



- Lou Dawson



- Jordan White



- Caleb Wray



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## Dawsons' peak: Father-son duo climb, ski Denali

Decades after a first attempt, Lou Dawson skis Denali with six young mountaineers

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Lou Dawson had fantasized about this for nearly four decades.

The view from the top of North America was more spectacular — and the moment more poignant — than the grizzled ski mountaineering legend could ever have fathomed.

The 58-year-old Carbondale resident was lost for words June 13 as he soaked up seemingly endless views of Alaskan wilderness from his snowy perch on the summit of Denali, more than 20,000 feet above sea level.

His breathing was labored, but the tears flowed freely as Dawson embraced his 20-year-old son, Louie.

“To share that moment was special,” Lou Dawson says. “Here’s your old alpinist dad who really worked hard and won through some pretty tough days. To get to the top and click into those ski bindings and ski down the highest peak in North America on a cold, windy, tough day, that was quite an experience for us. It will definitely live in our minds for a long time.”

He continues: “This showed me I was capable of much more than I thought. At my age, that is fun to see. ... I never thought I'd get an opportunity like this again.”

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Accompanied by six other National Outdoor Leadership Schools instructors, Dawson first tackled Denali in 1973. While the group is believed to be one of the first to effectively navigate most of the mountain on skis, the expedition was not without its pitfalls.

Dawson remembers being marooned in a snow cave at 18,500 feet for nine days as inclement weather inundated the area. There was plenty of food and fuel, but the shelter was poorly ventilated; carbon monoxide from the stove made many sick.

“The experience was not pleasant. Your body starts to atrophy — that’s a long time to lay around. You lose a lot of strength,” Dawson says. “When I look back, the situation was a little more dicey than I thought it was at the time. But it all worked out.”

The group slogged through disorienting whiteout conditions to reach the summit. They did not ski off the top, however; the National Park Service discouraged the group from using skis. Dawson has regretted that decision ever since, even though the trip “really defined me as a winter mountaineer.”

“It’s one of best ski descents in North America, maybe the premier ski descent,” Dawson adds. “I wrote about it in

my book 'Wild Snow' [published in 1998]. It would've been neat to have actually done it.

"I just figured it'd be one of those things in life I didn't get to do."

Dawson admits that he dreamed about returning to Alaska in the years that followed — a notion he shared with few people but one that gained traction once his son grew older and started to develop a passion for mountaineering.

Desire began to turn into reality last year, when Lou Dawson received a chance e-mail from a friend.

Jordan White, a Basalt resident who gained notoriety last spring when, at the age of 23, he became the youngest person in history to climb and ski all 54 of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks, was looking to complete his third of the Seven Summits (the highest points on each continent). He had compiled a list of potential partners (he wound up convincing six to sign on) and was hoping Dawson, one of his mentors — a man whose guidebooks he thumbed through when he first learned to read — would tag along.

"The impression I got was that he was excited about getting to do this with Louie," White says. "He wasn't sure he was going to be fully capable ... but the guy is as tough as nails.

"We couldn't have done this trip without him. He helped out getting equipment, and he was the wisdom of the group."

One would assume little could intimidate Dawson. He's a Colorado Ski and Snowboard Hall of Fame inductee who became the first man to climb and ski all of the state's 14ers.

The accomplished author and blogger's website "Wildsnow.com" has become a trusted reference guide and forum for outdoor enthusiasts of all ilks. The site receives an average of 10,000 unique visitors a day during the winter, Dawson says.

By most accounts, he is the authority on ski mountaineering.

"He's a legend. The people he hangs out with, their names are on routes everywhere ..." says Caleb Wray, who joined the Denali expedition, which was his second. (In 2002, he guided a group that included some close friends and his now-wife, a group that abandoned a summit bid after spending six days in a whiteout.)

"The idea to become a ski mountaineer didn't really come to fruition until I was 20 years old or so. I started looking into this stuff, and he's the father of this whole thing in America. I own the guy's guide books — one of them is in my wife's Jeep right now. ... The cover's almost worn off, but all the good pages are still in there."

Still, when presented with the opportunity to "relive his youth" as he calls it, Dawson was hesitant.

He worried about lingering physical ailments — "Most of my joints are creaky, and some are worse than that," he jokes. Twelve weeks before the trip, Dawson had surgery to repair a plica, or tissue irritation, under his right knee cap.

He worried about the affects of high altitude. He worried he would not have the brute strength to keep up with a group of strong, determined 20-somethings — among them brothers Colby and Tyler Christoff, who ski raced at Syracuse University (N.Y.), and Joe Brannan, who recently became the sixth man to ski all 54 Colorado 14ers. (The 26-year-old pushed back the date of his wedding so he could join the expedition.)

"I'm not a particularly strong person. I have a slight frame, which is not good for carrying big packs," Dawson opines. "It's abuse. ... This was a very difficult decision for me. It's intimidating and scary in some ways because I didn't know if I could handle what I needed to in order to be safe. ... I knew Jordan and his friends could help me out a bit, but they can't climb the mountain for you. When you're up there, you have to take care of yourself. I didn't want to have to depend on others.

"I tried to inculcate a good attitude about it. I told the guys and told [my wife] Lisa that even if I got to base camp and hung out, or to 14,000-foot camp and was able to blog from there and live on the mountain and be part of the scene, I would've been OK. ... I got my mind to relax that way."

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Being a spectator just wouldn't do, however.

Not after enduring a winter workout regimen designed around one specific goal. Not after his son had taken time off from college at Western Washington University to join him on an excursion they had discussed for years while combing through photos and equipment from 1973.

