



At 6:48 PM Japanese time, on August 7, 2007, an extremely weary, but newly transformed group of 6 hikers and I successfully summited Mt. Fuji on a climb that had started only less than 14 hours earlier when the sun was just cresting the eastern horizon. With over a years worth of preparation and research invested in the climb, the plan was to make it to the summit in two days. The previous arm-powered attempt to reach the top of Mt. Fuji was accomplished in just under 4 days by Keegan Reilly 2 years earlier. Since we had the benefit of learning from the successes and the challenges from their climb, as well as performing great deal of more physical training, we suspected we could better the previous time. However, what none of us could have forecasted was the collective will that was inaugurated that day. It truly was the essence of “my” struggle becoming “our” struggle that moved us up the mountain in world record time. Of course in the end struggle was transformed into triumph, something I have had the fortune to experience several times over recent years as an international handcycle racer, however, having it happen collectively like this was brand new, and truly the real story of the day’s climb.

After becoming paralyzed in an automobile accident over 18 years ago, it has been the accomplishment of physical feats and athletic success that I have using to define me, instead of the disability. In some sort of twisted destiny, the devastating life altering injury actually ended up providing incredible physical opportunities and personal insight that I likely may not have explored if I had been able to carry on my life participating in traditional able-bodied sports and athletics. In the

endeavor to prove oneself still physically competent after suffering a spinal cord injury that would seemingly make taking part in any kind of sport severely limiting or even impossible, I have discovered that those overcompensating measures are what make so many of us able to accomplish such high octane undertakings.

Early on I played wheelchair basketball and raced wheelchairs in which the competition allowed me to travel the world and even go to college, but it was the adaptation of bicycles in the mid-90's that really called to me. And recently, after a stint of 7 years or so of successful road handcycle riding, I turned to the off-road cycling. With the development of the off-road handcycle called the One-Off, which uses rear wheel drive and super low gearing for effective climbing ability, disabled riders of these bikes have been able to access terrain and topography that they would never have been able to gain access to any other way. With the advent of this new bike, we have seen individuals tackle unruly parts of the earth such as the White Rim trail in Utah, Mt. Kilimanjaro, and many other peaks and valleys. Why did we choose Mt. Fuji as our challenge? The idea was hatched a few years ago with my friend Richard DeBernardis, himself no stranger to challenges and world records. After entering the Guinness Book of Records as the first person to cycle the perimeter of the United States, Richard set his eyes east to repeat the feat in Japan. This led to a lifelong love of Japan and a yearly pilgrimage to Fuji, which he has climbed no less than seventeen times. Richard is now President of the Perimeter Bicycling Association of America (PBAA). PBAA also has close ties with Global Sports Alliance, an organization in Japan that promotes a clean environment and fair sport. They were our hosts while in Japan and a major sponsor, and obviously a natural fit to join our team, "Reaching the Summit without limits".

We arrived in Japan roughly eight days before we were to travel to Kawaguchiko, the town at the base of Mt. Fuji. What one might consider counterproductive to being prepared and rested for our upcoming grueling undertaking, we spent long days touring various parts of Japan, visiting the town of Kusatsu where we were special guests of the mayor and attended a special festival which was partially in our honor, and partaking in as much Japanese culture as possible, including eating strange cuisine, and drinking too much sake. However, we had to work our timing with the schedule given to us; upon

arriving in Japan typhoon season was in high gear so we had to wait for the weather to clear up, we had plans to pay our scheduled visit in the village of Kusatsu, we had scheduled stops to visit some special camps where we would meet with disabled children and hopefully inspire them with our pending climb, and our friend at the top of Mt. Fuji had made arrangements for us on the mountain that we had to wait for. Nonetheless, upon finally arriving in Kawaguchiko tired from long days of touring, my digestive track tattered from some disagreeable fish I ate, and feeling a bit worn from too many late nights and sake, the undertow of thinking in many of our minds at the time was that we certainly did wish we got to the mountain sooner!

