



PUSH TO THE TOP:
John Golden takes a break en route to the summit of Mount Everest last May.

“Your body is actually eating itself and dying,” Golden says. “It’s just scary being alive up there.”

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 relegate 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-

tween the tibia and femur) and articular cartilage, which, Cole says, “helps the joint move in a frictionless way.” (The latter procedure is called an osteochondral allograft.) Even today, combining both procedures remains uncommon, says Cole. “Most people are not candidates [for the procedure]. People in [an older] age group will do so well with a knee replacement that it doesn’t make any sense to do a transplant.”

Following the surgery, Golden immediately began physical therapy. Initially unable to put any weight on the knee, he worked at the painful task of extending his range of motion—“I swear, blood was coming out of my ears,” he says—before finally taking his first step in July 2005. In the following months, his focus shifted from therapy to physical training, as he worked to get back in shape and lose some of the weight he had gained over the years. (Ultimately he dropped 70 pounds.)

Having achieved his goal of being able to play in the backyard with his two children, Golden returned to Cole and said he wanted to do something more athletic. The doctor ruled out running, jumping, and other “ballistic” activities. Golden countered by asking if he could try climbing, a peculiar choice given his fear of heights. Thinking Golden meant scaling a bluff in

PHOTOGRAPH: JON SHEA

Wisconsin, Cole gave his approval. Golden, it turned out, had more ambitious plans.

In September 2007, with the encouragement of Ed Viesturs, 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 Cascades 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, acclimating 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, leapfrogged 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 Limit*.)

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." ■

TOP DOCTOR:
Brian Cole, left, with Golden on Mount Rainier



PHOTOGRAPH: JASON THOMPSON

disease; bone marrow transplant. Northwestern. 312-695-0990.

INFECTIOUS DISEASE

JOHN FLAHERTY

AIDS/HIV; travel medicine; orthopedic infectious disease. Northwestern. 312-926-8358.

J. PAUL O'KEEFE

AIDS/HIV; fungal infections; surgical infections; travel medicine. Loyola. 708-216-3232.

BEVERLY SHA

AIDS/HIV in women. Rush. 312-942-5865.

GORDON TRENHOLME

Fevers of unknown origin; malaria; tropical diseases. Rush. 312-942-3665.

INTERNAL MEDICINE

JORGE BALANDRIN

Christ. 708-424-1222.

RONALD BOSH

Provena Mercy. 630-879-2110.

THOMAS GALLAGHER

Hinsdale. 630-323-3540.

BARRY GOLDBERG

Geriatric medicine; concierge medicine. Highland Park. 847-433-1709.

EDWARD KOGAN

St. Alexius. 847-884-7111.

AUDREY TATAR

Hypertension; asthma; cholesterol/lipid disorders; osteoporosis. Northwestern. 312-726-8800.

DAVID WECHTER

Masonic. 773-493-8212.

INTERVENTIONAL CARDIOLOGY

TED FELDMAN

Stents for coronary artery disease; catheter therapy for valve and structural disease. NorthShore. 847-570-2250.

DOUGLAS LOSORDO

Stem cell therapy in heart failure; angiogenesis; angioplasty and stent placement; heart attack. Northwestern. 312-695-0072.

MATERNAL & FETAL MEDICINE

STEVEN AMBROSE

Ultrasound; prenatal diagnosis; high-risk pregnancy (consultation). Christ. 708-398-6200.

RICHARD BESINGER

Prenatal diagnosis; premature labor; critical care obstetrics. Loyola. 708-216-6444.

SHARON DOOLEY

Fetal abnormalities; high-risk pregnancy; multiple gestation. Northwestern. 312-695-7542.

JUDITH HIBBARD

High-risk pregnancy; heart disease in pregnancy; preeclampsia; ultrasound. UIC. 312-413-7500.

MAHMOUD ISMAIL

High-risk pregnancy; perinatal medicine; neonatal infections; infections in pregnancy. Chicago. 773-702-5200.

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