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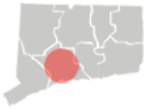
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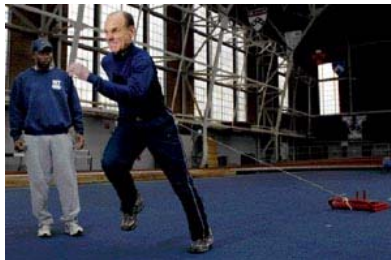
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Hamden man will climb North America's highest peak to raise money for breast cancer research

By Mary E. O'Leary, Register Topics Editor



Lew Nescott Jr. pulls a weighted sled inside Yale University's Cox Cage as part of his training regimen, supervised by Yale track coach Marc Davis, left. (Peter Hvizdak/Register)

NEW HAVEN — Lew Nescott Jr. is the kind of guy you want on your team — driven, focused and at the top of his game.

Following a rigorous year of physical training, the senior research analyst in Yale University's Office of Development will board a flight to Alaska in late June to join three guides and eight fellow mountaineers where they will spend up to 22 days climbing Mount McKinley, the tallest peak in North America.

While Mount Everest is the highest in the world, McKinley

has a greater elevation gain from base camp to the 20,320-foot summit, is more northerly, and therefore colder, and perhaps more importantly, there are no Sherpas to haul all the gear the team will need.

To this end, you can find Nescott, 53, of Hamden every morning, pre-dawn, running laps in a field outside Yale University's Cox Cage before he goes inside to navigate the bleachers with a 60 pound pack on his back, while dragging a sled weighing 80 pounds.

After a full day of work, he heads to the Payne Whitney Gym to climb more stairs and hit the weight room.

The climb is not only a personal challenge, it is a fund-raiser for breast cancer research sponsored by the Yale Cancer Center and partly underwritten by New Haven outdoor gear retailer Trailblazer, which made a significant contribution to the equipment Nescott will need.

Every year, the cancer center will have an athlete either running or walking to raise money for research, but this climbing event is a first.

"I'm doing this for the women I have loved, for all women everywhere who battle this disease," Nescott said. While he is reluctant to share details, Nescott said the disease has affected friends and family.

"I can't imagine what it is like for a woman to walk down the corridor (for treatment,) but I can tell you what it is like to sit on the other end in the doctor's office and simply wait there and do nothing. So, this climb is about trying to do something," Nescott said.

Marc Davis, the track coach at Yale, started training Nescott last summer.

"I'm used to speed and power type of guys and he is all about endurance. He is a completely different type of athlete," said Davis. Advertisement

And while Nescott was always in good shape, Davis said his pupil has done a body transformation in a year, becoming slimmer and much stronger.

"Marc is an out of the box thinker," Nescott said of this trainer. "If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be climbing McKinley."

Nescott leaves from Bradley International Airport on June 22 and will start the adventure on June 25 with guides from Rainier Mountaineering Inc., moving through seven camps with the group roped together as they traverse the lower glacier before transitioning to the medical camp at 14,000 feet for the ascent to the summit.

The glacier part of the climb involves starting at midnight so as to cross at the coldest point of a 24-hour period. Nescott said.

"When the sun hits the glacier, you have to worry about crevices and snow bridges melting. Enough weight and it can collapse. It's very dangerous," Nescott said.



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"You better be prepared. You better bring you're A-game. This is a very serious mountain," he said.

The climb on the upper mountain starts around 7 a.m. daily up to 4 p.m. with a break every two hours to rest and hydrate on this stormy, cold place where temperatures can drop to 40 degrees below zero.

With hurricane type winds and a fickle weather pattern that can delay the adventure for days, climbers often have to hold up in snow caves they assemble themselves until it is safe to move on.



Nescott said he can control his conditioning and counts on the team leaders to make good decisions, "but in the end you can't control the weather."

The window to climb McKinley is small, from May to July, and Nescott's team is the last scheduled for this season.

Nescott didn't start climbing until he was 46, but he has several serious ascents on his mountaineering resume, including Mount Demavand, Iran at 18,601 feet and Mount Elbrus in the Central Caucasus, Russia, whose summit is 18,481 feet.

The development officer said the extreme environment on these mountains, which makes breathing and sleeping difficult in the oxygen-thin air, takes you out of your comfort zone.

But Nescott finds the overall experience enlivening as you have to remain focused and vigilant at all times.

"Anything that someone says during a climb matters because it could involve a question of safety. You listen at a level that you don't always listen at sea level. Your body is almost like a machine. You have to be aware of it and attend to particular parts of it to make sure that you can keep functioning," he said.

He said one of his team members is a medical student and another is a nurse. While the guides are well trained to watch for serious physical problems that might arise, such as high altitude pulmonary edema and cerebral edema, which can kill a climber in a matter of days.

In one study, four out of every 100 climbers on McKinley, which is also known by its native name of Denali, come back with some physical change, ranging from frostbite to broken bones to cerebral edema. Close to 100 have died attempting to scale it in the last century.

A Pennsylvania native, Nescott came to Yale in 1988, where he produced a documentary on "Awakening and Enlightenment," as the associate administrator of the works of Jonathan Edwards.

He earned two degrees at the Yale Divinity School along the way — a master of divinity and a master of arts in religion — and has been working at the university's development office since 1991.

A deeply spiritual man, Nescott said he will do "everything I can to get to the summit on behalf of all and for all and that is really the mission in my heart" a phrase pulled from his Orthodox Church in America liturgy.

But he is realistic, and said the most important thing is safety.

"Summitting is optional; coming home is mandatory. That's it. It's that simple. Where you put your foot is your summit," Nescott said.

Nescott said this year is one of transition for him, as he struggles with some personal issues, which have made him thankful for the focus imposed by his training regime.

"It's been a year of personal turmoil in which I am seeking some sense of peace and redemption," he said.

For the last five to six years he has been involved in some international humanitarian relief work in Russia and Iran and he is currently getting recredentialled through courses at the peacekeeping division of the United Nations. Nescott said he is considering this as new career choice.

He spoke a little of his childhood in a Russian-Ukrainian home, where there was an emphasis on blending in as Americans and a message to suppress the family's ethnic roots.

At this time in his life, Nescott wants to revisit his heritage.

"How poetic is that — trying to ascend North America's highest mountain and on a deeply personal level maybe reclaim just a part of who I am," Nescott said.

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