

FEELS



LIKE

FUN

Squash Falconer's adventures range from the toughest in the world to the weirdest. She's climbed up and paraglided off Mont Blanc and also done the world's highest bum-board. Why? She's only ever motivated by fun, curiosity and having a good laugh.

Interview: Anna Smith

Squash grew up on a farm where she got her fill of the outdoors, leaping from trees and running away from cockerels. Through school she did what she terms a 'moderate' amount of sport, and, with some encouragement from a teacher, her Duke of Edinburgh Award. Before she knew it, she was 18, gazing at Mont Blanc on her first ski season and waiting for the right excuse to climb it.

"I climbed Aconcagua; that was my first mountain. I was in my mid 20s and I'd met a group of friends when I did my first ski season. This group were doing extreme endurance adventure races and they got me involved in them. It was like long distance running, biking, kayaking, and climbing all thrown into these 36-hour races and I did that for a while. I was at one of their houses and one of the girls had broken a shoulder, she's really sporty and it was driving her mad, and she said 'What can I do where I'm not going to hurt my shoulder?'. She went and climbed Kilimanjaro and loved it. She wanted to climb a higher mountain so they were talking about going to Aconcagua in Argentina. I just piped up and said, 'I'd love to do that' and they just said, 'well come with us'. So, it was more about going on an adventure with my friends. I went and did that. That was the beginning of it. Then together we went from there to Muztagata, and it carried on from there."

Much Higher Mountains

WFA: *Since then, where have you found the inspiration for your ideas?*

SF: They all kind of come in different ways. Sometimes it's other people's ideas. Sometimes it's my own ideas coming together, like Mont Blanc, for example. When I passed my motorbike test I decided I wanted to ride a motorbike to the south of France, but I didn't really have time to do it, so I put it to the back of my mind. And when I did a ski season I had a view of Mont Blanc and I used to think 'oh people climb that. That'd be something cool to do,' but, at the time I wasn't a mountaineer, so it went to the back of my mind. And then, when I started paragliding, I thought it'd be great to fly off a high mountain, but I put it to the back of my mind. A while later, I was chatting with some friends who I'd learned to paraglide with and I realised that I had these three dreams that I could roll into one. I could ride a motorbike from England to the south of France to the foot of Mont Blanc, when I got there I could climb it and then, if I got to the top, I could paraglide off it. So that's how that idea came about. And I'd already climbed much higher mountains than Mont Blanc, so it was never about always doing bigger mountains. It was just doing what felt like fun and that I had an interest in doing. I didn't know until afterwards that I was the first British woman to fly from the summit of Mont Blanc so that was kind of the icing on the cake for the trip really.

Same with the bum-boarding, it was just a bit of a joke. I'd snowboarded on Muztagata and found my snowboard quite heavy, so, as a joke, just before I left for Cho Oyu one of my friends gave me a plastic bum-board. It was just a bit absurd and silly. I took it with me because it didn't really weigh anything and it was just funny. Then afterwards it dawned on me, because we'd done it at a high camp, I was the world's highest ever bum-boarder. It was just absurd, really, but it's interesting that it becomes the thing that people want to talk about.

WFA: *Has that motivation changed?*

SF: There's got to be intrinsic motivation. It comes from inside of me; I've got to be passionate about it and want to do it. It's often about the team of people I'm doing it with, you know. With the ElliptiGO [ElliptiGOs are essentially elliptical machines on wheels and Squash is a multi-European champion and holder of a world record for the longest ElliptiGO journey at 3074 miles], I was pretty determined to get the record, because I knew I could.



Credit: Flo Tomlinson

Above

On the summit of Everest

Below

Squash flying above the French Alps

Right

Squash started her adventures by running endurance races with her friends



Credit: Oliver Orram



It's not the be all and end all though. I think because I've had expeditions where I haven't reached the top and they've still been good expeditions I'm more interested in coming back down alive than injuring myself. I set out to be the first woman in the world to fly from the summit of Everest and I failed ultimately. But I still summited Mount Everest and the most important thing was that I came back down alive.

The biggest change for me in terms of my motivation is I've got a daughter now. She's coming up to five and when I got pregnant everything changed, because it was no longer just about me. Everything I've done really, as much as it's been about the team and perhaps doing it for charity and everything else, there's an element of selfishness to it. You have to be quite motivated and driven yourself. It takes a lot of time. I think when I had her I wanted to be her mum. My motivation wasn't to go off and carry on climbing and doing these big adventures because not only did I want to be a mum, but I wanted to be well and present for her. The first run I did after she was born, I thought, 'What if a car hits me and something happens to me?', I never felt that before. I always kind of thought, 'Oh, I'll be alright' But since I've had her I see a lot more danger than I used to. It is starting to come

back, I'm starting to do more things, but there's a part of me where I think that I've been so privileged and lucky enough to do the things I've done and I did them. It was never really about going harder or further or faster. If a project comes up that motivates me, that's great, but I don't feel the need to out-do each project I did.

