

50th Anniversary of the Everest Conquest and the Everest Obsession

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Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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The second of June is the anniversary of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II of England. On that same day in 1953 news arrived in London that Sir Edmund Hilary and Tenzing Norgay had reached the summit of Mount Everest a few days earlier on May 29th. It seemed like a fortuitous convergence of events celebrating resurgent British Imperial power. In fact it was but an illusion, a false echo of past glory for a fading empire economically drained by the ravages of war.

As the world celebrates the 50th anniversary of the conquering of Everest I am struck by a number of things. Not being a mountain climber I have not quite grasped the full significance of the achievement, but as someone who observes the sporting world I have always been intrigued by the Everest obsession.

Over twenty years ago I sat in a lecture hall at Banff, Alberta, listening to a member of the Canadian team that was preparing to attack the summit of Everest. The slides he showed offered a combination of beauty, danger and awe. I was totally engrossed by the way in which he talked about the mountain and the upcoming attempt. Coolly he rolled off the statistics showing that it was a near certainty that several members of this Canadian climbing team would not survive the assault on the mountain. He acknowledged that he could easily be one of those to die on the mountain, and presented this fact in the fashion of someone reading a list of the current temperatures.

It all left me dumbstruck. What could possibly drive someone, in fact several someone's, to put their life on the line to reach the top of a mountain? I'm still not sure I know the answer to that mystery but I must say I have a greater appreciation for the feat than I once did.

Since 1953 some 1200 people from 63 different nations have reached the summit of Everest. An estimated 175 have died trying and 120 of those are still on the mountain. The odds have been stretched more in favor of the climbers in recent years, as conquering the summit has become a tourist attraction. At a price, somewhere in the \$50,000 range, it is said anyone can now reach the summit of the mountain. Everest has become the ultimate in chic for those in our society burdened by too much money.

Since my youth the name "Everest" has had a magical quality and George Mallory's 1924 comment that he climbed Everest "because it is there" has been part of my cultural memory. The mountain is called by locals, Chomolongma -Goddess Mother of the Snows- and that seems much more appropriate to the status that it has achieved, than Everest, the name of Sir George Everest the Indian surveyor-general.

In 1997 I read John Krakauer's riveting account of the 1996 tourist climb that ran into storms and left eight people dead including two of the best guides on the mountain, Rob Hall and Scott Fischer. I was mesmerized by Krakauer's account, as were millions of others who made Into Thin Air a best seller in both hardcover and paperback. The foolishness of the modern tourist assault on the mountain, the professionalism of the guides and their dedication to the task at hand, the varied circumstances of these deaths made for fascinating reading, but again raised the question of "why?"

The current celebration of the anniversary of the first conquest of the summit raises further doubts about the new tourism on Everest as fears of a traffic jam on the mountain developed over recent weeks. Sir Edmund Hilary expressed dismay over the presence of a thousand people and 500 tents on Everest for the celebration. "Sitting around in a big base camp and knocking back cans of beer - I do not particularly view that as mountaineering," he said. Other veteran climbers expressed their unhappiness at the commercialism and circus atmosphere.

But the quest goes on. Perhaps Mallory's answer to why people are attracted to the mountain is still the best one ever articulated, although I hope not.

It seems to me that climbing to the summit of the "Goddess Mother of the Snows" must be about much more than "because it is there." It certainly is related to that human quirk that pushes any number of people to risk their lives in the name of progress, science, or even sport. There is also the challenge itself which lies behind the Mallory remark and which leads thousands of people to test their limits, often at serious risk, each day in some way or another. For some it comes in the form of extreme sport, for some in a physical challenge, for others in a challenge of the spirit. For all it seems to involve overcoming fear. For

some it includes striving for perfection. And as someone else has said, in the end it's all about death.

With Everest, the Goddess Mother of the Snows, it is quite literally about death, the quest for immortality through mortality. It is a paradox and a mystery and at the heart of what it means to be human. This is why we celebrate Hilary and Tenzing's achievement. It is ultimately a celebration of ourselves.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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