through September is Rainier Mountaineering, Paradise, WA 98398; (206) 569-2227.



then you're not dealing with the crisis you're involved in right now," she says.

Curious friends and strangers ask her if she had time to be introspective during the storm. Her response: she was so busy trying to stay alive that she didn't have time to think about dying.

"Staying alive is a very active, assertive job," she emphasizes. "Do not get passive. People who get passive die." Many people on McKinley died. Panicked climbers, restless climbers, and those whose bodies couldn't tolerate the cold and altitude perished.

Ruth Anne has recognized her inner strength ever since childhood. The oldest of six children, she gained independence and fulfilled her curiosity by exploring the world around her. "I grew up in Minnesota and loved the outdoors. When I think of all the things I did as a child, my mother probably should have been more worried about me. But she was very busy taking care of five other children.

"Once when I was in high school, I was on a canoe trip. I was with another guy and I looked up and saw a huge boulder coming to land on us. I grabbed him, pulled him forward and the rock landed on his foot. It would have been on his head. But it's like I had time to do that, to figure it out." Maybe Ruth Anne's unusual sense is really a gift that others don't share, as evidenced by another bizarre situation.

"Once I was hit by a car and I saw it happening. I was on my bike. Time slowed down so I jumped off my bike, put my hand on the hood of the car and wound up rolling and absorbing the energy

of the car. I ended up on the windshield looking in at the driver."

This feeling of being able to trust herself is what drives Ruth Anne to push herself beyond her own limits. That's the power that makes her not afraid to mountaineer.

"Mountaineering is a high-risk, high-profile event. I really trust my skills, and I really believe that outside of an act of God, they'll protect me."

Her husband, Bob Hall, doesn't share the same passion to climb mountains—he suffers from altitude sickness above 11,000 feet. "Bob's idea of a climb is anything that ends up in the hot tub," she says laughing. "He's got a different agenda than I do. He lives vicariously through me."

Human limits are something that Ruth Anne finds intriguing, and not surprisingly so. She has used mountaineering as a way to systematically test her stamina, as well as both her mental and physical strength.

"I'm not measuring myself against other people. You can never fail, if you measure yourself against your own best effort." Now, as she approaches higher elevations and bigger challenges, she feels qualified and capable of dealing with them.

High-altitude mountain climbing entered her world when she was 39. Already an avid rock climber, skier, recreational windsurfer, and medical illustrator, Ruth Anne was recruited by friend Pete Whittaker to go to Africa for his first international climb. The nephew of Jim Whittaker, the first American to conquer Everest, had climbing in his blood. She decided to accompany Pete,



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Climbers on McKinley's summit ridge, just shy of their final destination.

because she really wanted to go to Africa. The fact that she would have to climb Kenya's Kilimanjaro to see it was incidental.

Their first climb was 17,355-foot Mount Kenya, which she compared to a long hike. But her expedition to Kilimanjaro was a different story. It took them five and a half days to reach the summit. But the elevation — getting over 19,000 feet — introduced an unexpected element. Suddenly, she was aware that altitude was a force she'd have to reckon with, and she became intrigued by it — by the magic of going really, really high.

Concerned about beginning mountaineering so late in life, her anxieties were soothed by Jim Whittaker. He told her not to worry, that usually the best high-elevation climbers are in their mid-40s, and that because they don't have the advantages of youth, they have to rely on technique.

The following year, she accompanied Pete to the Mexican volcanoes — Orizaba, 18,705 feet, and Popocatepetl, 17,887 feet. The duration of the Orizaba climb, 14 hours round trip, found her lapsing into a hypnotic, effortless mode because of the rhythmic breathing techniques she had to employ. She was hooked.

To improve her skills, she completed an advanced skills training course at Washington's Mount Rainier, then went to Russia to climb Mount Elbrus, followed by Aconcagua two years later. Again she was the only woman on the team.

An experience on Elbrus taught her an important lesson about

the mental side of mountaineering.

"A few minutes before we reached the summit, I turned back because of some disunity in the group. When I got down to the base camp, I regretted it. I realized later that the problem had been that I lacked commitment and failed to focus on my objective," she reflects. "No amount of physical conditioning will get you up a mountain if you really don't want to be there." She considered her lesson learned before going to Aconcagua and practiced visualization to strengthen her commitment. "It's probably the best lesson I've learned in mountaineering: commitment."

Aside from mountaineering around the world, one of Ruth Anne's favorite places to hang out is the western United States. The wilderness around southern Utah and, in particular, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, inspires her. "Despite my mountaineering activities, my heart really is with showcase desert, like Arizona and Utah. The ocean doesn't do much for me. I love living in the mountains, especially in the transitional zone next to the desert," which is exactly where she makes her home.

One of her new-found hobbies is organizing "soft adventure" wilderness trips with friends. Several times a year, she takes a group of women to places like Tahoe's Desolation Wilderness and Guatemala. The reward she reaps is seeing how people change by getting out of their comfort zone. "I like the changes that I've made in my life as a result of these activities and I enjoy seeing that happen to others. Unless you set goals that exceed your limits, you never really know what your limits are."