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Ever higher, ever faster

When did mountaineering begin? And why did it begin in Switzerland? In the company of Ueli Steck, the world's fastest mountaineer, and author Daniel Anker, a man with encyclopaedic knowledge of mountains, we explore the history of the conquest of Switzerland's summits.

By Alain Wey

The conquest of the mountains bears comparison with man's most incredible journeys, such as the crossing of the oceans and his first steps in outer space. It encapsulates the quintessence of the human spirit – always aiming higher and relentlessly pushing back the boundaries. Even when all the peaks had been ascended, mountaineers continued to brave the unknown and find new ways of reaching the summits. Ueli Steck from Berne is one of the finest examples (interview on page 23). Known as “The Swiss Machine” outside Switzerland, he has smashed the ascent records for the toughest north faces in the Alps. He took just 2 hours 47 minutes to free-climb the north face of the Eiger solo. This 21st-century alpine hero has revived public interest in his exploits. But when did mountaineering actually begin? Man has not been endeavouring to scale the summits since the beginning of time. The

age of mountaineering in fact began in the 18th century, as Daniel Anker, an author and journalist specialising in mountains, explains.

The beginnings

“Before the ascent of the summits was recorded, mountain dwellers and chamois hunters had already scaled some peaks, but had left no trace”, Daniel Anker explains. The ascent of Titlis (3,238 metres, Uri) in July 1744 by four monks from Engelberg monastery marked the birth of mountaineering in Switzerland as a leisure pursuit. The first summit conquered that has permanent snow cover was Schelaplana (2,965 metres, Grisons), which was reached in around the 1740s. Monks from the Grand-Saint-Bernard monastery then scaled Mont Vélán (3,727 metres, Valais) in 1779. The first 4,000-metre peak in Switzerland to be

climbed was the Jungfrau (4,158 metres) in 1811 followed by the epic ascent of the Finsteraarhorn (4,274 metres, Berne), of which this year is the 200th anniversary. However, these feats cannot be discussed without mentioning Horace Bénédict de Saussure, who is regarded as the father of alpine mountaineering. A naturalist and geologist from Geneva, he sponsored the first ascent of Mont Blanc in 1786 and himself climbed Europe's highest peak a year later.

From science to sport

The history of Swiss mountaineering has also been shaped by geologists like Louis Agassiz (1807–1873), who climbed to take measurements to prove the existence of the Ice Ages and to gain a better understanding of the formation of the Alps. Topographers also had to reach the summits to undertake the triangulation of Switzerland. The most

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Above the clouds – mountaineers on the summit of the Eiger, with the Mittelhorn (left) and the Rosenhorn in the background. The first ascent was made in 1858 via Wengernalp and the west flank. The British mountaineer Lucy Walker became the first woman to climb the Eiger in 1864. She was also the first woman to ascend various other alpine peaks, including the Matterhorn in 1871

“When I’m climbing, the only thing that matters is the ascent”

Ueli Steck has become a legendary figure in global mountaineering over the course of a decade, in particular for his rapid ascents of well-known faces, known as “speed climbing”, solo and without a rope. The star from Ringgenberg (Berne) has built his reputation on major feats that have attracted great media attention. Having smashed the speed record for the north face of the Eiger in 2007, he repeated the feat a year later in 2 hours and 47 minutes, improving his time by more than an hour. He then undertook record ascents of the north faces of the Grandes Jorasses in 2 hours 21 minutes and the Matterhorn in 1 hour 56 minutes. He is nicknamed “The Swiss Machine” because of his physical preparation and extraordinary training. In 2009, he received the “Piolet d’or” – the Oscar of mountaineering – with Simon Anthamatten for the first ascent of the north face of Tengkampoche (6,500 metres) in Nepal. In 2011, he reached the summit of Shishapangma (8,027 metres) in a record time of ten and a half hours. One of his partners in the Himalayas, the American Freddie Wilkinson, said of him: “Climbing with Ueli is like shooting hoops with Michael Jordan.” Ueli Steck is renowned for his versatility, technique, physical condition and extraordinary mental strength.

How would you describe Ueli Steck?

A Swiss mountaineer from Interlaken who attempts to climb mountains. I have a very German Swiss temperament – I like to have things under control and to do them properly. Am I reckless? I don’t believe I take excessive risks. I’ve always said that I don’t do extreme mountaineering. The challenges I undertake are always controlled.

You are one of the few mountaineers to climb above 8,000 metres without oxygen. How do you prepare your body to endure such altitudes?

It’s a question of acclimatisation. The body has to become accustomed to the altitude. It’s the same for everyone. It’s more a matter of patience than training.

When you climb with a partner, is there a reason for not going solo?

That’s something completely different. When climbing solo, it’s just you and the mountain. When I climb with a partner, we take decisions together. Ultimately, it’s the team that matters. It’s not a question of safety. With 8,000-metre-plus climbs, you ascend more quickly solo and speed is a safety factor.



Ueli Steck

Do you sometimes get frightened?

Not on the mountain. Beforehand, yes, I do. But not during the ascent. I train to the point where I’m able to control the situation.

What do you think about when climbing?