Sorry About That

WFA: *You did a first ascent of Khang Karpo (6646m), how did the mental challenge of that differ from climbing well-established routes?*

SF: There was a lot of unknown. We didn't know the route we were going to take until we got to a designated base camp. It was close friends I was going with, who I'd climbed with before, and the Sherpa team were quite small and we got on very well with them straightaway. We were a small team. On the trek into base camp, we all discussed our aims then the Sherpas really led the route finding but we were all in the loop. We explored one route and decided it wasn't going to work that way so we regrouped and went the other way. It was just more about accepting that this was a first and it was unknown so it might not have worked. We all had to be really careful with each other and our levels because we all wanted to move together as a team. We didn't want to



Credit: Kath Sammland



Credit: Kamil Taniola



split up. Whatever we did, just the fact we were on the trip together was brilliant. We had such a laugh and it was great. There were certainly times when I knew I had to knuckle down and I needed my team, and perhaps they needed me, but I'd say that we were all quite relaxed because we all had the same goals and aims and we were just having such a good time together.

WFA: *Is it important to get on well with your expedition team?*

SF: Perhaps if there's an existing friendship there that's always brilliant, but what I found on mountains and in extreme situations, is that even if you're from different backgrounds, and with the Sherpas, different cultures, when you're in exposed and dangerous situations it's incredibly bonding. You accept each other in a very different way because you realise how important your community is, and you're dependent on each other.

Also understanding each other's objectives [is important]. Some people want to go just to have a good time and they don't mind about the outcome. Other people want to go because they're hell bent on the summit and they will almost do anything for that. For me, that's not necessarily the best type of partner because they'll almost do it at any cost. I want to know what their priorities are. Is their priority coming back safe and well over everything or is their priority doing the task that you set? Sometimes you have to just accept that you are different to some people but as long as ultimately I feel like that person is looking out for me and I'm looking out for them, then it's going to be okay, you don't have to agree on everything.

WFA: *How do you find yourself dealing with those extreme situations where you have to rely on each other?*

SF: I always thought if I was in a life-threatening situation, I don't know if I'd be able to hold it together. I think I'd probably panic and I wouldn't be able to think and I'd be full of fear of what might happen. I've had a few experiences, for example, on the second attempt of climbing Mont Blanc we fell off the mountain. We were ice climbing and roped together, I was above my expedition partner and I lost my footing and slipped and fell down past him. As I fell the rope tightened and I pulled him off too and there was a crevasse below us. I had this incredible calm; this voice in my head just said to me 'Squash, you're falling, you need to arrest yourself'. I'd practiced these ice axe arrest drills and I really calmly arrested myself, came to a stop, he came to a stop and there was complete silence. I just said; 'sorry about that'. So it kind of showed me the reality of the situation. It wasn't until we were back down the mountain that we actually discussed it.

On the third attempt [the first and second attempts to fly off Mont Blanc were thwarted by bad weather] I kind of thought, 'Oh well, whatever it is we've given ourselves a month to do it. We're at the end of the month'. This was our last attempt. So it was almost quite a surprise because when we summited the wind was really strong and we didn't think we were going to be able to fly off. Then the wind started to die down and we realised that we were going to get this window. That's when it dawned on me. I was almost relieved that I couldn't take off because it made the decision for me. If I mess the take-off up I was plummeting down,

"YOU REALISE HOW IMPORTANT
YOUR COMMUNITY IS"



Credit: Jerry Ranger

because it was a committed take-off, so when I actually got the chance to fly, I thought; 'I don't even know if I want to do this'. But we decided to go for it and I did it. As I took off it was just absolutely amazing. And then, obviously, I had to deal with the flight.

Paragliding has been a great sport for me because every single time you go to take off you have to compose yourself. You're about to launch yourself off solid ground into the air and it's incredibly dangerous. I learned from that, I always get this feeling in my stomach. It's almost excitement but it's a bit of feeling sick and nervous as well. I always say that if I don't have that feeling then I'm not going to fly, because that means I'm being complacent.

WFA: *And finally, I've read about your 'knickers theory', can you explain that for us?*

SF: I have this philosophy that if your knickers are right, then your day goes right. What that really is, is a nod to getting the small stuff sorted, because if you pay attention to the detail that's ultimately what becomes the big stuff and what makes everything happen. When I did my first trip I didn't question it because I didn't even think 'How many pairs of knickers do you take?' We got

to base camp and everyone asked, 'How many pairs of knickers have you got?' I was like, 'well, we're away for a month, so 28'. And they go, 'what? We've got three pairs'. I thought, 'oh right, well I'm actually really pleased I've brought mine, because it's kind of a little luxury'.

In the early days, there was always loads more men than women and it was almost like a bravado thing that the men wouldn't have showers and they wouldn't wash or brush their hair or change clothes. But I did want to wash and I did want to keep clean because it made me more comfortable. I just liked it. I always take some chocolate as well. Little luxuries like that. We had an Italian with us on Cho Oyu and he took some parmesan and olive oil and that was just amazing. And I'm not judging anyone who doesn't want to, but I realised that this was actually a barrier stopping some men but definitely women from doing things. Actually, just because that's the way something's done doesn't mean you have to do it that way. To a degree you have to rough it, but you can certainly make yourself much more comfortable. Not everyone can relate to climbing a mountain, but every single person can relate to opening their drawer in the morning and deciding which pair of underwear they're going to put on today. **W**

Left

Squash has led and co-led a number of expeditions, including to Everest Base Camp

Middle

Taking on a ladder crossing on Everest

Right

Squash braving the cold in Svalbard

Learn more about Squash's adventures at www.squashfalconer.com