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Local trio confront challenges

**By Moira K. Wiley
Staff Writer**

Local residents Mike Bale, Bert Jacobson and John Rogers recently climbed two of Colorado's most difficult and dangerous "14ers."

The term 14er refers to the highest mountain summits in North America, which are those exceeding 14,000 feet in elevation. Colorado hosts a total of 53 legitimate 14ers, which are found in several independent mountain ranges.

Bert Jacobson, the most experienced of the three, started climbing in 1988 when he and his wife climbed their first 14er together. The couple have been on about 10 trips together.

"Another partner and I started guiding trips in the summer for fun," said Jacobson. "It was on one of these trips that I met Mike and John. They had the same enthusiasm for climbing that I did and we've been together ever since. I no longer guide trips and the mountains I'm climbing are getting more difficult. These are the guys I trust to climb with."

This summer the Stillwater trio climbed Capital Peak (Elevation 14,130 feet) and Pyramid Peak (Elevation 14,018 feet). According to the accepted rating system for Colorado's 14ers, these are considered very difficult and marked as double black diamonds, the extreme range of the ratings.

It took them six days and a total accumulated distance of over 10,000 vertical feet and 20 horizontal miles to reach the summits of both Peaks.

Pyramid Peak along with Maroon Peak (Elev. 14,156 feet) and North Maroon Peak (Elev. 14,014 feet) are known collectively as the "Deadly Bells," because of the high number of fatalities that occur during climbing attempts.

The sheer cliffs, slanting ledges, loose rocks and unpredictable weather make these mountains highly volatile.

The trio will make summit bids on Maroon and North Maroon Peaks next summer.

Capital Peak has an infamous knife-edge ridge that was featured in Aspen magazine. The edge is a 300-foot long ridge with a 2,000 foot drop on either side.

It connects the false summit of K2 to the exposed face of Capital Peak. The ridge is climbed by straddling it, holding on to it while keeping the feet on one side or by tight-rope walking, which is an option rarely tried.

“At 12,000 feet and up, the weather can almost instantly turn lethal for the unprepared climber,” said Jacobson.

“Temperatures can drop 30-40 degrees in a matter of minutes. Freezing rain, sleet and snow transforms cotton clothing into cold, soggy garments capable of inducing sudden hypothermia. The thin air, dry atmosphere and demanding physical exertion quickly drain the fluids from your body, contributing to dehydration even before thirst is apparent. Finally, altitude sickness and pulmonary edema are conditions that can neither be predicted nor prevented.”

The mountain climbing trio have been together for over six years and have climbed nearly all the 14ers in Colorado.

They started planning the 2002 summer trip during the long, 14-hour drive back to Stillwater after the 2001 summer trip.

They discussed their mistakes, weather and the logistics of their next trip.

“It takes an enormous amount of planning,” said Jacobson.

“You set up base camp at about 11,000 or 12,000 feet and this is the point of take off for the summit. You have to take enough supplies, in case you get weathered out. The one thing you can’t control is the weather, so you have to be prepared for anything.”

Jacobson suggests that anyone interested in this type of adventure should get in shape and talk to an experienced climber before setting out on a trip.

“There are several textbooks available that offer advice on what and what not to do and advice on trails and routes to take,” said Jacobson.

“But, speaking to an experienced climber can give you insights not contained in a book. New climbers should never go by themselves and should always go with an experienced climber the first few times. Every mountain is different.”

Jacobson has climbed 50 of the 53 mountains in Colorado classified as 14ers. His goal is to climb them all.

“I tried to play golf, but it didn’t give me the same thrill. Some people ask me if I’m crazy or why would I want to do this. But, no one asks an overzealous golf player why they drop everything and go play golf every chance they get. It’s the same concept with me and mountains. Many people ask me if I’m afraid of falling or dying. To which I always respond, I’m not afraid of dying, I’m afraid of not living.”