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The Cover

Although mountain climbing has been classified as a sport, there are formidable differences between it and other sports. While a football player may crack his ribs or a skier break his leg, a mountain climber risks losing his life for a misplaced step or an imbalanced move. In fact, one mountain climber has stated, "Mountaineering is one of the finest sports imaginable but to practise it without technique is a form of . . . suicide." Despite the risks, however, mountaineering is attracting hundreds of new enthusiasts each year. The challenge of mountaineering has even been met by such unlikely climbers as a one-armed girl who reached the summit of the Grand Teton in Wyoming, blind Colette Richard who reached the peak of Mont Blanc du Tacul in France (more than 3,900 m), and one-legged Bruno Wintersteller who has climbed some of the most hazardous routes in Europe.

The dangers associated with mountain climbing include temperature drops of as much as 32 C in two hours, avalanches, lightning, mists that obscure landmarks, darkness, fatigue, and hypothermia. In addition to these, Charles Houston, MD, discusses the problems of high altitude mountain sickness (p 2193). Dr Houston's first-hand knowledge of mountaineering stems from expeditions in Alaska, India, and the Himalayas. Gradual acclimatization, the key to preventing high altitude sickness, has contributed toward the successful climbing of Mt Everest without the aid of oxygen tanks, despite the warnings from physiologists in the 1920s that a man would die from a night spent without oxygen at 7,500 m.

When asked, "Why climb Everest?" George Leigh Mallory, who died in an attempt to reach its peak, responded, "Because it is there." Mountain climber Steve Komito of Estes Park, Colo, when asked why he climbs mountains, responded, "Because it's there? No. Because I'm not." (Photograph © H. Armstrong Roberts).

—WILMA GEHRET FAST

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