



REACH



for the x
TOP

By JOANNE BLAIN

Photography by
KERITH PERREUR-LLOYD

A resolute attitude has carried SARAH DOHERTY not just to the top of Kilimanjaro, but over almost every obstacle this B.C. woman has encountered



IT SEEMS ABSURD, BUT CLIMBING MOUNT KILIMANJARO ISN'T CONSIDERED AN EARTH-SHATTERING ACCOMPLISHMENT ANYMORE. YOU MIGHT IMPRESS PEOPLE BY TOSSING THE FEAT INTO COCKTAIL-PARTY CONVERSATION, BUT YOU'LL STILL

be just one of tens of thousands who make it to the summit every year.

But not many people have conquered Kilimanjaro on one leg. When you narrow that down to the number of one-legged climbers who make it to the top after one of their crutches snaps in half along the way, Sarah Doherty is in a pretty exclusive club.

It's one that takes a mixture of guts, conviction and stubbornness to join, and the 49-year-old has all of those.

"I just knew I was going to summit," says Doherty, who took on Africa's highest peak this past January with three able-bodied climbers, including her partner and her sister. "It

wasn't about being cocky — I felt strong, I felt focused. I had done all my homework and I was ready."

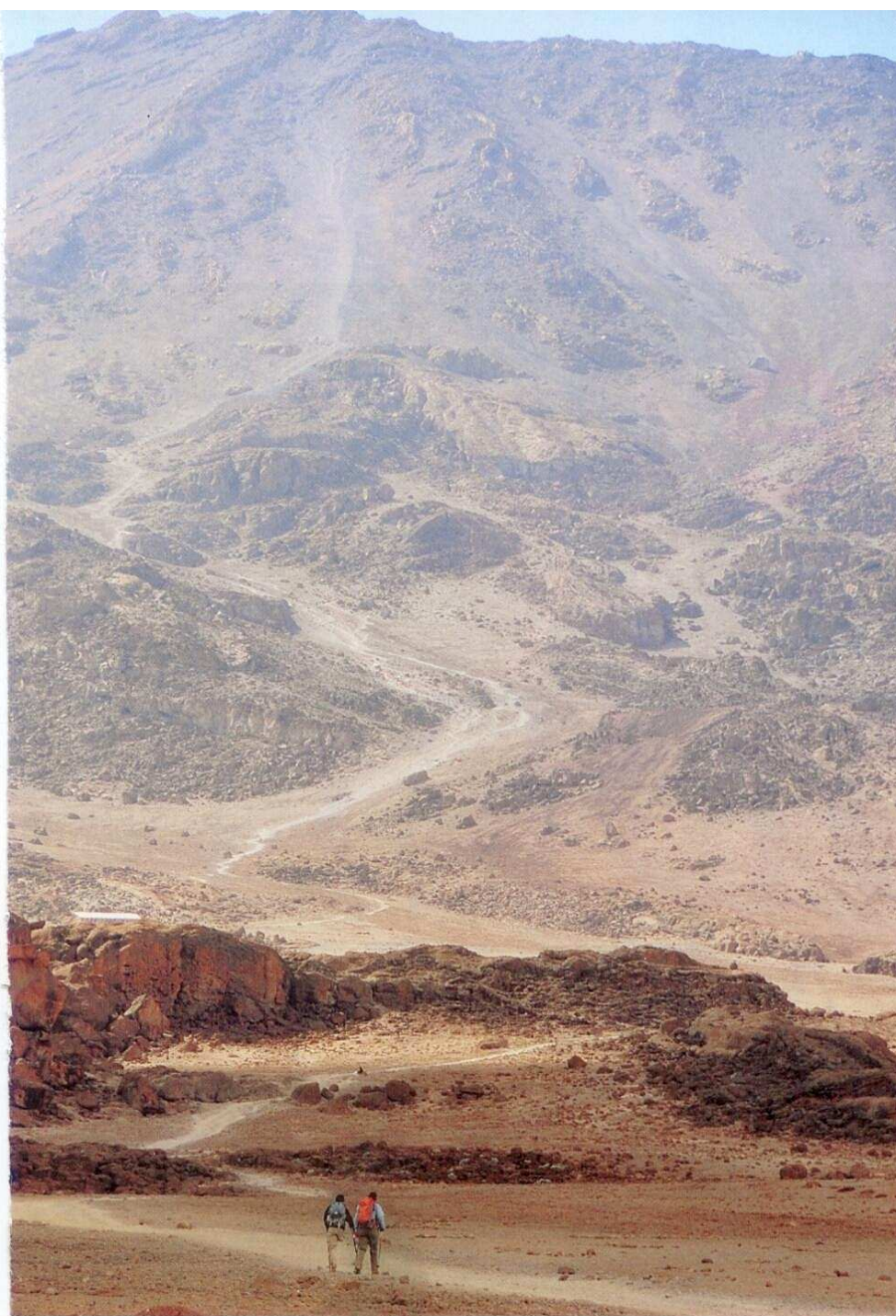
That attitude has carried Doherty not just to the top of Kilimanjaro, but over almost every obstacle she has encountered since she lost her right leg at age 13. She was cycling to a friend's house at dusk in her hometown of Taunton, Mass., when she was struck by a drunk driver. The impact tore off her leg at the hip and destroyed half her pelvis. She almost bled to death before the ambulance arrived.

