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Part II: **West Valley Operator Scales Tallest Mountain in South America**

- [Continued from Part I:](#) Gerardo Perez has his sight set on Alaska's Mt. McKinley next – the tallest mountain in North America.

By JIMMY STROUP

(April 9, 2008) Some of Geraldo Perez's climbing success may be natural talent, but he spends all his spare time at sea level training for future climbs. He and his wife, Mirla, are constantly running somewhere and regularly participate in half and full-length marathons.

"I try to go to the gym, and run between 30 and 50 miles a week," he says. "You have to be dedicated because the mountains will take it out of you. You have to prepare yourself."

Wife enjoys hikes but not extreme climbs

Mirla enjoys a good hike, too, but stays away from the more extreme climbs. Mountaineering involves a lot of risk and he says you have to be practical even when it's unpleasant.

"The reason I don't take her on the larger expeditions is because we can't leave the kids alone," he says. "Not only that, but it's too dangerous. If someone's going to die, I'd rather it was only me and not both of us. It's not fun to think about, but it's a dangerous sport and you have to think realistically."

Mt. Aconcagua? Check.

All told, the Argentinean monster took Perez 11 days: nine to go up and two to come down. He went with three friends from LA, but was the only one in the group to summit. His fellow climbers came down with a common problem in the climbing community: altitude sickness.

"The first time I did Whitney, I had altitude sickness so bad. It was my first big climb and I was unprepared for it," he says. "You get headache, nausea, dizziness. You can't coordinate your steps."



On top of Mt. Aconcagua: Eleven days later, Gerald Perez reaches the summit.

"The best medicine is to go down. I've had to take friends who were sick down before and you have to stay with them every step of the way – almost carrying them. It's like having a person who is drunk walk down a mountain with you."

But their sickness wasn't going to stop Perez. The team made it to 17,500 and he made the summit push from there in a single, 18-hour day. The entire trek was unlike any other mountain he'd climbed.

"The terrain in Argentina was completely different from anything I've done before," he says. "It was cold, but no snow up to 17,000. And it was all gravelly and difficult to walk on. You take two steps up and slide back a step. After about 18,000 feet there was snow all the way to the summit, but no snow on top. It was weird."

Perez says he literally ran down Mt Aconcagua in two days in anticipation of returning home after the cold (-27 degrees below zero at the worst) journey. And that was in Argentina's summertime climate. He says it would take a month to climb if you did it in the winter.

Future plans

Energized from his latest success, Perez plans no hiatus break like most of us might. He's off to Alaska in May to conquer Mt. McKinley and is putting together a trip to scale numbers three and four in his quest for the Seven Summits.

"My plan is to go from here to Russia to do Mt. Elbrus, which is the highest mountain in Europe," he says. "Then from there, I'll fly to Africa and do Kilimanjaro in the same trip. I think it will be cheaper that way. I should be gone about a month in order to do both. I hope my wife can put up with that."

Mt. Elbrus is 18, 510 feet high and covered with ice and snow year-round. Tanzania's Mt. Kilimanjaro is 19,341 feet high and ought to be an easier climb with less extreme temperatures.

If Perez accomplishes that, he'd only have Vinson Massif in Antarctica (16,050 feet), Puncak Jaya in Indonesia (16,024 feet) and the mammoth Mt. Everest in Nepal (29,029 feet). He'd then join an elite group of mountain climbers and even be a class unto himself.

"If I do it, I'll be the first Puerto Rican to do it," he says. "You have to keep a low profile on that for me, though, OK? I don't want another Puerto Rican to get ahead of me."

Until he can head out again for his next mountain, Perez will stick to what keeps him happy: training.

"It's a lot of work, effort and training, and you have to be prepared," he says. "But I like the challenge. It's something that most people don't do. One guy asked me yesterday, 'Why do you go to the mountains?' I said, 'Because they're there and because they won't come to me.'"