After a few scant hours of sleep, my hand picked crew and a gaggle of volunteering sherpas from the GSA office geared up at station 5 of the Shubashiri Bulldozer route, elevation: 6,561 feet. There are many paths up Mt. Fuji, this particular one is actually considered a descending route, and as one might suspect from the name, one of the trails in which 3 bulldozers travel everyday to carry supplies to the top. We chose this route knowing the majority of it would be less traveled by the hundreds of people that trek up the mountain each day, and that we figured there likely would not be any totally insurmountable obstacles on this trail or completely vertical climbing. After several ceremonial pictures and commencement speeches, I started rolling upwards. It felt wonderful to finally be on the mountain and making headway towards the goal that has been firmly planted in my head for nearly a year. I was moving swiftly and fluidly and then 200 meters in I discovered the loose dirt and volcanic skree we have been hearing so much about. The grade at this point was still only about 30 degrees, however, I immediately dropped to my very lowest gear, began spinning my cranks like a hamster in a wheel, and literally inched along in what felt like quick sand. But we expected this, and we felt were prepared for it. Shortly before leaving Arizona we fabricated an elongated steel bar that affixed to the rear axle of the bike. Strapped down, it served as a surface on which we placed much of our camping gear, tools, and replacement bike parts. Its secondary purpose was to provide an ergonomic lever for which members of my crew could place downward pressure for the bike to get better traction. The first one to jump in on this task was my girlfriend, Shelley Regan. With that little

bit of downward pressure, I was able to skip up a few gears, and those inches of gained travel turned into feet.

Our group traveled in a slightly splintered fashion this early in the climb and many decided to trail behind knowing it would be easy enough to catch up with the slow moving main group, or maybe they chose to spend a little extra time at the base sipping coffee and easing into the morning since many of them got so little sleep. Up ahead of them, we forged on. Time was of the essence, time is always of the essence in these kinds of endeavors, and taking heed to that, even so early on, is very important. Shelley, my best friend Joel Mitchell who currently lives in Seattle, Scott Shipman, a friend from the PBAA office, and my good friend Maralyn Goldstein took turns working the rear tension bar while I cranked away. A few times in these early portions we were tested with grades upwards of 60 degrees, and in those cases, everyone chipped in. No one said it out loud, but I am certain what all of us were thinking was, “how many of these steep sections will there be, and how long will they last?”. We would soon learn that unfortunate answer.

A few hours later, the rest of our group, including the Japanese contingency, caught up and exclaimed their delight and surprise on how far we had made it in such a short time. We took this opportunity to break for a short breakfast of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches prepared by Maralyn. We quickly moved on after eating, our crew now increased by two: Scott Wilbur, a close friend of Scott Shipman, and Hagi, our newly formed friend from Japan proved to be splendid additions. Richard DeBernardis chose to lag behind us carrying out his climb in contemplative solitude, while Anton Gannon and Tatsuo Okada kept their distance while doing most of the filming. The rest of the Japanese volunteers were carrying gear, including my wheelchair for when we would finally make it to the top.

For the next few hours we made slow but steady progress which was accompanied by various chitchat, joking, and even the occasional break out in song. Of course the conversation and joking came to a halt during those moments in which we'd hit a spot that would take all of our collective efforts to gain mere inches where we felt like we were actually moving downward and backwards, instead of forward. In fact, soon enough we came to a section where that sort of terrain was all we

could see ahead of us. Although few words were passed amongst the group, the anguish on all of our faces told the story of what we were all thinking. Hours passed by and we could still see the same short-term landmarks we were either working towards, or just passed. It was demoralizing. How long were we going to be out here? Were we going to hold up? At this point not only was there someone applying pressure to the leverage bar on the back, but someone was working each rear tire at all times applying downward, spinning pressure. Taking breaks and reassessing the best line to take was happening more frequently as our fatigue increased. As if things were not challenging enough already, along came the second bulldozer of the day. Not only was just moving on the path difficult enough, but now we had to seek even higher ground, in looser terrain. Everyone was on board trying to move the bike and me off the path. The foreboding bulldozer was heading right toward me, and I don't think they can see me! With about 10 feet to spare before I was crushed under the 2 ton tread bearing monster, we got the driver's attention and he stopped. "Hiroaki's friend?", the driver asked. "Yes, yes!", we all exclaimed knowing he was referring to our host waiting for us up at the summit, and certainly appreciating knowing the driver was excited to see us, as opposed to being annoyed at us for blocking his daily route and possibly inciting him to be more cavalier with his passage.

