



**'Breathing and running is difficult at such a high altitude'**

The BBC Sport website has it about right in their caption alongside a picture of Phil Walker, AOC editor, manfully trying to make his ground on top of Kilimanjaro

# BREATHTAKING

30 SOULS, 150 PORTERS, ONE BIG MOUNTAIN AND A WHOLE CAN OF WHOOP-ASS!

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WELCOME TO  
**MOUNT KILI MADNESS**  
 THE HIGHEST GAME OF CRICKET EVER PLAYED

PHIL WALKER WALKED AMONG THEM. AND WALKED, AND WALKED...

## 2AM, FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 26, 2014. MOUNT KILIMANJARO, TANZANIA.

Day 7 on the mountain. *Seven.* Reckoning day.

The temperature hangs in that territory between -12 and -15. We're 4,800 metres up. Another thousand and we'll be standing on Africa's roof. The intention is to play a game of cricket in a crater just below Kili's 5,895m tip. The previous record for cricket's highest game had been set in 2009, on Everest, and we'll be adding a few hundred metres to that figure.

It seems a lifetime of pain away. The Gray-Nicolls – my turn to carry it – tugs at my rucksack. The air, thin, turns reedier with each contorted minute.

For much of the week I've been nervous about the 2am thing. Most of us have. It's come to be known, with grim humour, as The Death March. There have been wobbles. Self-doubt. Clammy gaps of introspection. We'd tried to share the bad days around: mine came on day four, when, with head splitting and body failing, I'd pirouetted into a tree on a sharp descent and kind of lost the plot.

A few of us hadn't expected to get this far. Some still doubted their chances. In the evenings a quiet pall of illness, head-throb and nausea encircled our otherwise chipper camp like those omnipresent black ravens; despite the resolutely shared concerns, we still had our own stuff going on. (Personally, my main issues were a dodgy stomach, a hauntingly crap sleeping bag and a sprained ankle ligament caused by dropping a tennis ball. In fairness I did well to get a hand to it.)

Above us the constellations glitter. Down below we're amazed by the complexities of breath. We gather ourselves, grabbing gulps of oxygen when we can. We're away. On the gravelly, inclining dustroad that snakes round the rocks and boulders of this alpine terrain, our team, Tembo, edge past the 10-strong crowd of our neighbouring group, Simba.

Among them, grabbing a breather, is England opener Heather Knight. As we trudge past she manages a line about my sanity-saving orange puffa jacket, which I'd acquired in a batch of resupplies just hours before. On past the line of pensive faces half-lit by head-torches, I hear out of the darkness big Doctor Simon apologising for not strapping my ankle up "for the big one", while bushman Liam, the professional Aussie, wisecracks about missing his morning fag. (The rumour that smokers, with their overtime lungs and existential brass, could actually be suited to such a challenge had persuaded Liam and me to turn our coffee-and-gasper-after-breakfast gig into some kind of defiant ritual.)



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We move on past, through the murmurs of good lucks and go wells, back to ourselves and the hours to come. Here we are then: to a man and woman, hanging on to Kilimanjaro. Why?

It's the question you can't help asking yourself. Some kind of survivalist fantasy? Fodder for the grandkids? Is it, I wonder, a ruse to put the Central Line in serene perspective next week? (Answer: no.) Some of us are here to raise money for causes personal to them, others to be part of a shared world record; a few more just for the kicks. Perhaps, in the end, there's some kind of desire in all of us to circumvent the tribulations of life by smothering ourselves in the sand, soil and dried lava of an unshakeable natural beast; to feel at once reassuringly tiny and vast.

For me at least, I wasn't aware I'd come here to prove something to myself. And yet here I am, somewhere near the heart of a challenge – and a powerfully silly one at that – that has suddenly, implausibly, locked this bunch of strangers together. Sitting on a rock to catch my breath, taking another swig from my crusted silver water bottle, life as I recognise it feels a long way down just now. I idly wonder if this is the state of grace we all dream of, while thanking the bloody stars for these hand-warmers.

I hadn't intended to be here. In July during my lunch-break I'd popped down to The Oval to give my mate Clare Connor a bit of support for some hare-brained challenge or other she was getting involved in. Once there, I'd had a beer. Then, you know, I'd had another. Clare asked me for



'@Gilo you crap you're pants every time u faced me and fidel #150klm' [sic, sic and sic]  
'Tolstoy' Tino Best gives it both barrels after Kilimanjaro-conqueror Ashley Giles makes a 'mind the windows' gag on Twitter

two good reasons why I shouldn't join her and the team up the mountain. All my excuses just floated away. I then met David Harper, whose brainchild this was. He, I would learn, is not a man easily turned despondent. I'd been, despite myself, just a little bit inspired. Harper does that. I went back to my desk a touch shaken.

