

Photography Eddie Safarik

AIM



# HIGH

WHAT DRIVES ALYSSA AZAR, THE YOUNGEST AUSTRALIAN TO SUMMIT EVEREST?

By Ricky French

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he perfect day begins under a full moon at 8pm on a lifeless, frozen wasteland where the human body begins to die, sometimes slowly, sometimes fast. The South Col of Mount Everest is a windswept mess of discarded oxygen bottles, rubbish, human waste and tents housing a down-suited, masked mob of high-altitude mountaineers. Welcome to the death zone – there’s no place you’d rather be. It can’t sustain life, but it somehow manages to sustain a dream. Midnight overtakes your laborious ascent, joining a queue, sometimes waiting ten minutes between steps. The rock lying in the shadows that you step over reveals itself to be a body, frozen where it fell. Come for the summit, stay for a lifetime. All going well, you’ll reach a point where every direction slopes down. On a planet of 75 billion people, no one stands taller than you.

When 19-year-old Alyssa Azar became the youngest Australian to reach the summit of Everest at 3:45am on May 21 it marked the fulfilment of a dream – a dream which had already been wrenched from her grasp twice before, in circumstances traumatic enough to make even the most hardened mountaineer reconsider the risks of Everest. The elation of her success, though, was tempered by news that another Australian, Maria Strydom, 34, had died on the mountain the next day. Alyssa saw Maria twice, the first time high on the south-east ridge; Maria was suffering altitude sickness and had called off her own summit bid. The second time was on the descent the next day, near the spot a short distance below the South Col where Maria would die soon after. Alyssa would return to Australia in triumph, finally able to show the doubters who thought she was too young to climb, too inexperienced at altitude, not strong enough, too different from other mountaineers. But her strange, isolated existence, where a single-minded fixation on one goal has left little room for human connection, raises the question of how the young mountaineer will cope should her life ever cross paths with the real world. Could the biggest danger of Everest be that the view from the top leaves you looking into a void?

**If dreams can come true at 3:45 in the morning** they can also be rudely interrupted. The alarm is cruel. My drive across the city sidles the Brisbane River, Story Bridge spanning it like a ladder laid over a bottomless crevasse. A security guard unlocks the padlock to Albion Park Raceway and a dark four-wheel-drive tails me into the car park.

Alyssa Azar alights and lithely climbs the stairs to a gym built into the grandstand. She’s a compact package of toned muscle with a hardened core, both literally and figuratively. Her dad, Glenn Azar – never far away – flicks on the lights to reveal this morning’s instruments of torture. Alyssa’s getting back into training after a short break spent processing the culmination of her Everest dream.

It’s a dream that germinated while hiking the Kokoda Track, aged eight – she was then the youngest person in the world to complete Kokoda – on an expedition led by Glenn. The 110kg ex-soldier, personal trainer, founder of a trekking business called Adventure Professionals and self-styled “success coach” is not exactly the type of person to squash your ambition, even if he could squash you with one hand. Businesses can sign up to his \$4500 one-day “Corporate Game Changer”. He’s not a guy to sit on the fence. His website’s homepage gives two options: *Inspire me*, or *No, thanks*.

I’ve rashly put my hand up to join Alyssa’s 4am workout. We have two gym sessions planned, plus a hike. This morning calls for 10 pull-ups, 50 push-ups, 10 toes to bar, followed by nine pull-ups, 45 push-ups, nine toes to bar, and so on, down to zero. Did I mention it’s 4am? *No, thanks*.

The workout was written by another ex-military man, Scott Evennett, who designed Alyssa’s training regime for Everest this year. According to Scott it’s about providing mental mountains for Alyssa to get over; writing out an impossible-looking workout and developing strategies to overcome not only the physical challenge but the much tougher mental one. “It’s blocking out the outside world, essentially, so that your only thought process is forward.”

Blocking out the outside world is one thing Alyssa Azar needs no training in. Fiercely focused, a self-confessed loner, goal-blinkered, uncompromising, naturally shy but necessarily media-savvy, she doesn’t smile easily, doesn’t do humour. She makes for subdued company as we later hike the slopes of Brisbane’s Mount Coot-tha. It’s called a “pack hike”. I assumed it meant we’d be hiking in a group, but no, it means you put a pack on your back and hike. I’m wearing Glenn’s old army pack, a veteran of 55 Kokoda trips.

