

His new route on the South Face of Annapurna is destined to be remembered as one of the milestones of modern alpinism. In March this year Ueli Steck, 37, was awarded a Piolets d'Or – the Golden Ice Axe – mountaineering's highest accolade, for his Annapurna climb. He soloed the 8091m peak in a 28-hour round trip, down-climbing most of the route. Steck, aka 'the Swiss Machine', has been labelled a 'game changer' for reinventing alpinism. He doesn't just get to the top, he does it as quickly as he possibly can; routes that take normal human beings four days, take him just three hours. Steck's Annapurna climb was an outstanding achievement but one he has little to say about; "It creates so much noise and problems. So many people are making a mess of it, so from my point of view it's better not saying anything. You can take what you need about it from my website..."

Annapurna

So, to recap: Annapurna is considered to be one of the most dangerous mountains in the world to climb, with a 38 percent fatality rate. In October last year, Steck soloed a new route (without the supplementary oxygen that's commonly used when climbing over 7500m) and completing the line attempted in 1992 by Pierre Beghin and Jean-Christophe Lafaille on the left side of the wall, between the 1970 British route and the 1981 Japanese route. The two French climbers had reached about 7200m when Beghin fell and Lafaille had to down-climb the face with virtually no gear. Steck summited the peak in the middle of the night after one long day of climbing, and descended the same route by down-climbing and a few rappels. He returned to the foot of the wall just 28 hours after leaving.

On his website he describes the climb: "Step by step I moved on. I kept telling myself 'Just fight, just fight'. Again and again. When I reached the summit ridge I could hardly believe it. It was night, the sky full of stars and the ridge going down in front of me. With my altimeter I checked everything very carefully, I followed the ridge and I knew: I was on the highest point. I spent not even five minutes up there before I started to descend. I was still full of tension. My goal was to reach the bergschrund. Then everything would be fine! Tenji, Don and Dan meet me at the glacier. They had followed me the entire time while I was climbing. Now they came towards me. Tenji had a Coke, bread and an apple for me. It is simply great. I made it. Everything is over now. From now the others make the decisions. The tension gets less."

Steck had started the route at 5.30a.m. on October 8th but his Canadian partners, including photographer Dan Patitucci, decided they weren't up for the route that day. Steck told the team that he would climb to Camp 1 at 6100m to acclimatise. Patitucci wrote in his blog: "I could see he was in a different mental place, more serious, focused to begin something so severe there are only a few on the planet who could even contemplate such a thing: to solo an 8000m peak via a new line, with >



Ueli Steck

After completing one of the greatest solo climbs in mountaineering history on Annapurna, we catch up with the man they call 'The Swiss Machine'...

Steck on the Mönch, in his native Switzerland



“Step by step I moved on. I kept telling myself ‘Just fight, just fight’. Again and again. When I reached the summit ridge I could hardly believe it...”

only a small pack, and without oxygen.” In his final push, Steck carried only a pocketful of energy bars, a bottle of water, a headlamp, an abseil rope and ice axes. He didn’t sleep and there was nothing to fix him to the mountain. He subjected himself to maximum exposure and one mistake would probably have meant death. Ueli later said that conditions were “one in a hundred years” on the face, making for quicker and more secure climbing than bare rock. Two weeks after his climb, the French team of Stéphane Benoist and Yannick Graziani repeated Steck’s route up Annapurna’s South Face with a few variations. It took them eight days.

HIGH ACHIEVER

The accomplishment is certainly in line with Steck’s others: in addition to setting speed records on the north faces of the Eiger, Matterhorn, and

Grandes Jorasses, he soloed the south face of Shishapangma (8013m) in just 10.5 hours in 2011. But Annapurna was clearly a new level. He writes in his blog: “I think I finally found my high altitude limit. If I climb anything harder than that, I think I will kill myself. To climb something technical in a cool style like that is what I wanted to do.”

