

## Conquering Kosciuszko

Dennis Cooper

The alarm has just gone off. It's 3 am on 3 December 2008. How come I'm so cold—it's supposed to be summer? It's freezing right now with a forecast of below zero temperatures at the summit of Mount Kosciuszko in the NSW alpine region.

We will travel in hand-cycles and wheelchairs and on foot up the Summit track to Rawson's Pass and then on to the top, a round trip of 18 km. I'll be in a Trekinetic K-2 All Terrain wheelchair, which I reckon is the best chair in the rough. The event has been organised by Disabled WinterSport Australia (DWA) as part of the Alpine Summer Accessible Tourism Project to promote International Day of People with a Disability (IDPWD).

I'm no stranger to the mountains. I cherish the memory of a family skiing holiday in Perisher, with the four of us coming down the slope like a line of ducks—dad tallest in front, Emmaline at 7 and Jacob at 4 in their Milo ski-gear and helmets with mum at the back. The scene is of tree branches covered with gleaming fresh snow.

That was three years ago, before I fell off a double storey roof, landing on my back and breaking it. Now we do things differently. Now I am 61 and have T10 complete paraplegia and the question is, could I really reach Australia's highest point? Could I tick that off the list of things I had hoped to do and see.

Only four months before the Kosciuszko trek I surmounted another personal challenge, one of the hardest things I have ever done—sit skiing. There is no way I would have been able to get back to actively ski again without the help of DWA. I was a skiing speed freak before my accident—even though I didn't start skiing until I was 50; I thought I wouldn't again be able to have that indescribable exhilaration and feeling of sheer joy and freedom. I met some amazing people during my short time there. The group had a number of people who also needed varying degrees of help. Who else but the volunteers and staff at DWA have the skills, the time and the patience to give people with special needs the help necessary to take part in this challenging activity. I was so thankful when we left the snow.

It was on that trip that I was invited by Paul Gardner, DWA program manager, to take part in the IDPWD trek.

The assault on the mountain began at Finskos Lodge in Jindabyne. As I was getting

into my thermal undergarments and layers of clothes I wondered whether the cold would be too much for me. Circulation isn't the same in people who are paralysed and we feel it much more than others.

We travelled by bus to the meeting point at Charlotte Pass. Our group included some honoured company—Paralympians Michael Milton, Ron Finneran OAM and Louise Sauvage.

Heidi Thomas, one of our friends who also has paraplegia, had come from Western Australia to be part of the event. In all 40 people were with us, some able-bodied and many with a range of physical and sensory disabilities. Not forgetting Westie the guide dog.

Heidi, Louise and I would be using the Trekinetic K-2. These all terrain wheelchairs have the large push wheels at the front and a single rear wheel. Ron, the only other wheelchair user, used a standard wheelchair specially modified to raise the two front castors off the ground above a single front wheel. Michael Milton did the trek using crutches.

Everyone was in good chatty spirits during the first 3.5 km on the road to the Snowy River Bridge. The surface was relatively flat but uneven with potholes and pebbles. The Trekinetics made the going very easy and very comfortably. There were three groups—never being one to shy away from a challenge Heidi forged ahead up front with the first group while we quietly plodded along.

We all stopped at various points along the way for a breather and to admire our beautiful countryside and magnificent views. It had snowed the week before and the landscape made for a lot of excited camera clicking.



L to R: Heidi Thomas, Dennis Cooper and Louise Sauvage



Approaching Rawson's Pass (photo: Altitude Images)

The first official stop, at the Snowy River, was particularly striking—the water gurgling under the bridge was crystal clear and sparkled as it wound its way down the mountain.

As the true ascent began I was feeling it in my arms—any manual wheelchair user can tell you what an effort it is to push uphill with quick movement of the hands back on the wheel rims to arrest any backward roll. This took us to Seaman's Hut, the second stop. We were 2,300 m above sea level and had travelled 5 km. There would be one more stop before the final ascent to the summit.

Fortunately there were plenty of volunteers to give us a push—this wasn't so much about personal strength, but rather personal achievement. At one stage Michael was in front pulling on a harness with Ron behind while they climbed and laughed together.

At Rawson's Pass, after 7.5 km, our third stop included a belated breakfast and a visit to Australia's highest loo. Apart from that relief we needed to catch our breath for the final assault to the top, 1.5 km away. It doesn't sound far but it is the steepest and most rugged part of the climb.

The track became rocky and uneven. Part of it had been modified with recycled car tyres filled with rocks set into the downhill curve to prevent erosion of the track. That proved no problem for the Trekkinetics as we pushed and were pushed and pulled upward by our intrepid helpers.

Even though I was one of the last to arrive at the peak I made it—that's all that mattered. The feeling of accomplishment was in knowing that we are in

wheelchairs and yet still able to sit on the rooftop of Australia! The outlook was awesome. We could see all the way to the mountains of Victoria. The road to the top is hard but the view compensates.

Our trusty steeds, the Trekkinetics, got us to the top across all sorts of surfaces and now turned downhill to tackle them again.

I was the last to leave on the descent and decided to challenge myself and my chair. I set the back of the chair to its lowest position and the wheel camber to maximum spread; I was off. The trekkers who didn't know I was coming would hear my Beep Beep and let me pass.

All I can say is thank God for the independent drum brakes on the K-2 chair. At one point I was going very fast towards the downhill side of the track with a big drop imminent and so I used the right brake ... a little too much ... I spun round to the right with the left wheel hitting a rock and throwing me out of the chair. Luckily my arms were already there to break my fall. The trekkers behind ran to my aid and after a brush down, back in my seat and undeterred I was off again!

One of my most vivid memories was the last part of the trek. I was the first one back and I can remember the last stretch, being on my own with no one visible in front or behind. It reminded me of the feeling I used to get in a previous life when I sailed around the world for five years in my own 42 ft yacht. The feeling of being at one with the mountain had me thinking of a quote by Thomas Traherne in *Mutiny on the Bounty*, "it has become fashionable to believe, that only amongst men of the sea, free from all restraints, totally at one with nature, can true happiness be felt."

Alone on the track it took a couple of tries to get up the very last rise. I was totally exhausted but gritted my teeth and pushed for all it's worth. At the end I was absolutely wasted—that used every last bit of strength I had.

Hopefully DWA will receive funding to take people up to the top of Mt K on a regular basis. I for one would do it again in a heartbeat!

*Note: Dennis Cooper is the Australian agent for Trekkinetic wheelchairs. For more information on the K-2 go to [www.trekkinetic.com](http://www.trekkinetic.com) or email [trekkinetic@optusnet.com.au](mailto:trekkinetic@optusnet.com.au).*