



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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VANCOUVER -- Mount Kilimanjaro, with its snowcapped peak rising in stark contrast to the surrounding desert, has long captured the imaginations of writers and explorers. But despite the mountain's imposing appearance, climbing to the top of Africa's highest summit requires little more than putting one foot in front of the other. It is hardly a stunning feat of technical climbing ability.

Take away the use of your legs, though, and all of a sudden scaling the 5,895-metre peak becomes a monumental task. Next month, that is exactly what Jim Milina, a 39-year-old quadriplegic living in North Vancouver, intends to do.

He and a team of nine friends, collectively known as the CORD (Climbing Over Restriction and Disability) Climbing Team, will take on the six-day climb using a special all-terrain wheelchair. If they succeed, Mr. Milina will set a new world wheelchair high-altitude record. The group plans to traverse Kilimanjaro via the Rongai Route, which weaves up the north side of the mountain to the Kibo Hut at 4,700 metres. At that point, they will decide if going for the summit is feasible, before heading down the south side.

The trip represents a step back into an outdoor world that Mr. Milina left behind 21 years ago when he lost the use of his legs in a freestyle skiing accident. He hopes to inspire others with disabilities to follow his lead. "We want to prove that outdoor and adventure travel is available and accessible and within the capabilities of the disabled," he says.

It's a dream that would have been almost inconceivable before the British Columbia Mobility Opportunities Society developed the Trailrider, a specially designed wheelchair that can roll over any obstacle that a typical mountain bike can handle. The chair consists of a reclined seat mounted on a metal frame and a single pneumatic wheel. It is propelled by able-bodied team members pushing and pulling in rotating groups of three.

As for Mr. Milina, he won't be just sitting back enjoying the ride. "I'm definitely an active participant," he says, explaining that between holding on, constantly shifting his weight to make up for the chair's movement and watching the terrain ahead to shout instructions to the team, he will be kept busy. His will be the first international climbing expedition to use the Trailrider.

One of the biggest challenges the team will face is high altitude -- a difficulty that is exacerbated by Mr. Milina's disability. He doesn't have control over his diaphragm muscles, which restricts his breathing power, and poor circulation in his extremities increases the risk of frostbite.

But exactly how his body will react is a mystery -- one that Dr. Andrew Blaber, a specialist in extreme physiology at Simon Fraser University, hopes to solve. Dr. Blaber will monitor Mr. Milina's reactions to altitude as part of the first-ever study on the effects of altitude on a person with a spinal cord injury.

Before the trip, Mr. Milina will spend four days in a hypobaric chamber that will mimic the conditions on his climb. Once on Kilimanjaro, a bevy of high-tech gadgets will be used to measure his vitals every half-hour.

"Erik came to me and said, 'I've got to find a way to take you climbing,' " Mr. Milina remembers. Until that point, he had assumed he would never be able to replicate his experiences as a young man in the mountains.

Mr. Bjarnason eventually persuaded him to try the Trailrider, and within minutes Mr. Milina was back on the North Vancouver hiking trails that he had not traversed since he was a child.

It was a turning point -- the beginning of what Mr. Milina refers to as the third phase of his life. He'd spent 18 years as an able-bodied person who loved the outdoors, followed by another 18 convinced that he would never enjoy it again. Now, he was suddenly aware that he was the only one holding himself back.

"I realized that [not going into the wilderness] was a limitation I had placed on myself. This equipment was always there, I just didn't think it was possible or didn't want to think it was possible, and that ignorance translated into me placing limitations on my life and my experience."

Mr. Milina wants to share his newfound freedom with others in the same rut. "Kilimanjaro means a lot more than just me climbing a hill," he explains. "It's about showing people with disabilities, as well as able-bodied people, that some limitations you place on yourself. You don't necessarily have to live within those boundaries."