

# Peak Condition

Top climber Andrew Lock has safely scaled some of the most dangerous mountains on the planet. As a result, he's living life out of the spotlight.

**A**NDREW LOCK is in the absurd position of being "in obscurity" because he's exceptionally successful at what he does. Makes no sense? Well, consider this: Lock is Australia's most accomplished mountaineer. He's summited 12 of the world's 14 peaks that rise into the "death zone" – above 8000m. He's climbed Everest twice. He's the only Australian to have conquered the 8091m peak of Annapurna in Nepal. By March next year, he plans to have topped both Shishapangma (8027m, China) and Makalu (8463m, China/Nepal). That will complete "The 14." No Australian climber has a record that even approaches Lock's. Mike Broom is the next closest – he summited six of the 14 before retiring. Lock stands above mountaineering in this country like Bradman does our cricket. And this is why you don't know him.

If Lock had made a mistake and had got caught on a mountain; if his energy had dried up and he'd collapsed and died; if his luck had ran out and he'd been buried

by an avalanche, then, perhaps, you'd know his name. But because he reaches peaks and gets down safely, because he hasn't lost even a digit to frostbite, Lock is anonymous. It's a reality that grates. "Bloody oath, it's frustrating," he says.

On this flat, hot continent we want drama stories not climbing stories, incidents not achievements. By and large, we don't even credit mountaineering as a sport. We tend to see it as an unhealthy obsession for those with the time, the money and the inclination to risk death in the pursuit of obscure achievements. It's crazy and self-indulgent, right? It's an attitude that fosters ignorance of an incredible sport.

"People in Australia have only heard of Everest," says Lock. "Some people who are in the game have heard of K2, but that's about it. First question I get is, 'Have you climbed Everest?' I say, 'Yes', and that's the end of the conversation. Tell them I've climbed 12 of the 14 8000m summits and they're like ..." He shrugs his shoulders.

But make no mistake, mountaineering is a sport – one that requires extreme levels of fitness, thought, dedication and perseverance. Every morning before work, Lock will punch out a 15km run. After work, he'll usually attack a climbing wall, visit a gym or do another run. On weekends, he likes catching a train to the southern edge of the Royal National Park, 32km south of Sydney, loading up a 15kg pack and running 35km to the park's northern boundary.

"High altitude mountaineering is about legs and lungs," he says, so the goal is to go hard and long. Recently, Lock did a VO2 max test in Canada. His figures showed that he had the same lung capacity as elite marathon runners.

And that's just the training. Once Lock is on a mountain, in the "death zone", the real work starts.

"It feels like you have a plastic bag over your head and there's one hole that you're

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trying to breathe through," he says. "You're puffing and panting but you can't get the satisfaction from the oxygen that you're craving. You feel physically starved and your brain is just buzzing because it can't get oxygen. I'm used to it now, but it's an unsettling feeling to begin with."

While sucking in just teaspoons of oxygen, mountaineers are often forced to churn out up to 12 hours of climbing a day, shackled to exacting timetables. They're in a state of constant vigilance, acutely aware of the dangers around them. At night, they're attuned to every noise; sleep is impossible. It's a wearing combination of physical exhaustion and mental tension, grinding over three or four days. Lock says the only way to deal with it is to slot into "a mental zone of just continuing, going step after step after step. You see the mountain, ever so slowly, dropping away beneath you. It's the most euphoric feeling."

The exertion ravages the body. When Lock came off K2, he slept for four days straight, waking only to drink water and go to the toilet. A month later, he was still sleeping more than 12 hours a day.

Mountaineering may be crazy and the euphoria of success may be a self-indulgence, but don't assume it's somehow less than sport. And just because Lock



is our most achieved mountaineer, don't assume that he hasn't suffered the same type of incidents that have put other climbers in the news.

In '05, he organised an ascent of Annapurna by its north face. It's the tenth highest peak in the world, but the one regarded as the most lethal, with a tally of 53 deaths from 130 ascents. It's a mess of cliffs, ravines and huge icy sweeps. But it's the mount's monstrous seracs (cliffs of glacial ice) that cause most alarm.

"From time to time, the face of a serac just carves off," says Lock. "You get an avalanche that can be anything from a few tonnes of ice to thousands of tonnes. Annapurna is constantly swept by these avalanches. It's Russian roulette. You can't predict a serac avalanche."

High on the mountain, between camp two and three, Lock heard a serac "let go."

He unclipped himself from

his rope and dived behind a low ice wall. The avalanche – a 30-second wave of ice – rolled safely over the top. Below him, however, four of his party were caught in a narrow ice gully. The wave hit them and carried them 400m down the mountain. Lock remembers three of them were "busted up pretty badly." By this he means broken shoulders, arms and jaws. The fourth had massive head injuries. When Lock noticed this climber choosing to lie on his broken left shoulder, rather than his right side, Lock realised that the climber had serious internal injuries, too. For two hours they stabilised the man, before making a makeshift sled and towing him back to camp ... where he promptly died.

Earlier this year, Lock returned to Annapurna. He reached the summit on May 24. To hit the peak, the climbers had to individually straddle a knife-edge ridge, with a 4000m drop beneath their feet. When Lock eventually got off the mountain, he felt a euphoria born of both the successful climb and the knowledge that he would never have to set foot on Annapurna again.

But to hear Lock talk about that failed

'05 expedition provides a telling insight into the mind of the mountaineer. He is matter-of-fact. He admits that one of his first thoughts after his colleague died was that they should head back up the mountain because "that was one less avalanche that was going to come down that face."

It's an objectivity that's uncomfortable in its coldness. But it's an objectivity born of having seen numerous friends go up mountains and not come back. As he says: "There's no point even thinking about climbing 8000m peaks if you aren't prepared for some casualties along the way." It's the attitude that's carried him to the top of his sport.

Lock admits to fierce superstitions. Every time he talks about his push for "the 14" he mutters "touch wood" and taps his forehead. He wears a mess of Buddhist prayer strings around his neck. He carries two lucky charms – a reindeer and a small, carved bear – on each expedition. Lock knows that mountaineering is a fine balancing act between success and failure, life and death, anonymity and notoriety. Perhaps it's a good thing that Andrew Lock is "in obscurity."

– Aaron Scott



Climbing Kangchenjunga, the world's third-highest mountain and part of the Super 14.