When I’m climbing, the only thing that matters is the ascent. I’m fully focussed on the grips and my hands and feet. I’m completely immersed in the moment. That’s my main source of satisfaction when I’m climbing.

Where does your passion for speed climbing come from?

Speed climbing originated in the 1980s with the French climbers and their incredible enchainment climbs. But it’s also part of the history of mountaineering – the aim has always been to reach the summit as quickly as possible. I’m always looking for new challenges and one day I gave it a go.

You’re now 35 years of age. Do you plan to continue speed climbing?

Speed climbing solo is very dangerous. You can push back the boundaries but sooner or later you have to accept that you can’t go any faster or higher. You have to do other things. My days of speed climbing in the Alps are over. Time for the next challenge!

Who inspires you?

My idol is Walter Bonatti (Italian mountaineer, explorer and reporter). Not just for mountaineering but for everything he did.

What does your plan to climb Everest involve exactly?

We’ll have to wait and see but it essentially involves reaching the summit without oxygen. However, it depends on whether the mountain affords us the opportunity or not (he had to turn back at 8,700 metres in May 2011). I’m setting off for the Himalayas on 5 April and plan to return in June.

Have you already made plans for after the Himalayas?

I’ve got plenty of ideas but when I get back the first thing I’ll be doing is building a house in Ringgenberg with my wife.

Which are your favourite mountains?

The Eiger, obviously. In the Himalayas, Cholatse is another mountain that remains close to my heart (6,444 metres, first solo ascent of the north face in 37 hours in 2005).

What’s your philosophy?

Everyone has to choose their path in life and decide what they want to do. You then have to stick to that path.

Information on Steck’s projects at www.uelisteck.ch

famous of them was Johann Coaz from Grisons. In 1850, his rope team was the first to reach Piz Bernina (4,048 metres, Grisons), the highest peak in the eastern Alps.

“But it was the British who introduced mountaineering as a sport”, Daniel Anker explains. “They started climbing in Switzerland in the 1840s.” Switzerland’s highest peak, the Dufourspitze (4,633 metres), was conquered in 1855. Anker adds: “This was the start of the golden age of mountaineering, which came to an end in 1865 with the first ascent of the Matterhorn. Most of Switzerland’s highest summits were reached during this ten-year period.” The British received all the accolades but it was Swiss guides who paved the way for them. “This is explained by the fact that the first histories were written by the British. The name of the client came first. In the case of the Matterhorn, the name of Edward Whymper is entered first, then the guides are mentioned”, Anker explains. When all the summits had been conquered, new, ever more challenging routes were sought. Ascents were then also undertaken in winter. Women’s tours and ascents on skis were later introduced. Last came solo ascents. The “final three Alpine challenges”, the north faces of the Matterhorn (4,478 metres), the Grandes Jorasses (4,208 metres) and the Eiger (3,975 metres),

were conquered in 1931, 1935 and 1938, respectively, by European rope parties. The challengers included a legendary figure in women’s mountaineering, Loulou Boulaz (1908–1991) from Geneva.

Swiss mountaineers take on the world

Swiss climbers soon took an interest in the highest peaks on every continent. Everest (8,848 metres), for example, conquered by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953, was almost reached six months earlier by two rope teams from Geneva who were forced to turn back just 250 metres from the summit. Hillary did not set out on his journey without first obtaining vital information gathered by the Swiss. In 1956, Ernst Reiss and Fritz Luchsinger became the first men to climb Lhotse (8,516 metres), the fourth-highest peak in the world. The first ascent of Aconcagua (6,962 metres), the highest peak in the Andes, was made by the guide Matthias Zurbriggen in 1896. Countless Swiss climbers have scaled mountains worldwide, and it would take a book to chronicle all their achievements. However, Lorenz Saladin (1896–1936) and his expeditions in the Caucasus Mountains, Michel Piola and the new routes on the Mont Blanc massif, and Michel Vaucher and his many first ascents – including Dhaulagiri (8,172 metres),

the world’s seventh-highest peak, in 1960 – are especially worthy of mention. His wife, Yvette, also became a major figure in female mountaineering. We should also mention Erhard Loretan (1959–2011), who became the third mountaineer to climb all 14 peaks over 8,000 metres.

The glory of the Eiger

The great names in Swiss mountaineering today include Ueli Steck and Stephan Siegrist from Berne, the three Anthamatten brothers from Zermatt, Denis Burdet from Neuchâtel and Nina Cabrez from Grisons. Daniel Anker explains: “These young climbers take on extremely difficult new routes. We can talk about mountaineering and Swiss alpine tourism in terms of four main peaks – the Rigi or Titlis in central Switzerland, the Jungfrau (where tourism began and the first difficult ascents were made), the Matterhorn and, of course, the Eiger, which is an extremely challenging peak. In the case of the Eiger, new routes are still being opened up for two reasons – the size of its face (1,800 metres) and the regard mountaineers have for it. To say you have climbed the north face of the Eiger carries more gravitas than climbing any other face.”

ALAIN WEY is an editor at “Swiss Review”



On the steep face, every step and every grip require careful consideration