The accident changed the way Doherty saw herself. She had been an active teenager who excelled in ath-

letics; she was on the school swim team and was set to compete in a track meet the day after she lost her leg. As one of nine children, she also shouldered her share of family responsibilities, such as working at her parents' grocery store and helping to care for her youngest brother, Bill, who is profoundly cognitively impaired.

"I lost those roles and some of my independence," says Doherty, who now lives in Roberts Creek on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast. "But I had a family with a 'get on with it' attitude." She received sympathy and support, but no coddling. If she wanted to hang out with her high school friends, who were used to rambling from one end of town to the other, she'd have to learn how to keep up.

"We were always adapting things," she says. "We put nails in the tips of my crutches so I wouldn't slide in the snow." After the accident, Doherty learned to ski through the New England Handicapped Sports Association — which led to a spot on the U.S.



LEFT: The climbers are dwarfed by the magnificent Kilimanjaro. ABOVE: Doherty and her twin have an emotional reunion at Gilman's Point. OPPOSITE PAGE: Flanked by her guide, Sosta (left), and her sister (right), Doherty embarks on the trail to Kibo Camp.

Disabled Ski Team — and she created straps for her backpack so she could carry her own skis. Rather than thinking, I can't do that, she asked herself, "How do I find a way to do that?"

Doherty didn't know it at the time, but she was laying the groundwork for her current career as an occupational therapist. She now does for clients what she has always done for herself — find ways to help them get on with their daily lives after a disabling illness or injury.

She's taken a giant step forward in that task with SideStix, a shock-absorbing crutch she is developing with her partner — in business and in

life — Kerith Perreur-Lloyd, a structural technologist. In addition to its hydraulic shock system, SideStix's key feature is its interchangeable feet, allowing it to adapt to everything from walking indoors to hiking in snow.

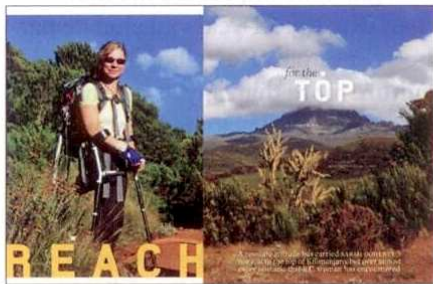
Doherty tested an early prototype of the crutch in 2004 by trekking 720 kilometres of the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage route in northern Spain. But two years ago, she set her sights on an even more demanding field test — Kilimanjaro.

It would be a formidable, but not unprecedented, challenge for Doherty. In her mid-twenties, she had climbed both Mount Rainier near Seattle and

Alaska's Mount McKinley, the highest peak in North America. Shortly afterwards, she put the sport on hold to get married and raise three children — Joshua, now 22, Abi, 19, and 16-year-old Hannah — with her former husband, Russ Kellett. SideStix was the impetus for getting back into mountain climbing, both for the rigorous testing ground it would provide and the publicity she hoped it would bring to the project.

The first person Doherty asked to join her and Perreur-Lloyd on the Kilimanjaro climb was her identical twin, Susan Gabriel. Although an avid hiker, and in possession of two legs, Gabriel's first thought was not whether Doherty was up for the challenge, but whether *she* was. "Sarah has done some incredible things, and as much as I love adventure, I'm not as much of a risk-taker," says Gabriel, a registered nurse in Boston. But after some research and training, Gabriel was on board and she drafted a Boston colleague, Ellen Clemence, to come along. **Continued on page 122**

REACH FOR THE TOP
Continued from page 103



In early January, they arrived in the Tanzanian village of Marangu, near the base of Kilimanjaro. The first few days of the trip were a blur of lost luggage, acclimatization and the realization of the enormity of the task ahead, which Perreur-Lloyd documented in a blog: “It’s very sobering talking to people who have attempted and failed, our anxiety levels have gone way up,” he wrote on Jan. 8, the third day of the climb. “Today we passed someone being brought down on a wheeled stretcher and a young boy collapsed on the trail in front of us.... We’ve all been popping headache pills and Sarah threw up after tea, hopefully this will be an isolated incident.”