“Alyssa doesn’t train with other people,” Glenn explains. I’m also warned that she doesn’t talk much when she hikes – or when she works out. To that list you could probably add, “ever”. Glenn makes up for it though. Despite his formidable exterior he’s personable, hospitable, accommodates lesser mortals with good grace. Sometimes the motivational maxims are befuddling, but his casual conversation is warm, varied and refreshingly open. He’s funded

Driven: but don't expect any small talk from Alyssa Azar



Alyssa's Everest expeditions by selling his Toowoomba gym, working round the clock and drumming up sponsors. Brand alignment is important. They turned down a substantial offer from a Queensland mining company, just when they needed the money the most. He lays it out straight: "We know who we are and what we're about."

Alyssa talks more when Glenn is around, knowing he's there to finish her sentences, pick up threads and shape the story, catch her when a question throws her off balance. Email Alyssa and Glenn might reply. Without Glenn, Alyssa retreats within herself, blocking out everything except the ground in front of her, the goal of the day.

We hit a steep section and I stride out a bit faster. I notice Alyssa has dropped back. Could it be I've outstripped the conqueror of Everest on the benign slopes of Mount Coot-tha? I turn round and see that she's stopped to put headphones on. Message received: *Less talk, more walk.*

**A book detailing the remarkable achievements** of Alyssa Azar's young life, *The Girl Who Climbed Everest*, by Sue Williams, is out on Monday. For a long time people doubted the past tense would ever make it into the title. This year was her third attempt on the 8848m peak. As Glenn says, "She got tired of being the girl trying to climb Everest."

On her first attempt, in 2014, she witnessed one of the darkest days in the history of Everest, when an avalanche killed 16 Sherpas. It ended the season for all expeditions on the Nepalese side, and sparked an uprising among Sherpas, sick of helping Westerners climb their sacred mountain. The avalanche happened early one morning in the Khumbu Icefall, near base camp; Alyssa was heading to the mess tent when the news came through. She watched helicopters fly bodies back – dead Sherpas dangling against the backdrop of their mountain goddess, Chomolungma, whom they prayed to for forgiveness prior to climbing.



In her element:  
Alyssa on Everest

In that same season an Indian girl named Malavath Purna, just shy of her 14th birthday, became the youngest person in the world to reach the summit of Everest, climbing from the more difficult Tibetan side. The Nepalese government doesn't allow climbers under 16 to attempt the summit.

A year later Alyssa was back, only to experience the devastating April 25 earthquake, again while at base camp. The quake killed almost 9000 people in Nepal and sent her home once again. Back to sea level: the lowest point of her life. For weeks she sat at home, not leaving the house. "I just didn't know what to do next, or where to go," she says. "It's hard to be at home knowing that this would have been summit week. To not be over there in those two months was incredibly difficult. I was depressed." To refocus she called on the only thing she knew was strong enough to bring herself back: her own mind. "I had to start the rebuilding process," she says.

Glenn says a common assumption is that he pushed Alyssa to take after him, tried to mould her into some sort of trophy version of himself. The truth, he says, is that he dismissed her early ambitions to walk the Kokoka Track (she first pitched the idea at age six), and only agreed to it on condition that she adhere to what he thought was an unachievable training regime. By the time she was 12 she had climbed the ten highest peaks in Australia, simply because she wasn't old enough to be allowed to climb the mountain she really desired, Africa's highest peak, Kilimanjaro. That would come two years later, when she was 14. "I was the perfect image of someone who shouldn't be doing this," says Alyssa. "I was small, blonde, a girl. But my motivation is always about the challenge. It makes me work harder."

Alyssa took up competitive boxing at age ten. Glenn remembers watching her much bigger opponent rain down blow after blow on his girl. Alyssa was crying and Glenn begged her to stop fighting, but Alyssa refused to quit. He told her the alternative then was to stop crying. "It's not like we bred her to be like this," he says. "It's just the way she is. We've got four kids; she's different to the other three, too." Alyssa's brother, Christian, born in 2004, is autistic, with a severe intellectual impairment. Alyssa took a photo of him to the summit of Everest. Glenn's love for all his children is evident, even if his unique connection is with Alyssa.