So has he reached a point where he wants to stop these speed ascents? “I don’t want to, but I know I can’t push as far on what I did on Annapurna. You can’t push more or you won’t survive. So my goals will now be different and I have to think about how I can move on with climbing so I will progress. But I know I cannot top Annapurna anymore as it’s super dangerous.” But in the recently released book from Patagonia, ‘Training for the New Alpinism’ by Steve House and Scott Johnston, Steck states that he needs to have a clear goal: “It’s important in life that you feel you’ve progressed and I try to progress in my life... I feel like this about many goals I want to reach but it has to be a progression.” So what is climbing for him? “A continuous development.”

In the book he states he is a control freak: “That’s my personality, I control situations in my life. There are a lot of things in life you can’t control and this is hard for me to accept.” Yet he also states that he is a coward: “Yes, I’m really like that. I can only manage to get over that by training a lot and trying to control it. That’s why I need control and that’s why I get scared – I need to know what can happen. Many people, I think, they really love the unknown. This is not my way. I love to have it under control. Every person is different – again, you have to decide for yourself.”

The former carpenter who never aspired to become a mountain guide, but wanted to ‘just do sport’ made his first serious solo ascent on the Eiger at the age of 18, and continues to take nothing for granted. His version of extreme alpinism – fast and light – is therefore far from carefree. His ascents require meticulous planning and attention to detail, and it’s understandable why Steck is a self-confessed training junkie.

NORTH FACES

Training for a north face requires a very different kind of endurance: “Like every athlete, there is no average day – your work depends on your project and it moves on. It’s a lot of running, weight lifting, climbing, it’s so many things together and it changes as you have to work in periods, not a particular day. If you look at other training schedules, it’s like this. I do a lot of six-week periods then it changes, it’s not 365 days a year. There is also a lot of planning. Then you have to adapt as something may go differently to what you expect. You need a lot of flexibility as well.” In fact, Steck has a coach who monitors his fitness levels and provides new stimuli to his training regime. He often paces himself against a friend who holds the Swiss record for 10,000m.

Given all this, why does Steck not want to talk about Annapurna: “I just climb what I feel like for myself it’s something that I’m interested in and I’m not interested in drama and everything else – I just do what I feel like doing. If somebody is interested and wants to write about it, that’s fine, but it’s not my motivation.” The ascent was also mired in controversy; doubters claimed he had no proof of his climb. Steck didn’t have a photo

of the summit; his altimeter had broken during his ascent; and he hadn’t used a GPS tracker, all of which are accepted means of documenting such a climb. The only proof was Steck’s word. Steck says his camera was knocked out of his hand by a small avalanche that nearly swept him off the mountain during his ascent: “A couple of hours before at daylight I wanted to photograph the headwall in order to have an overview picture at night. I was hit by spindrift and I had to grasp my ice gear in order not get knocked out of the wall. In this way I lost one of my down gloves and my camera was thrown off the wall. Now I had to climb with my finger gloves. The down glove which was left I wore once on my left hand and then on my right hand – depending on the cold of each hand.”

Ultimately, the Piolet d’Or judges had no doubt that Steck had accomplished the climb. He gave a detailed description of his route, which was corroborated by Benoist and Graziani. Photographers at the base camp tracked his progress until nightfall with a telephoto lens, and Sherpas reported seeing the glow of his headlamp just below the summit. It’s also in line with his other speed ascents and after all, the Charter of Piolets d’Or does not mention the need to provide evidence for climbs.

“What happened is perhaps partly my fault,” writes Steck in his blog. I’m not someone who likes to brag, because climbing mountains brings nothing to humanity. So I’ve always done what I thought was right: I give details of my ascents when asked to do so, and nobody, to date, has vehemently criticised me for not providing evidence. And Steck doesn’t have any incentive to lie about either. He says he doesn’t particularly care >

A photograph of Ueli Steck sitting inside an orange tent on a high-altitude mountain peak. He is wearing a red jacket, black pants, and a black beanie with white sunglasses. The tent has "MOUNTAIN HARD WEAR" written on it. The background shows a vast, snow-covered mountain range under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The ground is rocky and partially covered in snow.

