



## Hitting sixes on Everest

### **Nick Compton on his experiences with a group of 18 amateur and professional cricketers on Mount Everest**

That first glimpse of Mount Everest was a bit like scoring that breakthrough hundred you wait a long time for. The colossal tower of rock and earth reaches almost 9000m into Nepalese air is a magical sight and one I will savour for a time to come. Even after two weeks of constant nausea, a headache that felt like a thousand bulls were charging through my skull and legs of jelly, I still would not have swapped the experience for anything.

When I embarked on the journey I never in my wildest dreams expected it to be so tough. However, for me the breathtaking views and the experience of camping for two weeks in the Himalayas, home to the top three mountains in the world, were at the forefront of my mind. What was to follow would be a great lesson in both respect and humility.

We left Kathmandu in a small 17-seated aircraft that swirled high into turbulence before it dive-bombed onto the side of a small runway cut into the mountainside. Despite having left half my stomach in the plane, I began to experience real excitement. The lush green mountainside with snow-covered peaks in the distance and the cool thin fresh air were a welcome reprieve from smoggy London.

At first, we simply absorbed our surroundings, chatted to locals and got to know the rest of the group. I was also keen to learn more about photography. Graham Napier, my tent mate, was already an enthusiast so I badgered him most of the time – I still cannot work out why he always wanted to walk on his own! The enigmatic landscapes were a photographer's dream. Huge, snow covered mountains; glittering glaciers and sinuous rivers all had me snapping away at every available opportunity in search of the one shot that would propel me to National Geographic stardom. Soon my memory cards were running low and once I realized that the mountain wasn't going anywhere I calmed down.

As conditions worsened, so the landscape turned from a mountain green to something resembling the moon. The air was thinner and our steps became heavier. One step followed the next; soon I was counting each one and resting after every fifty. Our focus had shifted to what mattered most – simply walking and breathing - activities one usually takes for granted. When survival mode really kicked in, I could draw parallels with the people the PCA Benevolent Fund helps. This is what some of them have to contend with on a daily basis and the Fund is there to assist those cricketers whose careers and lives have been shattered, be it in an accident or through illness. It is only through having this experience did it propel my consciousness away from myself.

Higher up our energy levels dropped and the priority became simply getting to the next camp. The fluctuations in temperature gripped us. As soon as the sun went behind a mountain, it became incredibly cold. At around four o'clock, we would be pulling on thermals, beanies and protective gear, preparing ourselves for a long and freezing night. There were no campfires to huddle around; the warmth came from a cup of the local brew and some conversation with my fellow trekkers.

Two of these were Adrian Morgan and Cameron King, who are the assistant groundsman and dressing room attendant at Lord's. Before the trek, I would have exchanged little more than a friendly 'Good morning' and a look at the wicket with 'Morg'. On this trip, I discovered he had a keen interest in bird watching and I suddenly found myself looking for 'Morg' every time I saw a bird and relying on him to tell me what it was.

It was only once we reached above 4000m did the effects of the altitude really become apparent. Before the trek, a doctor had explained about altitude sickness, the symptoms and warning signs. As she ended the talk with a sinister, 'you might not wake up' it was hardly surprising that we got little sleep that night! Regardless of fitness and training, once you enter the realms of Base Camp, altitude sickness can catch anyone. We were all affected in some way and morale took a knock when Cameron had to be airlifted off the mountain just a day from Base Camp. When you entrench yourself as deeply as we did in nature, you realise we were all equal up there. Nature has a very holistic way of bringing one back to earth. The pace of nature and its natural balance is something that became very apparent, you could not escape it and nor did you want to. It was time to respect the enormity of the task and the conditions.

Amidst the brutality of some very serious climbs, there was time to soak up the culture. The Nepalese people display a calmness and contentment, which is strengthened by their deep Buddhist beliefs. We came across Buddhist monuments and places of worship, which one has to walk around to the left out of respect to the gods. Watching Sherpas carry packs of 50kg to 80kg on their backs up enormous mountains was a very vivid image even to the point where one of our trekkers asked 'Is that heavy?' You can imagine the reply had they only spoken English! What for us would seem a harsh way of life, for them is normality and it really put our incessant moaning in context.

That eventual sight we had all been waiting for loomed ahead. Everest has mysticism to it. Even at Base Camp, only the peak is visible, as though to see it all you have to keep climbing. To think we were standing less than 3 km below the highest point in the world, seeing the route to the summit that so many had accomplished yet so many had failed was incredible. All it did was reinforce the fact that no I was not going to the top and would never consider it.

Despite fatigue, we played a game of cricket at the old base camp: Sherpas vs PCA. Five overs each and unsurprisingly very few quick singles were taken. Middlesex have asked me to practice my six hitting so there was no better place than at 5500m where the ball travels further. Maybe I should suggest the team goes there for a pre season tour - or maybe not!