When Glenn and his wife Therese separated in 2011 Alyssa moved with Glenn while the other three kids stayed with their mother. Alyssa sees her mum and siblings regularly, and in her book dedi-

cation she pays tribute to her mum as a "tower of strength". Glenn and Alyssa share a two-bedroom apartment in Brisbane, where the blue and yellow down suit she wore to the summit of Everest hangs proudly in the garage. I prod one of the thick gloves slung over the suit, turning it over mindlessly, as though it might reveal something. I step away and Alyssa discreetly reaches over and turns the glove back the right way round.

Hidden amid the clutter of barbells, workout equipment and climbing gear is a large, framed underwater photograph. Glenn picks it up and dusts it off. It shows a 16-year-old Alyssa diving underwater with a kettlebell to help her sink, enveloped in cool blue and laced with bubbles, like clusters of pearls bursting for the surface. The photo was taken by Alyssa's older sister, Brooklyn.

Glenn runs Adventure Professionals from a rented office space in Teneriffe. Alyssa says climbing Everest wasn't motivated by it being an investment in the family business, even if bookings for treks have gone through the roof since her success on the summit. "When I prepare for something like Everest I often think of the worst case scenario, which is me lying dead on the side of the mountain. Is that worth it, just for a commercial opportunity? No. That's not worth dying for." Now that Everest is done, Alyssa says she will divide her time between her own mountaineering trips – she plans to climb the "Seven Summits" – the highest peak on every continent – and helping run Adventure Professionals. "One feeds the other," says Glenn. "It's how we can afford to do what we do."

**Alyssa first realised she was different around** the age of six. "My favourite thing to do was train. Over time I stopped caring about fitting in. I knew this was what I loved doing." She says problems at school began when she was about 12. Glenn says the problem was teachers harassing her to be normal. "We got called into the school a few times. They were worried Alyssa was depressed, saying she doesn't talk, doesn't hang out with people."

"I would use my lunchtime to do schoolwork because I'd be training after school," explains Alyssa. "I was in the office a lot because they thought it was unusual that I wasn't socialising with other kids." Were the teachers right? She shrugs her shoulders. "I told them I was training for Kilimanjaro."

Alyssa left school at 14 – "I just found school was more about the social aspect and I thought I should be there to learn" – and was home-schooled until halfway through year 11, then left the school system altogether. But the girl's no dummy. She devours books (her favourite, *Warrior Training*, by former

SAS soldier Keith Fennell, is so well read that its cover has fallen off) and is prone to bursts of unexpected lyricism, such as when she describes her perfect day: “I’d wake up some mornings at base camp and go through the [Khumbu] icefall, and I’d just think there’s nowhere I’d rather be. If I wake up and my whole day ahead is climbing to Camp Two, that’s great to me. My place is being in my bubble on the mountain. That’s my place.”

**Her quest to climb the world’s highest mountains** hasn’t been without controversy. Going in to this year’s Everest expedition Glenn and Alyssa became embroiled in a heated dispute with Ronnie Muhl, the leader of a South African expedition company called Adventures Global. Alyssa climbed with Adventures Global on Aconcagua, the highest peak in South America, in 2014, as well as on her first two Everest expeditions in 2014 and 2015. According to Muhl, the Azars still owe him around \$US10,000. Glenn Azar disputes the amount owed. But Muhl is also scathing of Alyssa’s attitude on the mountain. “It’s almost as if she has zero social skills. She’s completely selfish,” he says. “I don’t know what drives that but I think her dad has a rather large influence on her thinking and behaviour. At some point that’s got to change. She cannot go through life living the way she does at the moment.” Muhl cites Alyssa’s refusal to take part in any group activities or discussions. “After dinner she would just walk out of the dining tent without even saying goodnight to anyone. She would completely ignore everyone. It’s just not normal behaviour.”

Nima Namgyal Sherpa, one of the leaders for Asian Trekking, the company that Alyssa climbed with on this year’s expedition, says he didn’t see any of the traits Muhl described. “She’s very reserved, but I never found her selfish,” he says. “I had no problems with her attitude. She was an active follower – that is, she would

do what I told her to do. My priority was to get her up the mountain, and that’s what I did.”