Mildly refreshed after our little bulldozer scare we forged on. Amidst streaking clouds that seemed to charge up the mountain with a purpose, Mt. Fuji was bearing down right in front of us. Never has the term so close, yet so far away seemed so appropriate. At this point Joel came up with the excellent strategy to do a five minute rotation on the rear wheels and tension bar, thus mixing things up for the crew, and giving everyone at least a 10 minute break from working the bike (except for me, of course). The tactic seemed to work, and we were moving with a purpose, and soon enough we were past the long section that we never thought we could have made it through. As tough as that section was, it was likely the best thing that could have happened to us that day. While we were all suffering together, and eventually came together so well as a group to overcome what could have very likely created complete anarchy, an extraordinary bond fused our climbing unit as one. We now knew we could overcome whatever the mountain threw at us here on out.

At 12:00 PM, we reached station 7, at 9,842 feet of elevation, and roughly our halfway point. We also learned this is where arrangements were made for us to stay overnight. Glances were shot amidst the group; we were all doing the math, but the decision whether to keep forging on was going to be mine. Those that knew me best in the group already knew the answer, and I think so did the others, they just needed me to confirm it. We felt good, and we were going for it. We reached station 8 within a few hours, and that is where we actually took a ½ hour break and I had some of the best miso soup and turkey jerky I had ever tasted. Completely refreshed and still invigorated with the notion that we could make summit by the end of the day, we came across another long stretch of trail similar to the near “show stopper” that was described earlier. But now we were a well-oiled machine and could not be stopped. Later, many of us talked about that section and how successful we were the second time around, and felt that our collective wills concentrated as one was certainly something to be contended with.

At this point of the climb the straight passes were roughly 2 hundred meters each connected by gnarly switchbacks. The grade was roughly 50 degrees and above from here to the summit, which we could see below the soon to be setting sun. At this point we knew we were going to make it before the day’s end, but would it still be light? The group was now in full deliberation mode, we all knew what was at stake, and could *feel* the summit, although it seemed hard to believe. I would not believe it until I was actually there, and then I still think I might be skeptical. With the last traces of the sun dancing just above the far off horizon, we appeared to be one switchback from making it to the top. My wrists, neck, back and forearms were throbbing with intense pain. For the last 5 hours I was breaking nearly every 10 minutes just to alleviate the pressure from those body parts, but now with my heart seemingly pounding through my eardrums and the end in site, we were to the swift. At last we are past the last switchback and Richard has come down to tell us that we are almost there, Anton breaks out in a version of “Wind Beneath my Wings” which ordinarily would have either annoyed me or made me laugh, but at this point it seemed poignant, and nearly brought tears to my eyes.

At last I see Hiroaki and as the climb smoothes out flat I hasten the speed and he is running along side of me. When I finally stop he nearly tackles me with an embrace that goes on for about 5

minutes. He cannot believe the time we made. When he finally lets go, I embrace my crewmembers one by one, and we are all overcome by emotion. The seven of us shared an experience that created memories for a lifetime, and even at that moment overlooking Tokyo Bay and the Sea of Japan off in the distance before the sun finally disappeared, feeling like we were on top of the world, we were completely attentive of the special bonding experience we all shared.

The evening came to an end rather hastily in the hut following some rice and miso soup. After what seemed like only a few hours of sleep on Tatami mats, we were all awakened to view the 4:45 AM sunrise. It was spectacular. We were surrounded by hundreds of people who climbed through the night with lamps on their foreheads just to experience the sunrise atop Mt. Fuji. To this day, I often close my eyes and I am there, at 12,388 feet, and I can hear the gentle jingles of the bells fastened atop the walking sticks of the nighttime sojourners, as well as the gentle prayer chants that begin just as the sun pierces the horizon, and turns the wispy clouded sky into fire.

