

Manaslu By Speed

Contributed by Tyler Cohen. As told by Benedikt Böhm

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For more on the Manaslu Avalanche, including the accounts of Glen Plake, Greg Hill and Bene Böhm, check out the December issue of Backcountry. Subscribe by November 19 to get the issue, or check it out on the iTunes Newsstand later this month.

After the avalanche....

Three of our team left, and three of us [Basti Haag, Consti Pade and myself] decided to stay. The whole base camp was kind of depressed. All this momentum I built up for this second time on Manaslu was crashing down. It was really tough for me to motivate myself. Then I heard a good window is coming in for a good summit push, and I started really trying to motivate myself, and we were trying to motivate each other.

Two or three days later, I was really up for it. I was really fevering for it and it was really hard for me to hang around base camp. I wanted to get up there or get out completely. I was really, really exploding on [September] 29 at 6 p.m. when we basically got the start.

Basti and myself, we went from base camp. It was a very, very long way, like much longer than any other 8,000-meter peak we've tried before. Very diverse--skinning, climbing, skinning again, climbing again. Consti--he's very fit but inexperienced at high altitude--decided to go from Camp 2. We picked him up in Camp 2 and went on together.

When we picked up Consti, Basti and I were basically going the same speed and when Consti came, we kept the same speed. I kind of was always before and was waiting for them at Camp 3 (6,800 meters). Then I really thought I needed to go my own speed. So I left and Basti was in the middle, and Consti was even farther back.

I moved my way up to 7,400 meters on the summit ridge. I had already felt wind at 6,000 meters, but when I came up to the summit ridge, according to the Ecuadorian team who were measuring the wind, there was up to 100 kilometer-per-hour wind, which is too much.

I was up there and thought, "Shit. Where the fuck is this coming from?" I was really keen to go up, but I thought about waiting for these guys anyway, even though I would have preferred to move on because I was really scared and I was super cold.

I went to Camp 4 where a couple tents were just shaking in the wind. I thought they were going to blow off the mountain. I opened up the first tent and there was somebody lying in there, so I couldn't sneak in. I opened up a second one and there was nobody in there. It was already blown in completely, and I really felt like, "Oh shit. I'm gonna get blown away."

I put my skis in front of the tent. It was next to the route from Camp 3, and I thought Basti would hopefully see them--it was still dark, like 4 a.m. I was shaking in there, and every 15 minutes, I opened the zippers and had to take off my gloves and I got really frostbitten on my fingers.

So I've been waiting up there for one hour when then I saw Basti passing the tent. He was very slow. He didn't see my skis. It was around 5:20 and the sun was coming out. The sun really helped a lot for motivation, also for the wind--it went down a little.

I caught up to Basti. I thought I'd just go behind him and motivate him. He was in front of me and his pole was just falling out of his hand. I could see that he was really knackered and exhausted. He had frostbite on his face and frostbite on his nose. I was scared that maybe he'd go over his limits. We were already in the Death Zone, so I moved on and he turned around.

I went up to the summit. I was there after 15 hours in total. Even though it was such a great dream of mine, and even though I'd been waiting long and got there even faster than I expected, I spent only two seconds on the summit. I was thinking about the 23rd [the date of the avalanche] and thinking that Basti and Consti weren't there.

I took [a carabiner from the avalanche debris] up to the summit, and I dug it in right below the summit with a scarf that I got from a lama to bring luck. I was honoring the summit to the victims of the 23rd, and it was helping me to finish this chapter. It will never be finished, but it helped me a little bit to get over it.

I thought, "OK, I'm putting on my skis and I'm going to ski toward them." Consti had taken over Basti by then and I met them 150 to 250 meters below the summit, which is still a lot of time--with their speed, another three, maybe four hours, maybe even longer.

Basti said right away, "OK, I'm going to turn around." I didn't talk against it because, for me, it was most important to get all three of us down safely. I took a little longer to convince Consti. I had to scream a lot, but I felt more responsible for him. Consti has less high-altitude experience and he's young. He's only 25.

Up there, with this wind in the night, there were huge wind bumps--like where you fall into them. It was a pity because it would have been such a nice ski slope. It was a really hard descent.

Coming down to Camp 4, we had to take off our skis because it was complete ice. Then it was a traffic jam because people were coming up to Camp 4. We decided, even though we didn't feel like it, to put on our skis again. We traversed about a hundred meters to just below where the avalanche came off. We saw this huge, four-meter crown.

This was such a bad descent compared to 2007, even though it was the same spot. Then, it was all wind-compressed powder, but super easy. But this time was all ice and a lot of waves because the avalanche took down everything. The worst thing I've ever skied. We just were fighting our way down meter for meter.

Farther down (around 6,400 meters), the sun had been so hot that everything, by 1 p.m., was crust and we were crashing through. All these crevasses, which were perfect in the morning, had opened up completely and they were twice as wide. We didn't have that in our plan, for the crevasses to open up in 20 hours. We had to throw our skis over, our backpacks over, and then we had to throw ourselves over. We were super scared because we were super tired and if somebody falls in....

The whole descent was just a nightmare. The last very big crevasse, there was a huge serac falling over, and we had to find a completely new way. It was so tiring. The whole route was gone.

We finally made it to Camp 1, and it was still shitty for skiing, but at least the biggest crevasses were through. Then, after 23.5 hours we were finally reaching base camp. It was like six and a half hours down--3,400 meters on my watch.

Of course I feel satisfaction, but I'm more thankful that we got out of there and also very thankful that nothing happened to our group, and we are back here with our families. And this is the most important one; just very thankful to have this life we are living.

Right after, I think I don't need that [speed descents at high altitudes] anymore....

I'm sure, because I am what I am, I'll find myself suddenly thinking, "Could you do Everest on a speed descent?" But then I'm like, "Hey. Don't even think about it man." There's all these thoughts, and I guess they will get stronger and stronger. And one day, I can't resist them.

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