Back in the Himalaya:
Steck on Ama Dablam

“I know I can’t push as far on what I did on Annapurna. You can’t push more or you won’t survive. So my goals will now be different and I have to think about how I can move on with climbing so I will progress. But I know I cannot top Annapurna anymore as it’s super dangerous.”

what others think, he climbs for himself and the joy of the sport. “I’m still motivated to go out and climb and I will keep climbing – it’s what I love; being out there and having a challenge. It’s very, very important to have a challenge.” Steck says he wasn’t really surprised by the controversy that enveloped him: “There’s a lot of jealous people. It’s the downside of fame, of being successful. Being awarded the piolet – it’s a really nice prize and an honor, and means a lot to me. Many may not agree and there is always controversy, you can agree or disagree.” So, does he think he’s been criticised unfairly? “I think that’s what happens to everybody who stands out and does something different to others and that’s why you get picked on and you have to except it. Criticism is also something of an honour – it means you’re doing something better than they’ve done...”

HIGH TENSION

This was not Steck’s first brush with controversy. In May 2013, he was involved in a much-publicised altercation with Sherpas on Mount Everest. Steck and teammate Simone Moro were accused of offending Sherpas while climbing. When they descended to camp, an angry mob gathered and began attacking the team. Believing their lives were in jeopardy, the westerners fled down the mountain. Ueli is vague about plans to return to Everest. “You never know...” he says, “It still has its appeal. It’s the highest mountain in the world so it won’t lose its appeal, and people won’t want to stop climbing it.”

Another proponent of the fast and light style of ascent is Killian Jornet. Jornet’s pioneered a hybrid running and climbing approach to mountaineering and set records in the process, as well as being subjected >



“Alpinism is risky no matter what; you can’t measure what is more dangerous. In certain ways it’s safer to be solo, in others it’s more dangerous than having a rope.”

to criticism. Jornetts quest for bigger challenges is leading him from speed running into alpinism. He aims to set speed records on a range of mountains across the globe, with his final aim of Everest in 2015, by the Holbein or Norton Couloir. However, the press were quick to criticise when he had to be rescued from the Aiguille du Midi in Chamonix after the weather deteriorated. He was making a run to the north face on the Frendo Spur track, and took the wrong route. Steck doesn’t really have much to say about Jornet: “You can’t compare him to me. He’s a runner, I operate on more technical terrain, I don’t know what his project is on Everest, I still have my project – but I don’t know what he’d like to do.”

Steck says he wouldn’t necessarily encourage or discourage others to climb like him. Proponents of this fast-and-light style say it minimises exposure to risk because a climber spends less time on the mountain.

They also say it is a cleaner and purer style of mountaineering because equipment isn’t left on the mountain and high altitude porters or supplementary oxygen are not used. “Alpinism is risky no matter what; if you solo a route or not, you can never measure the risk,” says Steck. “You can’t measure what is more dangerous. In certain ways it’s safe to be solo, in others it’s more dangerous than having a rope – you can’t generalise how dangerous it is, you can’t tell. You need to find your own personal goal, it does not make sense to do stuff because others have done it.”

So, what is next for Steck? “Now I try to train and get back in shape and basically have time to train and climb... I’ve no plans, plans always change.” He recently told Epic TV that he was going to take it a bit easier this year, work on his rock climbing and go on holiday with his wife. However, this doesn’t really seem to be the case. In March, he

and Michi Wohlleben linked the three classic north faces of the Tre Cime di Lavaredo. Starting up the Cassin route on Cima Ovest at 8.30am, they then climbed the Comici line on Cima Grande and finished with the Innerkofler on Cima Piccola. It took them 15 hours 42 minutes. “It was an impulse, a cool idea,” says Steck, “When (Michi) came up with the idea he called me a week before and I was psyched to try it and we had a lot of fun.”

I wonder if there is anything outside of training that interests Steck: “There is no time for anything else, there is not much time left in my days except for training.” ■ T&M

Ueli Steck is sponsored by Mountain Hardware – for more information, go to www.mountainhardware.eu