Soon after, the pride kicked in. I wasn't turning back. After weeks of studiously neglecting all thoughts of it, in a rush I got my jabs and bought my tabs and made the last-minute dash to the trekking shop (not my scene) to buy the necessities. I concluded that if there was one overriding reason for going, it was because nobody expected me to.

For Clare, however, the reasons were real and resonant.

## IN BED WITH MAKHAYA



For a full week Nishant Joshi, part cricket writer, part medicine man, shared a tent with Makhaya Ntini. Despite being stretched down from the summit, he somehow lived to tell the tale.

I watched Makhaya Ntini play international cricket with distinction for over a decade. Having seen his interviews and behaviour on the pitch, I'd always assumed that in person, he'd be an affable, gentle chap. Well, I had the privilege of sharing a week in the same tent with him, and I can happily confirm that he is just that... and, well, a whole lot more.

The first time I met Makhaya was at our team briefing.

"Hi, Makhaya, I'm Nishant."

"HEY, IT'S MA ROOMIE! HAHA!"

It's imperative you know that Makhaya speaks in ALL CAPS.

At our first team lunch out in the open, a monkey was sneaking in and out of our dining area, feeding off a bowl of pineapple scraps. Most of us giggled. Makhaya, however, does not react like most people. He jumped up, bared his teeth and shouted "MONKEY! HAHA!"

He did this every time the monkey appeared.

At bedtime, there was no sleeping configuration that would ever make me feel comfortable in the miniscule tent, but I took the liberty of arranging our sleeping bags in a 'top-tail' fashion. Makhaya wasn't having it.

The next evening, he confronted me: "I DON'T WANT TO SMELL YOUR FEET, ROOMIE, HAHA!"

"I don't want to go face-to-face, Maks, that's a bit weird to me."

"NO DOC! WE GO FACE-TO-FACE, MAN! HAHA!"

We were the quintessential odd couple: imagine a fully-loaded Eddie Murphy in the body of Hulk Hogan, sharing a tent with Doogie Howser.

Yet, emotionally we were on the same plane. Knowing that I was struggling up the mountain whilst he was bounding up, he looked out for me. On a couple of occasions, he jogged uphill to base camp, then jogged back down to collect my backpack from my weary shoulders.

We'd often stay up until the wee hours. In our tent, there was plenty of "DOC, WHAT'S LIFE LIKE IN LONDON?" pillow talk. He missed his wife and kids dearly, and loved to talk about his academy.

This was an unlikely bromance, but after a week of hard graft, I can happily say we're now camping buddies for life.

She had lost her mother earlier this year: "We all need a focus in our lives, especially when we are dealing with deep personal loss. When I learned about the goal of playing the highest ever altitude game of cricket, I was hooked by the challenge and by the opportunity to raise money for Cancer Research UK, a charity close to my heart."

Each of us had our own story. For Heather Knight, her involvement in the Rwanda Cricket Stadium Foundation (RCSF), which aims to raise £600k to build a national arena for Rwanda's cricket-mad people, had brought her here. In March she'd been out to the Rwandan capital Kigali to see the work being carried out. Those memories, she said, would see her through. But through what, exactly?



Kilimanjaro. Africa's grandest peak. The highest freestanding mountain in the world. EJ, our Zen-like guide and, once he gets his braids cut, a future UN secretary general, tells us his preferred version (there are loads) of where the name originates. "From the Chagga tribe, who could be found on the edges of Kilimanjaro, estimated between 250-400 years ago. For them, they would see the snow at the top, which they called 'kipoo' - meaning snow-top. And 'Kilimanjaro' came from two words: 'kileme', which to the Chagga means impossible, and 'jaro', which means bird. So: impossible even for the birds to get to the top."

EJ is basically the suavest man on Earth. All week he's headed up our Tembo group, doing the job of guide, sage, meteorologist ("The mountain creates its own weather"), orator, joker and lightning rod for around 50 porters in his care, for without such a cast list this project would literally not get off the ground.