But other climbers back up Muhl’s character assessment. Lisa Gering was a tent mate of Alyssa’s for two weeks in 2014 during the unsuccessful attempt on Aconcagua. “She was very distant, very unapproachable. I put in a big effort to get to know her – I mean, we were about to spend two weeks in a flipping tent together – and she just didn’t let me in. Everyone’s there to climb the mountain, but there’s a social etiquette and social context in which you climb.” Lisa says she was left mystified by Alyssa’s behaviour, and offers three explanations. “Maybe it’s because she’s young. Or maybe it’s because she’s focused. Or maybe it’s because she’s just bloody rude. I really don’t know. But I do think her dad has disempowered her to manage in this world. She can’t think on her feet.”

Alyssa maintains she gets on well with people. “I don’t try to change people. I accept people for who they are. One of the things I like about expeditions is I can be who I am. That’s my environment so why should I pretend to be someone I’m not?” Does she think she has the balance right in life? “I’m not sure about balance. I’m very much all or nothing. With Everest that was my whole life. It was who I was meant to become. This is where I’m meant to be, and that’s a really good feeling.” What was she afraid of? It’s the easiest question of all, and her favourite, because it requires a one-word answer. “Failure.”

**My work is not done. I’m strapped to something out of a James Bond film,** ominously called a “leg-press”. Glenn lifts what looks to be tractor tyres while Alyssa swings kettlebells from the floor up and over her shoulders. She’s in her element, headphones in ears, a taut, hard-muscled body contorting its way through a familiar routine. Her happy place is a house of hurt. Glenn finishes his own

workout and walks with me outside. He says the reason Alyssa doesn’t do team sports is she can’t stand it when people fail; when they aren’t as strong as her. We look back into the gym, where Alyssa has put the kettlebells aside to swat at a boxing speed ball, unblinking eyes staring it down, hardened knuckles jabbing it in a steady, syncopated rhythm: *puck puck puck puck*. “She’s just different,” her dad concedes. “People don’t like different.”

In 1997 Brigitte Muir became the first Australian woman to climb Mount Everest, and the first Australian to climb the Seven Summits. In July this year she received an email from a 15-year-old boy, who told her he was planning to climb Everest next year.

His reason: to beat Alyssa’s record. He confessed he’d never climbed anything other than Mount Kosciuszko. “That’s not what climbing mountains is about,” says Muir, exasperated. “This is not a competition between people. I’m lucky I didn’t grow up in that environment. Mountaineering used to be about climbing mountains and immersing yourself in an amazing environment with people who would become your friends for life.”

“I find that mountaineers are generally Type A personalities,” says Chris Burke, another top female mountaineer. “They are very goal-oriented. You have to be extremely focused. Climbing Everest is 50-70 per cent mental. A lot of people physically can keep going but their minds give up, they lose their nerve, lose their courage, start to doubt themselves.” She says she’s seen people arrive at base camp, take one look at the mountain, turn around and go home, never to return. Burke says the five most important attributes of a successful mountaineer are focus, courage, determination, perseverance and strength. When the same question is put to Alyssa her answers are almost identical: self-motivation, resolve, toughness, determination, perseverance. But that doesn’t mean you’re going to get the same flavour of tent-mate.

“Most of us underachieve,” says Glenn. “Alyssa could die tomorrow and she wouldn’t be considered an underachiever.” And is he concerned by criticism from fellow mountaineers? He shakes his head. “My kids all have a very healthy self-respect. They won’t be pushed and I’m not big on them being subservient to adults.”

**The girl who climbed Everest finishes her training session** and waits patiently for the guy still doing push-ups. I’m determined not to give up. Toughness. Resolve. Perseverance. The lactic acid in my arms floods into my brain; the pain is all I can think about. I remind myself it’s just an obstacle I have to get over. Two more push-ups. “You can do it sitting back on your knees if you like,” Glenn suggests. I think he wants to get going. *No, thanks.*

I lurch forward, summoning my arms to flex again. Instead, they collapse underneath me. I rest for a few seconds and reset. This time I make it up. One more. I exhale loudly, groan, and at a glacial speed my trembling arms jack my broken body off the ground. It’s over. But it’s more than just over; I’ve attained my goal. A sense of achievement washes over me and I stumble towards Alyssa, raising my arms into the air like a champion boxer. Her hardened expression cracks into just the hint of a smile and she offers her hand for a high-five. Her hand is tiny, soft and supple. Warm. ●

Close: with her father Glenn

