

One less hill to climb

Age, Everest no obstacle to man's commitment to better health

JASON NOTTE
 jason.notte@metro.us

This 69-year-old man is in better shape than you are.

Though slightly rattled by a persistent cough, Werner Berger is a tanned, lean, vibrant specimen of human being forged from years of activity. And that cough? A high-altitude hack brought on by days of breathing thin, cold air en route to the summit of Mount Everest on May 22 — when the South African-born Canadian became the oldest person to reach the top.

Now Berger and director **Randall Blaum** are looking to make that ascent and the testimony of several experts into a documentary assailing the state of physical health in North America — from lack of exercise to decreasing vitamin content in produce and popular supplements.

If the energy he displayed in his interview with Metro was any indication, prepare to have a near-septuagenarian make you feel old.

When did you decide you were going to make this documentary?

Berger: About three and a half to four months before I went to climb, we decided on doing it.

Blaum: John Griber — who is an athlete for North Face and is a snowboarder, skier and one of the top high-altitude cinematographers —

not only had to summit Mount Everest, he had to do it bigger, better and faster than the rest of the team while carrying all the camera gear.

Some people spend a whole lifetime of mountaineering preparing for Everest. How did you prepare for it?

Berger: One step at a time. I came back from trekking in that region and just wanted to go higher and more remote. I decided one way of learning to climb would be to go up Mount McKinley with a guided company. They immediately said, "you don't have enough experience to climb this mountain; go to a mountaineering school on Mount Rainier for a week and then reapply," believing that I wouldn't do so and would have had enough on Rainier. But I did that and reapplied.

How did you fare afterward?

Berger: I went and climbed McKinley in 1996, but did not get to the summit because when we got to the summit ridge 20 minutes from the top the weather was so hard that we had to abort. That was my first serious attempt at a mountain. I went back to McKinley in 2000, got stuck in high camp for nine days in blizzard conditions, ran out of food, ran out of fuel and had to escape down. I went back in 2006 and finally summited the sucker. In the interim, I got to thinking about doing the Seven

Summits — the seven highest points on the seven continents, and my first real accomplishment was in 2002 when I climbed up Aconcagua [in Argentina]. I've since done all seven, with Everest being the last.

Why, at this age, has this become such an important thing to accomplish?

Berger: After I came back from trekking in the Everest area, I found that every time people asked about it or I really reflected on it, this glow came over me. Three years ago, there was a shift when I talked to my son and a group of other people that I started calling "my board" about not just climbing Everest for the sake of climbing Everest but potentially leaving a legacy as a result — having it mean something. What struck us was, with my age, I'm hoping to be a model for health. When you look at the health in North America, it's really awful. When you think of 60 percent of people being overweight and 25 percent being clinically obese and you have the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control saying that 80 percent of people die of degenerative diseases, something is wrong. Nobody wants to change their lifestyle in a significant way, but if you show them that this is what you can do, maybe it will snap them out of this malaise around health care.

Was Everest the most

challenging?

Berger: If you took all my climbs together and multiplied it by 10, it would be beyond that.

"[I was] always being active in some kind of sport: Squash, tennis, snow skiing, scuba diving. Anything related to physical activity. When Mount Rainier came around, it wasn't such a massive shift, just a shift to a different activity."

Werner Berger



From left, director **Randall Blaum**, cinematographer John Griber and climber Werner Berger (in purple coat) take on Mount Everest for the upcoming documentary "Meet Me At The Top," which is slated for release in spring of 2008.