

# Ershlers complete Seven Summits with Everest climb

**P**HIL AND SUSAN ELLERMAN ERSHLER can scratch one more thing off their “to do” list. On May 16 they conquered 29,035-foot Mount Everest and became the first husband-wife team to top the Seven Summits together. (See box.)

The Ershlers’ quest to successfully scale the tallest peaks on each continent began in 1992 on Mount Kilimanjaro. Having scaled six other peaks since then, Mount Everest was their final and most formidable obstacle. In fact, the Kirkland, Washington, couple had been thwarted during a 2001 expedition just 1,500 feet from Everest’s apex. When Phil’s corneas began to freeze, he and his wife had no choice but to turn back. A second opportunity to subdue the world’s tallest mountain together came last spring. Weather conditions were favorable. They made their final ascent from the 26,000-foot level and reached the top at 10:20 a.m. Nepal time.

Sue vividly remembers the failed attempt two years earlier. The wind was blowing. Light snow was falling. Lightning flashed off in the distance. The elements and bitter cold temperature impaired Phil’s vision.

“We need to go down, can you live with that?” the veteran mountain climber and professional guide asked his wife.

“I was happy that we were alive, safe, and together, but disappointed that we were not successful,” she recalled recently.

During a 20-year career in telecommunications, first with GTE—now Verizon—and later with Quest, she had risen to sales leadership positions. Ascending the hierarchy of corporate affairs, she learned lessons that have served her in pursuit of mountaintops. Never quit. Try to figure out what you can learn from disappointment and rejections. Move on. Failure is just a requirement to attain loftier goals.

“I wrote down my climbing goals and looked at them every day until they became do-able,” Sue explained. Completing the Everest ascent became a high priority. She even left her job to focus single-mindedly on a second assault.

Phil, an owner of International Mountain Guides based in Ashford, Washington, has been guiding climbers up mountains around the world

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**Phil and Sue Ershler conquered Mount Everest on May 16.**

for a quarter century. His credentials include 400 climbs on Mount Rainier. He was the first American to conquer Mount Everest’s North Face in 1984, and he completed the Seven Summits in 1989. He met Sue in 1992 and introduced her to a new vocabulary—“ascenders,” “carabiners,” and “crampons.” She didn’t know how the climbing devices were used but was eager to find out. That summer, she accepted his invitation to climb Rainier with him. She remembers struggling through the snow and ice and over crevasses, and finding it difficult to breathe the thin air. Nothing, however, matched her sense of accomplishment and exhilaration at standing atop the 14,410-foot Rainier.

“Nowhere in my life have I duplicated that feeling,” she says.

Since then the 1979 Washington State University business administration graduate has accomplished more than 31 successful climbs of peaks over 14,000 feet, including 17 on Mount Rainier.

She credits Phil, who graduated from Whitman College (’74 Science), with never letting her give up on herself.

“We had proven to be such a good team that we were married in 1996,” she says.

By the end of 1999, they had climbed six of the Seven Summits together, four of them while married, leaving only Everest. During their 60 days on the mountain this year, Sue celebrated her 46th birthday, and Phil his 51st. The final climb via the South Col to the summit from Camp IV at 26,000 feet and return took nearly 16 hours. It began at 11 p.m., May 15 and ended at 3 p.m. May 16.

The Everest conquest complete, Sue says she was flooded with emotions—“happiness that we made it together, excitement that I could actually achieve such a difficult climb, amazement that I was actually stepping onto the top of the world, and concern about getting back down to base camp safely.”

—Pat Caraher

## THE ERSHLERS’ SEVEN SUMMITS

- 1992 Mt. Kilimanjaro (19,340 feet), Africa
- 1993 Mt. Elbrus (18,481), Russia
- 1995 Mt. McKinley (20,320), North America
- 1996 Mt. Aconcagua (22,840), South America
- 1998 Mt. Vinson, Antarctica (16,023)
- 1999 Mt. Kosciuszko (7,310), Australia
- 2002 Mt. Everest (29,035), Asia