But the real drama came on the final day, when the four climbers set out for the summit around midnight after a few hours of fitful rest — some hadn’t slept at all. They made slow but steady progress in the thin air for the next hour until the unthinkable happened.

“I heard a curse ahead of me,” Perreur-Lloyd wrote in his blog. “Sarah had felt her left SideStix cuff slip and assumed that it needed tightening. I turned on my headlamp and in its harsh LED glow, we realized the full enormity of the situation. Sarah’s left SideStix had snapped at the handle/forearm bend.... This break had happened in the worst possible place.”

Doherty immediately teared up in frustration and anger. She berated herself for not field testing the latest prototype more thoroughly before she took on Kilimanjaro and for not bringing a spare set. “I was devastated — that’s the best way to put it. Kerith kept saying, ‘I can fix this.’ But I didn’t really believe him.”

She and her guide, Sosta, sat down on a rock while Gabriel and Clemence

continued up the mountain and Perreur-Lloyd ran back down to the summit base camp to try to repair the crutch. The plan was that if he could fix it, he’d head back up the mountain to meet Doherty. If he couldn’t, he’d flash his headlamp several times to signal that she would have to abandon the climb and come down.

That’s when fate took over. Doherty told her guide she was cold, so he insisted they get up and start moving — hypothermia can spell death at an altitude of 16,500 feet. Sosta wanted to head down the mountain, but Doherty was determined to continue the climb.

Doherty and Sosta began an awkward dance as she balanced on her one remaining crutch and his outstretched forearm. “Sosta could count to 10 [in English], so we did a series of 10 hops,” she says. They would take 10 hops uphill, followed by 15 to 20 sideways. It was gruelling for both of them, but they made progress.

“Over 2½ hours, we covered 2½ kilometres and a thousand vertical feet,” says Doherty. “It is amazing to think about.” At times, even she couldn’t believe what she was doing. “There was something else driving me that was bigger than me, in some ways. Maybe my endorphins were going crazy — I have no idea. I just know that I wanted to keep going forward.”

But about four hours short of the summit, Doherty realized her impro-



Posing with a prototype: Doherty and her partner, Kerith Perreur-Lloyd.

vised tango with Sosta couldn’t take them any farther. “We were getting to an area of fairly soft scree [small, loose stones], so I knew that was probably the end of us hopping together. Either we were going to have to stop or Kerith was going to have to show up,” she says. “And Kerith showed up.”

No one was more astonished to see Doherty and her guide at 17,500 feet than Perreur-Lloyd, who, on the way up, had erroneously been told by another guide that Doherty was headed down. “I was blown away,” he says. “I was absolutely flabbergasted that someone could keep going at that altitude and under those conditions.”

With both crutches and a renewed spirit, Doherty and Perreur-Lloyd pushed on to Gilman’s Point at 18,638 feet — if you reach this spot on the rim of the mountain’s volcanic crater, it’s accepted that you have made it to the top of Kilimanjaro. Doherty was exhausted, but she urged Perreur-Lloyd to continue up to Uhuru Peak, the highest point on the mountain at 19,340 feet. On the way, he met Clemence and Gabriel as they headed down.

Reaching the summit without her sister had been bittersweet for Gabriel, but that feeling evaporated when she joined Doherty at Gilman’s Point. “I burst into tears,” Gabriel says. “That changed everything for me.”

Kilimanjaro has changed a few things for Doherty too. She is more determined than ever to refine the SideStix prototype, made by Toronto’s Bloorview Research Institute.

She hopes to test the crutches — and herself — again by climbing Mount Rainier for the second time before she turns 50 in December. After that, the goal is to get SideStix in production before the 2010 Winter Olympics and Paralympics in Vancouver and Whistler, B.C.

Doherty thinks she’s made of the right stuff to accomplish all of that, and you’d be hard pressed to find anyone to disagree with her.

“I have a tough emotional personality,” she says. “I feel it — it feels like iron inside. If I can inspire you, I think that’s fantastic. If you think I’m crazy, sorry. This is who I am.” **M**