

Looking down on everyone: Michael Groom 8850 metres above sea level, on the summit of Mount Everest in 1996. The prominent peak in the background is Makalu, the fifth highest mountain in the world.



there's summit about michael

MOUNTAINEER MICHAEL GROOM KNOWS WHAT IT TAKES TO CONQUER THE WORLD'S HIGHEST PEAKS—AND WHAT IT TAKES AWAY. BY GABI MOCATTA.

MICHAEL GROOM'S LEGS have carried him higher than most people will ever get, including the top of the five highest mountains on the planet. But when he walks into the room to be interviewed, I can't help looking for a limp, or a wobble.

Thirteen years ago, he and climbing partner John Coulton were descending from the summit of Kanchenjunga on the Nepal–India border—the third highest mountain on earth—when they became lost in poor conditions. Partially blinded by retinal haemorrhage, caused by pressure changes in the eye from high altitudes, Groom went out in search of their tent. He knew he was in a heavily crevassed area and despite moving cautiously, he found one the hard way. The ground disappeared beneath his feet, and in a fraction of a second he found himself inside a crevasse, but through sheer luck, he had fallen onto a ledge only a few metres down. In an instant, he started to slide off the ledge into the deep crevasse, but he clawed himself back on with his ice axe and crampons. Practically blind and fighting fatigue, Groom climbed the ice walls and hauled himself to the surface. Groom didn't even mention this detour to Coulton until they were off the mountain, but the close call convinced Groom to stay put for the night.

Coulton had the strength to remove his boots and stuff his feet into his pack, increasing warmth and circulation. Groom was too exhausted to move. The pair had no shelter from the biting winds, and during that miserable night, Groom stopped feeling his hands and feet. Where Coulton eventually escaped minus only a couple of toes, doctors later preparing to amputate Groom's blackened extremities told him he might never walk again. And in the morning, when the weather cleared and the two oriented themselves, they found they were only 100 metres from their tent.

Knowing this history, I expect to see some outward sign, some uneasiness in his step. But as he strides into the room, the Queenslander's gait couldn't be more confident. He doesn't like to dwell on this injury, although he knows the fascination his drastically shortened feet inspire. Looking back now, he sees it as a challenge: when perhaps he should have died on that mountain, he was "granted a second chance".

"I had to make the most of every opportunity," he says. "I had to learn to walk again—and that was certainly the most difficult mountain I've had to climb."

His stoical answers belie months of pain, depression and frustration. For a long while, he incarcerated himself at home, able to move around only by crawling. Then came the humiliating falls in public while he learnt to stand upright again. People treated him with disdain, thinking he was drunk or drugged. "Getting my balance—that was the big difficulty," he grins. Steely resolve and a determination to work through the pain got him on his feet again—with the help of a pair of plastic prosthetics custom-made by an understanding podiatrist. Since then, Groom has conquered some of the toughest peaks in the Himalayas, including Mount Everest—twice.

QUIET ACHIEVER Slightly built, with a gentle voice and quiet demeanour, Groom defies the macho stereotype of the Himalayan mountaineer. Managing without bottled oxygen at impossibly high altitudes while all around him struggle even with it, he's sometimes been jokingly accused of having an extra pair of lungs. Despite his obvious athleticism, though, that extra strength is not just physical: tests have shown that his lung capacity is barely one per cent above normal. This is a man with determination as strong as steel.

"I like to climb a mountain on its own terms," he explains, "not just bring it down to my level by artificial means." This doesn't mean he has any less respect for climbers who do use oxygen, he adds. This is just his way of doing things. It means that at extreme altitudes, his progress slows to 10 laborious steps followed by two minutes' rest: a pace he describes as "heartbreaking". It also puts him in a tiny elite who can operate at all in such thin air. Only a handful have ever reached the highest peaks this way—and even fewer have made it down alive. Even with experience, training and determination, climbers still have to face the reality of blind chance.

On Everest in the autumn of 1991, Groom survived another dramatic fall. Caught in the path of an avalanche, his safety rope snapped like thread and he was swept 900 metres down Lhotse Face to what he believed was certain death. "I imagined my epitaph: Michael Groom, dead at 32," he says. When he was almost suffocated by the snow forced into his mouth and nose, the deafening roar turned abruptly into eerie silence. Groom managed to dig himself out and emerged with just grazes, a broken nose and a few smashed ribs. His luck, he admits, was astounding.