Not after coming so far — by RV no less, a one-way jaunt of more than 3,000 miles, spread over roughly two weeks, and broken up with strategically mapped ski excursions along the way.

Long days on the road only heightened the anticipation. Upon arriving in the town of Talkeetna on May 29, Dawson blogged: "We'll fly to the Kahiltna Glacier this afternoon or tomorrow. The flight takes about 45 minutes and is mind blowing. I can't wait to see Louie's face."

He likely could feel a smile forming on his own, once the de Havilland Single Otter touched down on the remote, snowy tract bathed in brilliant sunlight.

All the memories came rushing back in one fell swoop.

"There was a lot of nostalgia, and it was very intense," Dawson says. "We landed on that glacier, and I teared up. I couldn't hold it back."

"The runway on the southeast fork ... is one of those places where you see people hop out of a plane and just stand there with mouths open and heads rotating 360 degrees like an owl," Wray wrote in a blog post on Dawson's site. "I thought, having been there before, that I was now immune to this rookie behavior. Nope."

Dawson, the objective literally now in sight, appeared to be invigorated. It was he who, on the first night at base camp, rallied the group, according to Wray's post.

"Well boys, are we gonna lay around base camp for a month or go climb a mountain?" Wray recalls Dawson saying. "It was classic. There were seven guys fully packed and rigged for glacier travel in about one hour."

It was rare for Dawson to take the lead. In reality, for much of the 18 days spent on Denali, he preferred to be just one of the guys — certainly not a mentor or guide.

"He is remarkably humble," Wray says. "He would listen to other thoughts, even when it was coming from a 20-year-old who didn't know what the hell he was talking about. He's patient. ... He was much like I expected an old mountain dog to be."

That dog was well aware of his limitations. While much of the group decided to lug all of their gear — about 150 pounds each — to camp at 11,000 feet, Dawson and his son opted to take two trips. Dawson even let Louie and others haul some of his equipment.

While others routinely set brisk paces on acclimatization days, Dawson was more than happy to methodically work his way up the mountain.

"He was definitely a little slower, but I stayed with him," Louie Dawson says. "He's super cautious, but he has more experience ... so I mostly just try to follow his advice when I can."

"My son was very patient, he was my teammate. It was wonderful," Lou Dawson adds. "He went with me and looked

out for me, which for me was a sweet experience. To have that experience with your son is one of the best things.”

The group dynamic worked. To a man, those on the expedition say internal squabbles — the death knell of many expeditions — were minimal.

Everyone pulled their weight around camp. In exchange for a few precious hours of blogging and a break from cooking and other chores, Dawson often volunteered to charge iPods.

“There was a little more to it than you think with seven guys listening to their iPods all the time,” he jokes. “I had a nest of wires hanging from the ceiling of the tent, an iPod sticking over here, one underneath my butt that I was sitting on accidentally. ... If I had to go pee, I couldn't extricate myself without unplugging something.”

Save for a minor avalanche, some cold feet and unpredictable weather, which resulted in a collapsed cook tent and some idle days, things went smoothly. As smoothly as can be expected in an unforgiving environment.

On summit day, the group opted to make their attempt from a camp at 14,000 feet — bypassing a night's stay at 17,200 feet, where conditions were unsavory.

Brannan, Wray, White and the Christoffs set out first on the brisk, clear morning, breaking trail up a section called the headwall. Then, it was on to autobahn, across the football field and up Pig Hill.

The Dawsons followed, about 45 minutes off the pace.

“You're walking incredibly slow ... you're so out of breath so quick. It's a nightmare for your patience,” Lou Dawson recalls. “Above 18,000 [feet], you really start feeling the effects [of the altitude]. You're a little dizzy ... and it's almost like you're an astronaut or something. You're in such a space where if something goes wrong, there's so little help you can get. It's a surreal feeling.

“Obviously, this is why we were there. It was a challenge, but wow, it was also a little scary.”

The other five were the first to successfully reach the top, braving brisk winds and temperatures that plunged to 20 below to take some photographs and revel in their surroundings. White took a moment to scatter some of his father's ashes; Kip White, an avid mountaineer in his own right, was killed in a fall while climbing the Maroon Bells with Jordan on Memorial Day 2005.

After clicking into their skis and taking a few turns off the top of North America, the group passed the Dawsons on the summit ridge. They exchanged a few handshakes.

“I think that was probably the highlight of everyone's day, seeing Lou so excited,” White remembers.

Wray paused to snap a photo of Lou Dawson guiding his son to the summit.

“I lost my dad at an early age, and to see Lou hop in front of his son ... was pretty emotional for me,” Wray says. “It was one of the greatest moments I've ever experienced in the mountains.”

A moment Louie will not soon forget.

“I remember when we used to go up to Independence Pass a bunch when I was 5 or 6 or so. ... Now its Denali,” he says. “It's once in a lifetime, especially getting to do it with [my father]. Not many people get to do this. I'm definitely very lucky.”

Only after a trying descent — White and Wray were knocked off their skis as winds gusted to 70 mph, while the Dawsons contemplated building a snow cave when visibility was reduced to nothing for long stretches — did Lou Dawson finally get to breathe a sigh of relief.

And begin to reflect.

"On most trips I do ... there's not a whole lot of uncertainty. I don't experience that winning-through-adversity feeling that people do when they're new to the game," he says. "It was neat to experience that again. ... Anybody gets that feeling when they challenge themselves.

"I can honestly say I'm not interested in that kind of trip again — if I did it, I think I'd be pushing it too much. ... There's a time and place for everything, and this came together at the right time and felt so right. It was like serendipity."

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