

# Diabetes can't break his will to climb mountains

Four years ago, Sebastien Sasseville learned he had the most virulent form of the disease. The news steeled his determination

BY YVONNE ZACHARIAS  
VANCOUVER SUN

Standing at the base of the mountain, Sebastien Sasseville is on fire.

He starts to climb. Day by day, bit by bit, the energy ebbs from his 27-year-old body. It screams with pain. He can hardly breathe. He is nauseous.

Still, he climbs.

He can almost taste the summit. He wants it so badly, that sweet taste of victory.

Sasseville knows something about climbing mountains.

Four years ago, the Quebec

native was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, the most virulent form of the disease.

"I was like, 'Oh, my God. I cannot imagine living like that.'" But even as he lay in his hospital bed, the determination grew within him. Diabetes would not stop him in his tracks.

That steely will propelled him in August to the top of Peak Lenin in Russia, an amazing feat for any climber, let alone one with Type 1 diabetes.

Eight other climbers joined Sasseville on the 12-day trek, but only he and one other climber, a 53-year-old marathon runner

from Greece, made it to the top.

At an elevation of 7,134 metres, Peak Lenin stands taller than Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro and has a success rate for climbers of less than 50 per cent.

Sasseville faced below-zero temperatures, unstable snow bridges and deep crevasses.

He also had a brush with death when an avalanche came crashing down from the peak, stopping only 1,000 metres from his head.

The day it happened is one Sasseville will never forget.

"We were crossing a crevasse. We heard a big vibration which



Sebastien Sasseville (right) stands at the 7,134-metre summit of Peak Lenin, which has a success rate for climbers of less than 50 per cent.

obviously was an avalanche starting. So we kind of looked up and it was coming down right on us. The bad thing was it started pretty much from the summit, so it

had tons of time to pick up speed and get bigger. For one, two or three seconds, I was almost 100 per cent sure I was going to die."

See **BATTLING THE** C4

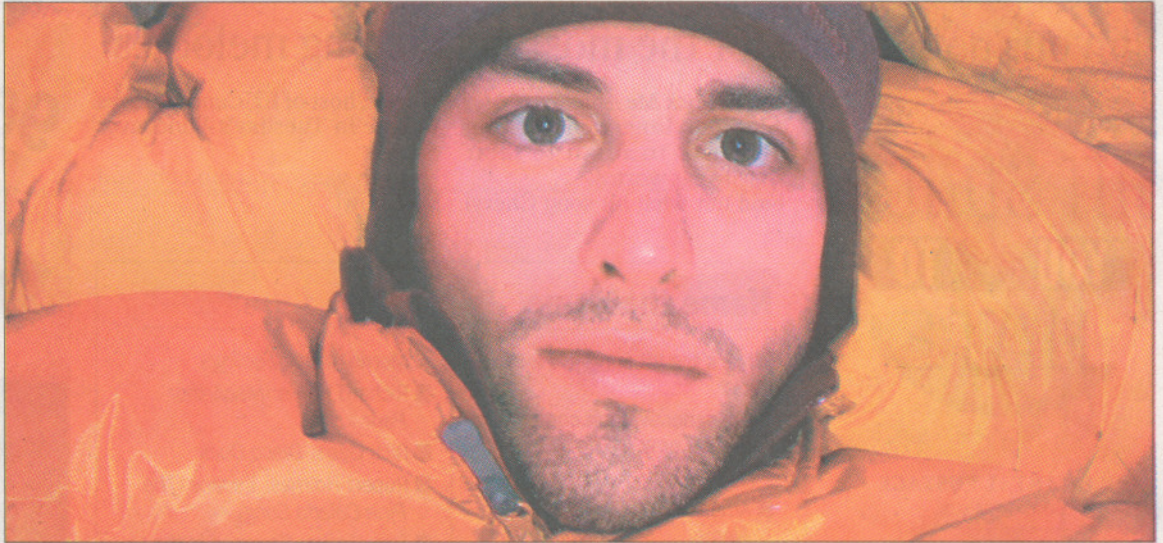
# Battling the odds to reach a peak

From CI

Ice debris hit the climbers like cold fire. "Then everything stopped and everyone was alive as well, so we started to climb again in silence."

The road to the summit has been an arduous one for Sasseville, one fraught with physical and psychological obstacles. Still, he climbs. An inner voice tells him to keep going.

The story of the Vancouverite's tough slog begins not with him but with his younger brother, who had been diagnosed about 10 years ago with Type 1 diabetes. It was a big shock to his family, who lives in the



Sebastien Sasseville, who suffers from Type 1 diabetes, climbed Peak Lenin in Russia recently for charity.

rural Quebec farming community of Saint-Patrice-de-Beaurivage. It

gave Sasseville early insight into the disease that would eventually hit him.

Prior to his diagnosis, Sasseville had made a trek to Everest base camp. He loved the trip so much, he promised himself one day he would return to climb the whole mountain.

With the taste of climbing in his blood, he took a group of nine teenagers with Type 1 diabetes to climb Mount Kilimanjaro last August. It took him a year and a half to put the trip together.

"A lot of people said it was a suicide mission. A lot of people didn't believe we would actually find the money and time and people that would trust us enough to let us go."

Six of the nine made it to the summit. All nine made it to the peak 200 metres below the summit.

"It was very, very rewarding."

Then came Sasseville's next challenge, Peak Lenin.

It almost beat him. "You are pushing hard

every day. You are going back to your tent exhausted. You know that tomorrow is going to be even worse because you are getting weaker and weaker and weaker."

It's tough to stay motivated for 20 days. That is 20 days without a shower, sleeping in a tent in minus-zero temperatures, having to put crampons on to go out and relieve yourself at night.

While exposing himself to great risk, he had to deal with the feeling that he was so far from home and the people he loves — his girlfriend, family and friends.

The last climber to drop out did so because his hands were frozen and he couldn't hold his ice axe.

Sasseville's hands were frozen just as badly. He stopped using his ice axe, pressing it against his body with his forearms.

There was no way he was turning back.

"You discover a willpower that is very beautiful but very scary."

He returned home,

having lost about 20 pounds and with fluid accumulation in his lungs. But there it was, that sweet taste of victory.

He yearns to climb still. Everest looms. He wants to be the first Canadian with Type 1 diabetes to reach the summit.

He tells his story because he knows that 50 per cent of diabetics suffer from depression at one point or another. He wants to inspire them to find their own mountain.

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The Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation's annual ride for diabetes research will take place at the plaza of the Vancouver Art Gallery on Oct. 20. Sasseville is urging corporations to support it. He also wants to thank his employer, LifeScan Canada, a manufacturer of blood glucose monitors, and the pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk for sponsoring his Lenin Peak trip. "They are genuinely involved in my adventures and I am very lucky they care so much for me and what I do."



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