

# From Under the Bar to Above the Clouds

by Joe Morden



"Life is a great adventure, and the greatest fear of all, is the fear of not living." At the time I read that great quote by the 26th president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt, I had little to no idea how those seventeen words would affect me and my life. But as I stood at the

highest point in the state of Washington, the 14,411 foot Columbia Crest on Mount Rainier, I couldn't help but smile at the thought of all the hard work it took to get a kid who dreaded the mile run in middle school, a kid who was deathly afraid of roller coasters most of his life to finish what many in mountaineering consider to be the hardest endurance climb in the lower forty eight. By the time I got down, I was astonished that most of the lessons I learned on the mountain were the same as ones I learned in the weight room, under the bar.

Lets rewind a bit: Like most I picked up my first barbell (the glorious sand filled plate variety) along with Arnold's encyclopedia of Modern Bodybuilding and the latest issue of Muscle and Fitness and would go blast myself with monster 2 a day workouts in my parents' basement. Sure it was idiotic, but I didn't want to be anywhere else. I loved the feeling it gave me to be working hard for a goal. Of course this mentality carried over to sports in high school, where I learned that the weights were not only a great hobby but also a tool - one I could use to get better. I was never the biggest or fastest on the football field or the track, but I was always one of the hardest working. I took that outlook with me when I went to college, and though I was no longer in competitive sports, I found Elitests, and Westside barbell, and starting setting personal goals in the powerlifting arena. For the next 6 years I continued to pursue my newfound passion for the Bench, Dead, and Squat, although I missed the conditioning aspect of training. Then, I came across that quote by Teddy Roosevelt, and suddenly that idea of actually training for an adventure rather than just for a PR in the gym was planted in my subconscious. So all I needed was the adventure.

Flying into Seattle, it is very hard to not be mesmerized by Rainier as it towers over the neighboring peaks of the Cascade Range. I had been to Washington a handful of times

before, was coming in for Christmas and, suddenly, it hit me. That's what the adventure will be. A summit attempt of the most prominent peak in the contiguous United States.

## **RULE #1**

### **Get a Guide**

Once I decided to undertake this climb, I knew I had to do one thing right off the bat. I would need two different types of guides: a guide for the prep, and a guide for the climb. For the climb, I researched two local guide companies and went with one based on client testimonials. I couldn't have been happier with that decision.

For the prep, naturally, I dove into endurance training: biking, running, backpacking. For 1 to 2 hrs a day on top of that, I was lifting 3-4 days a week. It didn't take long for my training to start going a little sideways, and my strength started to plummet. That's when I got into contact with Josh. Right after we started, I was able to continually make strength gains week in and week out. It wasn't long until I had surpassed the training weights I was using before I started all the conditioning. The whole time I just kept wondering when I was going to hit the wall, but the wall never came. As I close on my first 12 weeks working with Josh, I have posted all time PR's in the Bench, Dead, Standing Military, Squat, Pull-up, Shrug ad all at a bodyweight that is 50lbs lighter than I was at at my heaviest and strongest. I continually tell people who ask me about what supplements they should take this week, to invest in a great trainer with Josh. I can't even imagine where I'd end up after working with him steadily for a few years.

## **RULE #2**

### **Commit to the goal : Prepare, Perform, Prevail**

This really goes with everything in life, but especially with training. Define your goal, find the best route to accomplishing that goal, and then do it. It's not easy to juggle a full-time entrepreneurial job, a committed relationship, family, and training 2-3 hrs a day 6-7 days a week. You don't go out to bars. You don't watch TV. You wake up early to get in another hour-long ruck hike. Sometimes your squat workout comes at 12:30 at night after a long day of work, and you can't get jacked on caffeine or else you won't be able to sleep the rest of the night. Sometimes it's those workouts that are your best. That's what people do who are driven to accomplish their goals. It's a perpetual juggling act of sacrifice - either sacrifice time with friends and family or sacrifice training time. Luckily, I have surrounded myself with an amazing web of supporters in my friends, family, and girlfriend. They all understood the drive that I had to accomplish my goal and were all very supportive.

## **RULE #3**

### **You can't sprint to the finish. Take it one step at a time.**

We woke up at 11:00pm, at high camp, to make our summit bid. For the first few hrs of the 6 hour summit push, we climb in the dark, tied in a four-man rope team, with climbers in 15-foot intervals. So it's not only dark, and cold, but you also are rapidly thrust into this summit push essentially alone with your thoughts, fears and skills. And believe me, when you are walking in pitch black, on a narrow ridgeline, and you turn your head to shine your head lamp to see what is next to you, and in return all you get is a black abyss, your thoughts immediately go into survival mode.



As we were making our way to Disappointment Cleaver, the crux of the climb, I careened, my neck back, and looked up in disbelief. Above me at an angle and altitude that was far steeper and higher than I had ever envisioned, was the small trail of white specs from another rope team making their way to the summit. All I remember thinking

was "You have got to be SH\*\*TING me." But then I was reminded of the rule I subscribe to in the weight room: you can't sprint towards a goal. Real progress is made one step at a time. 10 steps turn to 100, 100 into a 1000, and before you know it, you've reached your goal. So I did what I'm sure every other climber did. I gritted my teeth, cursed the biting wind, planted my ice axe into the glacier, and pressed forward. Many people, especially young people, believe in instant gratification. But people successful under the bar, on the bodybuilding stage, or on the sports field are generally the ones pressing on, one foot forward, one step at a time, winning small victories and surpassing small goal after small goal.

### **Funny, Weird, and Painful Things I Had Not Anticipated**

- You can't out-train the effects of altitude when you live in a flat place like Michigan. The lack of oxygen seemed to hit me out of nowhere. At the time I didn't really think I was being affected by it, but looking back in my summit picture, my lips are blue. I also can't clearly remember the summit - lot like if you are over-served at your local watering hole one Friday night, you know you were there and you can kind of remember what you did, but it's very hazy.
- It doesn't matter how many flavors of CLIFF bars you bring, if you live off them for the better part of the week, you will want to be a card-carrying member of the latest zero carb diet when you get back, just so you don't have to ever look at another one again. Additionally, the only thing worse than the CLIFF bar diet is

- trying to choke down a half-frozen packet of energy gel - unless, of course, you like the consistency and flavor of chocolate phlegm.
- Getting to the bottom of the Mountain is more painful than getting to the top. And almost more tiring.
  - Energy bars/gels/Gatorade will give you an insane bloat. Add these to the nature of climbing in high altitudes and it becomes almost an epic display of what your body can store. I gained close to 20lbs of bloat from my experience. I was so swollen, in fact, that I could only fit into two of my suit pants for work the following week, and had to wear flipflops because my feet wouldn't fit in running shoes, let alone dress shoes. Fortunately lost over 20 pounds when I got back home.
  - When I tell people about the climb, I get a lot of "that doesn't sound like fun" or "why would you spend so much time and energy doing that?" And I think this quote, by Arctic explorer and mountaineer, Don - Hide quoted text - Garner, really sums up my feeling about it: "We learn most from our suffering and the changes and the challenges on these trips. You don't learn much if everything goes great. Or if you are not scared shitless. You don't learn much on the groovy little trips you sign up with to see some nice scenery. You need to be challenged to see your character and soul. Some of your scarier and better parts. The scariest places have always been when I have been by myself on these long trips. My learning grounds. Those are the places that I learn most - the scariest, suffering spots. We learn by our confusion."

When was the last time you tested yourself? And what have you learned in the wake of that test?