

# The Boston Globe

## Boston climber aims to be first US woman to summit K2

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Vanessa O'Brien says goodbye to her husband, Jonathan, at Logan Airport before her flight. Aram Boghosian for The Boston Globe

Late one recent Tuesday night, outside Terminal C of Logan Airport, Vanessa O'Brien gathered her luggage from a black SUV, kissed her husband goodbye, and strode toward her gate.

Halfway across the world, a monster waited. How else to describe a 28,251-foot tower of jagged rock and ice? A peak known for such daunting terrain, volatile weather, and a blatant habit of snatching lives that it has come to be known simply as "Savage Mountain"? A behemoth so nearly unclimbable that it has taken almost one life for every four people who have reached its summit.

At some point in the coming weeks, O'Brien will attempt to become the first American woman to summit K2. If she succeeds, she'll join an elite group of international climbers — the world's best — while securing a place in history.

If she fails? She chooses not to dwell on what that might look like. "If there's a weather window, I will be there," O'Brien, 50, said before departing June 23 for "That much," she said, "I can guarantee." Her resume is impressive. In just five years of climbing, the Back Bay resident has scaled four of the world's 14 tallest mountains, conquered Everest and set a world record as the fastest woman to climb the highest peaks on all seven continents — a feat known as the Seven Summits — in just 295 days.

But this climb promises to be far different from anything she's faced.

As the world's tallest peak at 29,029 feet, Mount Everest looms largest in the human consciousness, but any true climber will tell you there is no comparison between Everest and K2. The numbers paint a grim picture. Only 377 people have reached the top of K2, according to the climbing website 8000ers.com, run by Eberhard Jurgalski -- compared to more than 4,000 individuals who have summited Everest (many have done so multiple times). And roughly 85 have died trying, resulting in a staggering summit-to-death ratio of 4-to-1.

How daunting is the quest? The total number of Americans to successfully climb K2 is 18 — just six more than have walked on the moon.

To female climbers, the mountain has proven particularly inhospitable, according to Jennifer Jordan, author of "Savage Summit: The Life and Death of the First Women of K2." Only 18 women have summited K2, and of the first five to do it, three died on descent while the remaining two were killed in later climbing accidents — sparking whispers that the mountain held a curse against women.

Since then, a number of women have reached the summit with the aid of supplemental oxygen, but the feat has eluded even the top female American climbers.

As recently as five years ago, the idea that O'Brien might be the first would have been unthinkable.

A longtime banker at Bank of America, Morgan Stanley, and Barclays Bank, she had taken up mountain climbing after leaving the industry in the midst of the recession. Her first serious climb came on Everest in 2010 and represented a harsh lesson in the rigors of high-altitude climbing. It was a humbling experience. She was so inexperienced, says her husband of 16 years, Jonathan O'Brien, that sherpas had to help her put her crampons on at base camp. She returned home having failed to reach even Camp 1.

In the ensuing years, though, she rebounded. In 2011, she climbed Shisapangma and Cho Oyo, two of the world's tallest mountains. A year later, she returned to Everest, this time reaching the top. She climbed Kilimanjaro, trekked through Antarctica, and to the Poles. Each trip brought a little more experience, a little more self-confidence.

K2 was never supposed to be a possibility. Her British husband had long vetoed the idea. He was well aware of the mountain's deadly reputation, as well as the peripheral risks it entailed. It was only two years ago that 11 climbers were killed at the base camp of Pakistan's Nanga Parbat mountain when a group of gun-wielding men, identifying themselves as Taliban, arrived with weapons and opened fire.

Then, last year, a climbing friend asked O'Brien whether she'd like to accompany him on an attempt at K2. At the time, she declined. But while tracking the summit on social media, she felt a familiar stirring.



“You never know when you have enough experience,” said O’Brien. “At some point, you have to call your own bluff.” Barry Chin/Globe Staff/Globe Staff

Not long after, she began training.

“There’s something special about K2,” O’Brien said. “And it’s not just because it’s the second-highest, it’s not just because there’s never been an American woman.

“It’s just this kind of magical mountain that has eluded so many mountaineers over time.” Her husband, who learned of his wife’s intentions only after she’d been training for about a month, has reluctantly accepted the idea, keenly aware there’s little he can do to dissuade her.

“I can get all excited and have the fight,” Jonathan said. “But she’s still going to go.” What makes K2 so difficult, say those who have survived it, is just how little control a climber actually has. Some of the world’s most experienced mountaineers have fallen victim to hazards no amount of training could have prevented. In 1986, 13 climbers were killed as a result of severe weather. In 2008, a falling glacier killed or stranded a number of climbers on the mountain’s upper slopes, resulting in 11 deaths.

Reaching the summit — and making it back down alive — requires a combination of skill, experience, and, perhaps most of all, luck.

And even then, there are no guarantees. “I had been doing nothing but climbing for 15 years — I didn’t have a daily job, I didn’t have a family,” said Phil Powers, a Denver-based climber who successfully summited K2 without supplemental oxygen in 1993 after an unsuccessful attempt three years earlier. “And I would argue that even that time for me, in 1990 when I went for the first time, was premature.”



Said O'Brien: "You never know when you have enough experience. At some point, you have to call your own bluff."



Vanessa O'Brien at the K2 base camp.

And so there she was on Tuesday, having just arrived at K2 base camp along with the rest of her expedition team, preparing for a climb from which there was no guarantee she'd return. The past couple weeks had been a worldwind. Before leaving, there had been logistics to finalize, including a last meeting with her personal trainer, a stop at the hair-dresser, a trip to the tailor to pick up her summit suit.

In the days since she landed overseas, she lost a tooth and made an emergency visit to a Pakistani military hospital for nausea. Now, despite the rough start, she waits at the foot of the peak, eyeing a potential weather window in late July.

There is nothing left to do but climb.

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Dugan Arnett can be reached at [dugan.arnett@globe.com](mailto:dugan.arnett@globe.com).