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# Everest guy, 69: I haven't peaked yet!

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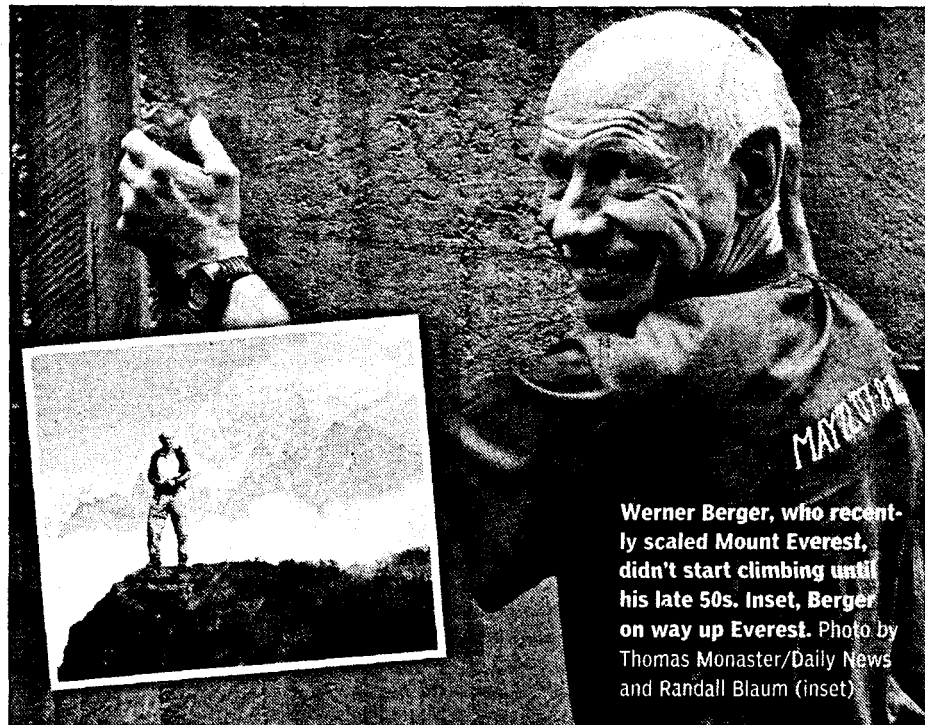
IT'S BEEN TWO weeks since Werner Berger stood on top of the world, and he's still flying high.

When he summited Mount Everest on May 22, the 69-year-old became the oldest North American to reach the top of all seven continents' tallest peaks.

"It's almost surreal," Berger said yesterday at the

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Daily News, a day after he returned from his adventure. "Was I really on top? Did I really accomplish this?"

Berger was coughing hard from having spent more than a month breathing Everest's cold, dry air. But his blue eyes sparkled as he recalled feeling the "total elation" of standing 29,029 feet above sea level, "seeing the whole world at



Werner Berger, who recently scaled Mount Everest, didn't start climbing until his late 50s. Inset, Berger on way up Everest. Photo by Thomas Monaster/Daily News and Randall Blaum (inset)

360 degrees and huge mountains as little dwarfs."

It was all the more special because Berger, a corporate consultant from outside Toronto, didn't even start climbing until he was in his late 50s.

Before Everest, the world's tallest, he climbed Mounts McKinley (U.S.), Aconcagua (Argentina), Kilimanjaro (Africa), Elbrus (Russia) and Kosciuszko (Australia) and Vinson Massif (Antarctica).

He trained for Everest for months, climbing in and out of a 50-foot-deep sand

pit with an 80-pound backpack.

His midlife hobby came "out of nowhere," Berger said, "from someone saying, 'Picture doing something that you don't think you'll ever do but would love to do.'"

Mindful of the "real spark" he felt as a teenager when Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay became the first people to climb Everest, Berger imagined hitting its base camp and climbing the Matterhorn and Kilimanjaro.

A guided tour initially re-

jected his bid to climb McKinley, in part, he learned later, because of his age. But Berger didn't give up. Now, "I don't consider my age in terms of my climbing," he said. "Sometimes I have the sense that I'm as strong as I was at 28."

A documentary film about his adventure is planned for next spring.

"Everyone has their own Everest to climb. How can we support them to conquer that?" he said. "If it makes a difference, this is worthwhile."

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