In all, there's something like 150 local porters, five men for every one of us. Dressed in orange boiler suits like London tube workers, ferrying tents, bags, portable toilets and mobile kitchens on their heads, they bring not just a utilitarian edge to this theatre of the absurd, but a touch of poetry too; for this is their mountain, their deepest mode of expression. EJ will tell us he has chosen this life. *We are mountaineers*, he and they will say. But they are more than that. Meet the protectors of Mount Kilimanjaro. And, thank Someone, our protectors too.

We need all the protection we can get. The sun is still nowhere to be seen. It's been three, maybe four hours of

# £50k

The figure raised for the Rwanda Cricket Stadium Foundation at the Brian Lara charity match at Wormsley

### Boots of Champions

The Kili climb was inspired by 2009's match on Everest. Joe Williams made that trip, playing at 5,165 metres. Five years later, Rob 'No Poles' Barry conquered Kili (amongst other things) in the very boots that Joe had worn.



sometimes holler. A group of porters to my left dance and sing like the Ladysmith, while to my right, bent double, the exultant remnants of virgin climbers. I'm not sure I'll ever forget those moments.

It's 9am. Most of us have been up to Uhuru; all will in time. There's a game of cricket to be played in the crater just below. It's flat, sandy, and just a tad exposed. It's also clouding over, so we need to get cracking, but the problem with *getting* cracking is that people *are* cracking. The porters have set up a couple of tents by the St George's flag-marked boundary for food and drink and running repairs, while outside, Ashley Giles and Heather Knight prepare to pick their teams.

I'm in with Heather, and opening the batting. At 5,752 metres. Adrenalin is a peculiar thing. I stride out there, all layered up, to face that whirling screeching devilish dervish Makhaya Ntini. Nine shivering fielders mark the sandy-grey outfield and I get a couple away, up and over. I even take a quick single, I dive (fall) for my ground. I twiddle my bat. I scream 'WAIT'. I punch gloves. I'm up in the skies.

I get 20-odd before Gilo, the canny old soak, runs me out as I walk a Ranatunga-like single. In our 10 overs we make 82-5. Seconds later I'm bounding out to field. What's going off out here?

Scoreboard pressure tells. Giles' team lose a few up top, I nip in with three wickets, and despite a late flurry, the game is ours. We're too exhausted to celebrate. But we know.

You're not meant to spend more than a few minutes at altitude like this. Yet we've been up here for a couple of hours and more. Later, EJ will tell me that we went "beyond the limits". Literally within seconds of coming off, I'm spangled. I can't drink, let alone eat. The head spins out as I gather my stuff. The descent back to base camp through the mid-morning mists, the adrenalin waning with every step, is an experience all of its own, and what follows is just a blur.

# 5752

The exact altitude in metres of the highest game of cricket ever played

trudge. EJ has morphed from spiritual guide into Kubrickian drill sergeant. To be fair, he did warn us. Then, perceptibly, as we stagger like sloppy drunks through the 5,500m mark, the horizon reveals itself. Daybreak on Day 7 is beyond beautiful. Even Bobby No Poles, whose stomach, it's fair to say, has not been the best - and I should know having shared a tent with him for a week - is moved to tears.

We will walk something like 40-50 miles this week, but those final steep steps up to Stella Point are for many of us the most gruelling we will ever take. Except, and I'm sorry about this, I'm not too bad at all. If not exactly jaunty, I'm certainly clear-headed and in good order. I reach Stella's semi-summit - there is still one more hour to get to fabled Uhuru Peak, but crack Stella and you're almost there - and pop myself up on a rock to watch the others pull through. No one in our group has yet fallen away. I sit and drink and

We're almost done here. We've seen wind, rain, snow, searing heat, clogging gusts, thinning air, freezing cold, illness, pain and joy. In the clamour to capture what may just have happened, we reconvene the following final night to make sense of it all. Revived by now, and with a fierce marketing team behind me, I've somehow blagged the Man of the Match award, and with it a wooden Maasai rungu stick, for next time I need to skull my enemies.

I make some speech or other, but as ever it's Clare Connor who gets it best: "It was pure, it was joyful, it was painful. It gave me time for reflection, time to breathe more deeply and time to talk and laugh."

We peel away. World record holders. It's done. Back to our lives, to our London, Nairobi, Dubai, Provence. And they remain our lives. Just with a bit more meaning than they may have had last week. ●

*We need you! Please keep donating to our three charities - Cancer Research, the Rwanda Cricket Stadium Foundation and TUSK - at [www.mtkilimadness.com](http://www.mtkilimadness.com). Or follow us @kilimadness. Catch the official video of the trip on YouTube: type in 'New cricket match altitude record set on roof of Africa'.*