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PEAK PERFORMANCE
AFTER RADICAL KNEE SURGERY, JOHN GOLDEN TOOK ON ONE OF THE PLANET'S MOST GRUELING CHALLENGES
BY GEOFFREY JOHNSON

IN THE FALL OF 2004, WHILE SITTING IN A DOCTOR'S OFFICE AT Rush University Medical Center, John Golden began his ascent toward the top of the world. A Chicago insurance executive, Golden had already endured numerous surgeries to his knees because of an injury sustained while playing football for Northern Illinois University in the 1980s. Told by one doctor to buy a ranch house because he would never again be able to climb stairs, Golden had conducted an exhaustive search for the best knee doctors, a search that brought him to Rush's Brian Cole, who was renowned for using cutting-edge orthopedic, rehabilitative, and transplant techniques to treat shoulder, elbow, and knee injuries. (Cole, a Castle Connolly "Top Doctor," graced Chicago's January 2006 cover.)

"From the moment I walked into Brian's office, there was a connection," Golden remembers. "I could tell he wanted to see if there was something we could do." It was the beginning of a journey that would transform both patient and doctor.

Ironically, though he had injured his right knee on the football field, Golden had essentially destroyed his left knee with the subsequent changes he had made to his gait. Given Golden's relatively young age (he's 43 today), Cole ruled out a knee replacement. "His activity level would have been restricted because of the fear of compromising a mechanical implant that's made of metal and plastic," says Cole. "And the life span of the artificial knee would be ten years or less, even with moderate or restricted activity, which would then relegiate him to another knee replacement."

Instead, in May 2005, Cole performed what he calls a "push the envelope" procedure: double transplant surgery using tissue from a human donor. He implanted two types of cartilage in Golden's left knee: meniscus cartilage (the fibrous, C-shaped cartilage be-
Wisconsin, Cole gave his approval. Golden, it turned out, had more ambitious plans.

In September 2007, with the encouragement of Ed Vestun, one of the world’s great climbers, Golden reached the summit of Mount Rainier in Washington State. “I was emotionally overcome,” he says. “I was crying and pumping my fist. I had to find a little private spot up there. Today it’s still a tremendously moving experience.”

Golden found his way down the mountain—“the most painful thing I’d ever done; my knee was hurting really bad”—and back to Cole’s office. He handed the doctor a check for $14,410, a dollar for each foot he had climbed on Rainier. The money, said Golden, was just the beginning of his plans to raise funds for orthopedic research. He also told Cole that he intended to scale other mountains, and he invited a mesmerized Cole to join him on one of those climbs.

In August 2008, after months of training, Golden and Cole climbed Mount Shuksan, a 9,127-foot peak in the Cascade range of Washington State. Cole describes the precipitous 21-hour ascent and descent as “one of the more inspiring things I have ever done.” For Golden, it was another step toward his ultimate goal: climbing Mount Everest, at 29,035 feet, the world’s tallest mountain.

In March 2009, Golden arrived in Kathmandu and made the 16-day trek to the Everest base camp at 17,600 feet; his wife, Marianne, accompanied him. “You have all these once-in-a-lifetime experiences,” says Golden, “but if you don’t share them with people you really care about, they don’t have the same meaning.” Marianne remained at the camp for only a few hours; Golden would spend another 50 days on the mountain, acclimatizing to the altitude by making several trips to carry supplies up to Camp 1 at 19,500 feet. In early May—at about the same time an avalanche claimed the life of a Sherpa guide on another expedition—Golden climbed to Camp 2 (22,000 feet) and then, in an astounding push, leaptfrogged Camp 3 and headed directly to Camp 4 (26,300 feet)—what Golden and others call the death zone. “Your body is actually eating itself and dying,” he says. “It’s just scary being alive up there.”

On May 11th, Golden hoped to attack the summit, but bad weather forced him to cancel the attempt and head back down. On a traverse near Camp 3, a sheet of ice broke and Golden tumbled. The fall slammed him against the mountain, leaving him hanging nearly upside down with a broken left hand and badly damaged ribs; he credits his guides—Jon Shea, Justin Merle, and the Sherpa Phinjo—with saving his life. “Those guys were heroic,” he says. With the weather getting worse, the climbers had no choice but to continue down to Camp 2; when they finally reached base camp, Golden—who wanted to make another attempt on the summit—was told his climb was done. “I don’t have summit fever,” says Golden, “but I may try again.” (In January, the Discovery Channel will air a documentary of Golden’s climb as part of its series Everest: Beyond the Limits.)

For now, Golden has plenty of other things on his plate. He has left the insurance business, and, with an eye toward opening high-end training facilities locally, he is working to help others achieve their own leadership and physical-fitness goals. Partnered with Rush’s Cole, he has created the LiveActive Fund, which has accumulated $160,000 for orthopedic research. Having forged a close friendship—one, says Cole, that has transformed the way he deals with patients—the two men have climbed Mount Rainier together and intend to organize future climbs as a way of raising money for their foundation. Cole, who leads the Cartilage Restoration Center at Rush, is also the team physician for the Chicago White Sox and the Bulls; he was recently voted team physician of the year by other team doctors in the National Basketball Association.

As for Golden, he has one more goal in his sights. A friend of the late Bears great Walter Payton, he wants to test his new knee on the Soldier Field turf, catching a pass at the very spot where Payton broke Jim Brown’s National Football League rushing record in October 1984. And though he will likely need a replacement for his repaired knee one day, he doesn’t let that faze him. “It’s in the back of my mind,” says Golden, “but I have faith in the team that we will find something else.”