AGONY AND ECSTASY In 18 years and 25 Himalayan expeditions, there have been ecstatic moments as well as bleak ones. Pictures of Groom—thin, nut brown and beaming—back at base camp after successful summit attempts go a long way towards explaining feelings Groom admits he finds hard to describe. "It's a wonderful sense of achievement," he says of standing on the roof of the world. "It makes the months of painstaking preparation and training, and the years of longing all so worthwhile." He also enjoys the camaraderie. Just as well, as climbers will be on a mountain—at close quarters—for up



Groom on Kanchenjunga, at 8598 metres the world's third highest mountain. This 1987 picture shows Groom 2.5 kilometres from the summit.

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to three months. But for Groom, climbing the world's highest peaks was above all the realisation of a dream. "Everest was something I had wanted since I was a kid," he says, "and not many people have the chance to fulfil childhood ambitions."

The successes contrast starkly with moments of agonising cold and disorientation. Groom has also lost many friends to the mountains, perhaps most publicly in the disastrous 1996 Everest attempt in which nine climbers died. Understandably, after the frantic media attention that surrounded the tragedy, Groom is reluctant to discuss it: it's something he writes of with poignant clarity, though, in his book *Sheer Will*.

His account of the 10th of May that year is a tale of perseverance, survival and bitter frustration. Brains starved of oxygen while descending from the summit into gathering darkness, Groom and his fellow climbers lost their camp in blizzard conditions. As the temperature dropped below –40°C and winds roared at 80 kilometres per hour, hypothermia set in. Staggering and delirious, the group huddled on the ground out of the full force of the wind. Late into the night, a sudden break in the weather allowed them a momentary view for orientation, and gathering up the members of his team, Groom started out in the presumed direction of the camp. They progressed only a short distance before the other climbers stumbled and collapsed.

As the strongest of those remaining on their feet, Groom was asked to go off alone in search of help. He embarked on a lonely odyssey across the South Col in near-zero visibility. Soon delirious and hallucinating himself, he could have stepped off the edge of the mountain at any moment. Close to dawn, as Groom was flooded with the deceptive warmth that signals a dangerously low body temperature, another miraculous break in the cloud revealed the tents only 50 metres away.

What happened during subsequent hours, Groom can only recount second-hand. Mired in semi-consciousness, he managed some garbled instructions about the climbers he had left behind. Searches in the whiteout were initially fruitless, before a battlefield of the dead and dying was revealed. Agonising decisions had to be made. In the atrocious conditions, mounting a rescue would have been close to impossible, jeopardising the lives of those who were fitter in order to save those who might be dead already, or who might die soon after their rescue. The fearsome winds continued, and as the hours ticked by above the 8000 metre mark, all the climbers slid closer to death.

Groom admits the memory of that night still prompts thoughts that perhaps they could have done more. He remembers thinking at the start of the climb that, with so many people on the mountain that season, there would inevitably be some who wouldn't return. He never imagined that such disaster would strike him. Being forced to make the decisions he did will haunt him for the rest of his life.

RISKY BUSINESS Groom bagged the 'Big Five' (Everest, K2, Kanchenjunga, Lhotse and Makalu) with an expedition to Makalu in 1999. "I've had enough of the great 8000-ers," he tells me. Not for him the huge expenditure of time and resources of Finnish climbing



Taking shelter in a makeshift snow cave during the 1994 K2 expedition. The camp was made at High Camp, the last stop before the summit.

partner Veikka Gustafsson, who plans to tackle all 14 peaks over 8000 metres. His feet allowing, and with the help of some specially designed climbing shoes, Groom hopes to do some shorter, lower, more technical climbs. He had planned an assault on Pakistan's Trango Tower until Dave Bridges, his partner in that venture, was killed in an avalanche on Shishapangma in October 1999.

Groom's injured feet will not last forever either. Warned by doctors that losing even another 10 millimetres would confine him to a wheelchair permanently, he's had to redefine his scale of acceptable risk.

"Mountaineering is all about weighing up risk," he says, and now he concedes his acceptance of it is lower. Every 12 months, his feet undergo medical examination. X-rays show the bones elongating, weakening them and making them vulnerable to stress fractures. Groom knows every extra step he takes now is a step he may not be able to take later on.

But for a man who has lived life to its extremes, even losing his feet doesn't seem too high a price to pay: Groom is amazingly philosophical. "There has never been any regret," he tells me. Although he lives with a "deep sense of sadness" for friends lost to the mountains, he says there's also "a sense of complete satisfaction" at achieving all he's dreamed of.

"If I died tomorrow, I would die content." Ⓟ

Freelancer Gabi Mocatta has mountaineered, climbed and skiied everywhere from Scotland to Siberia to Tasmania to California. When Michael Groom isn't risking his life, he is available as a conference speaker through the Saxton Speakers Bureau, Melbourne: (03) 9813 2199 and Sydney: (02) 9231 1900.