

Kili Climb Report, THE SUMMIT

Correspondent: Paul Francis

Filed: 7am Thursday August 6, from Millemium Camp, 3820mASL*



We did it. We have conquered the highest freestanding peak in Africa and reached the magnificent summit of Mt Kilimanjaro in our inaugural Ultimate Burn.

Yesterday was an historic day for the Humpty Dumpty Foundation and I have to tell you, right now, after almost 12 hours of climbing - most of it up, and about two of it down - plus a few hours of sleep, we are all absolutely shattered. But we are so very happy to be so shattered.

Everyone who attempted the summit made it and it took us between eight and 12 hours. Words really are inadequate to explain the camaraderie of the Good Eggs in our Kili Club, or the personal achievements that each of us has made, or the challenges and sacrifices it took us to get to the top of the mountain. But I'll do my best.

We broke camp at 11pm and walked up the last 1200m through the night. It was bloody cold (I wish I had a dollar for Humpty for every time I've said that in the past few days), but we had countered the cold with at least five layers of jackets and pants over thermals; hats, gloves, and facemasks. We set off in groups for safety and to make navigation easier.

Among the first to summit Kili were Chris Gray, Mark Lochtenberg, Andy Hurt and Chad Walker. Then over the next few hours, the rest of us got there one by one. It was harder than anyone imagined, even after spending the previous five days acclimatizing to the altitude. Reaching the summit took a lot of sweat and tears; people were vomiting, people were hallucinating, people were hoping and praying to make it each step of the way. This morning, with the peak behind us, we've all agreed it was the hardest thing we have ever done. Oh, and it's not something that you would say was fun.

Equally though, it's also one of the most amazing things we've ever done. The moon was full, which was fantastic, and we were above the cloud line so we didn't need our headsets - they have a lamp in them - to see. Seeing the next step ahead was easy. And it really was about looking just one step ahead. None of us were looking off in the distance. We were looking one inch ahead because that's how far we were going, and that's how slow you had to take it to make it.

By the time I got to the summit, there were several Humpty Dumpty flags in place, which was absolutely awesome, but honestly, I just wanted to get down.

Forgive me if I go on a bit in today's progress report - but you'll all agree, it's the ultimate progress - and I think it's important to know a little bit more about some of the Kili Club and what they have to say about the climb.

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Brian Freeman, the head of Adventure 35 who led us up Kili told me "Sir Edmund Hillary would be proud of the efforts of the Humpty Dumpty climbing team." Coming from Brian, that's saying something.

Joe Hockey, who actually gave an interview from the summit but now can't remember it said; "We spent six days climbing a mountain; the kids in hospitals climb a mountain every day."

A few hours before we began our final ascent, Adventure 35 surprised us all by giving us cards of encouragement from our families back home. It was an incredibly moving moment.

Mark Lochtenberg's daughter had some wise words for her dad: "It's a long way to shops if you want a sausage roll." We roared laughing.

Mark has three kids, lives in Mosman and is a regular City-to-Surf competitor. The standard reaction from Mark's friends when they discovered he was climbing Kili is, and I'll quote him here, "he's a 'fat bugger' and will never make it to the top'. Well Mark, you proved them wrong, didn't you?

Paediatrician Jonny Taitz, who sees the struggles sick and injured children go through every day had this to say this morning: "Once you've climbed Kili, everything else is easy."

Gary Gerstle, who climbed with his wife Penny – both of whom have been long-time Humpty supporters said this: "Bit by bit, inch by inch, step by step – it's nothing compared to the battle the kids go through."

Joe Brown: "It's the first time the come-down is better than the high."

Tedd Warden: "It's the best group of people that I have been with, and to come together and do this is so rewarding."

I also take my hat off to David Koch – this is the second time Kochie's climbed Kilimanjaro, and all of us think that's awesome. Particularly as the rest of us have pledged never to do it again and have to wonder why someone would want to do it twice.

Kochie had two reasons for taking on the Kilimanjaro Challenge a second time. This is what he had to say: "The first reason I did it again was because of Humpty. I reckon it's such a sensational organisation the way it helps the kids out. And the second reason was to help out a mate, Joe Hockey, who said it would be terrific to climb and get some publicity and awareness for Humpty.

"I had done it before but it didn't get any easier the second round. I was fitter and I was about 13 or 14 kilos lighter than the last time but you can be fitter and lighter yet you have to have a head for altitudes. And I don't have the head for altitudes."

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Mate, none of us do.

I've mentioned a few of the climbers in past dispatches, but I haven't mentioned Chris Gray. He's 39 and works in television property (you'll have to ask him what that means when we're back in Sydney) and it's pretty amazing that he even managed to start the 12-day trek with us last week.

Chris sprained his ankle falling down the stairs at his local pub (his mates were amazed he could get through the eight alcohol-free days of our 12-day trek), then injured his back at boot camp. Being an innovative bloke, he gave up the gym and boot camp and concentrated on long walks as part of his training, mixed with some general training and fitness with the rest of the group.

His strategy paid off, but there was something else driving Chris - his son, who was born premature. Chris knows what it's like to feel that ache in the gut when your child is at risk, and that's what drives us here at Humpty.

"My wife Tanya went into labour at 26 weeks and our local hospital at Randwick didn't have enough equipment so we almost had to fly to Canberra," he said. "We ended up at Royal Prince Alfred. Scott was then born at 34 weeks and spent a month in the special car nursery."

His wife, Tanya, is more than halfway through her second pregnancy and the couple are expecting a baby girl. "So crossing fingers we won't need the equipment we donated," Chris said.

Andy Hurt is a 43-year-old sales director for a communications company. He's climbed Machu Picchu in Peru, done the Routeburn track in New Zealand and backpacked around Africa for three months when he was a bit younger. He even visited Tanzania. But, he says he's never done anything as "hard and high" as Kili.

I'm always interested about how people find the Humpty family and then decide to join us and help out. "I was at the Good Egg lunch and they talked about the Kili Climb. I rang my wife on the way home and talked it through with her and then within 24 hours I had sent in my deposit," Andy said. "I thought to myself if I thought about it too long I would find too many reasons 'Why Not'. I have no regrets now at all, it has been a life changing experience already."

Andy's got two boys - aged three and two - and this year he and his wife decided as part of their New Year's resolutions that the family would concentrate on charity. And haven't they done that?

Andy, you're a top bloke. Thanks a million.

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I'm looking at the peak now and while it's not the top of the world, it's pretty close. Truly, the sight is unbelievable; you look at the clouds and you can actually see the shape of the Earth. No doubt about it, Kilimanjaro is just magnificent; it's bloody beautiful. And knowing that it's behind us is pretty good too.

Wish us luck. It's not over yet- we've still got seven hours of walking ahead of us to get back to the Mweka Gate which is a mere 1700m ASL. Then we're homeward bound.

I'll have one more progress report tomorrow, but before I sign off now, I would like to thank everyone back in Australia who has joined us on the trek and supported each member of the Kili Club. Without you, we couldn't have done it.

Tutaonana.

*ASL – above sea level.

Again, from the bottom of all of our hearts up here near the heavens on Mt Kilimanjaro, thank you so very much. We couldn't have done it without you.

Tutaonana.