

by Niki Kapsambelis

# BOLD MOVES

CONQUERING INDUSTRY OR CLIMBING EVEREST, KOBOLD MOVES MOUNTAINS

“There’s always an extra seat on the boat, an extra chair in the classroom, an extra job opportunity at a company – even if everyone tells you no.”

Fighting through the combined effects of dyslexia and attention deficit disorder to graduate from the Tepper School was a battle Michael Kobold describes as “the hardest time of my life, by far.”

But that personal milestone recently was eclipsed by his latest undertaking: climbing Mount Everest in an effort to raise money for the families of fallen Navy SEALs.

Hardly the weekend warrior type, Kobold (BS '01) has what he describes as a sedentary job and lifestyle, and eats “considerably more chocolate than anyone should.” He’s also afraid of heights and has never climbed anything higher than a stepladder.

So why, if Kobold is interested in raising money for a worthy cause, would he consider attempting to summit the world’s highest mountain – an adventure that has proven impossible, or even fatal, to experienced climbers?

The answer is simple: To save face while serving a worthy cause. At a charity dinner in New York to benefit the families of fallen Navy SEALs, Kobold took some ribbing from a SEAL commander who had heard that Kobold had already made an unsuccessful attempt on Everest.



View from Camp 4



Kobold traversing the Geneva Spur between Camp 3 and Camp 4



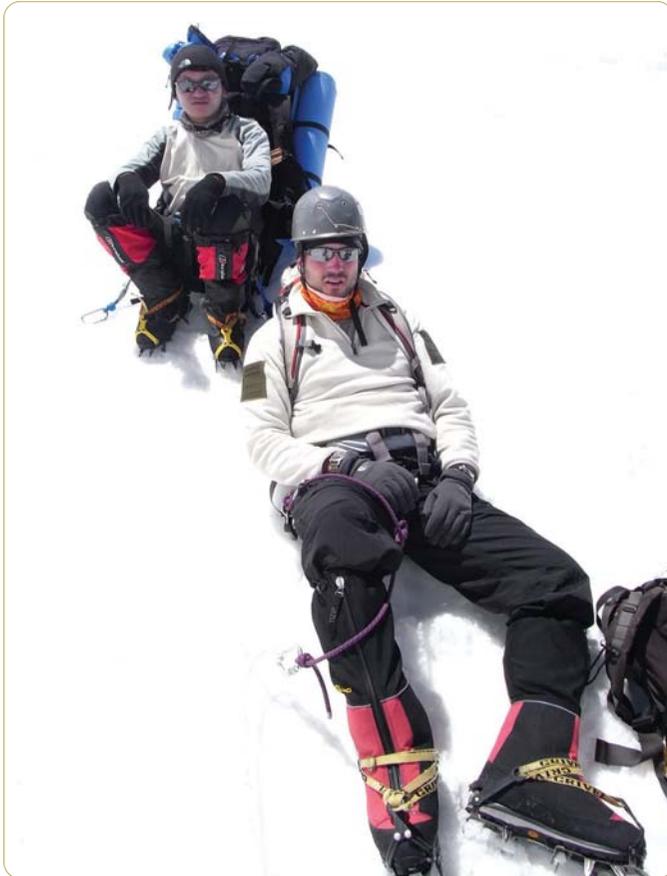
Kobold, Ang Namgel Sherpa raise the Navy SEAL flag



Kobold and guide Kenton Cool, below the summit of Mt. Everest



Kobold and Sir Ranulph Fiennes in 2007



Kobold and Ang Namgel Sherpa rest on their way to Camp 1

In 2007, on a week's notice, Kobold went to the fabled peak at the invitation of British adventurer Sir Ranulph Fiennes, but didn't get very high. At base camp one morning, while slicing a salami for breakfast, he cut open his hand in the mess tent and fainted at the sight of his own blood.

"When I came to, there were five doctors, one tree surgeon, a fireman, two people from the news, and a cameraman and a photographer," Kobold recalls. His adventure ended as abruptly as it began.

Back in New York, he sheepishly admitted to the SEAL commander how far he'd actually gotten.

"That's not very far," the commander said with a smirk.

Though affable and easygoing – Kobold has been known to conduct company meetings for his Kobold Watch Co. around a picnic table – he is quick to point out that "I am still male, and of course males are known to be ego-driven."

The exchange prompted Kobold to take the "I'll-show-him" reaction to new extremes: He decided not only to summit Everest, but to do so while raising money for the Navy SEAL Warrior Fund. And the SEALs, in turn, agreed to help him prepare for the expedition.

And so it came to be that Kobold found himself in the early months of 2009 training on the SEAL base in Coronado, Calif., the rigors of which caused him to pass out a few times every week.

"These guys put me through the wringer. I've never had anything like this happen to me," he says.

Training regimens included drills such as running on soft sand barefoot for an hour, each step hitting debris and shell casings leftover from other exercises.

While running through an obstacle course, the height-sensitive Kobold was stymied by a six-story cargo net strung between two wooden poles. He was able to climb only halfway.

To motivate him for the next attempt, SEAL recruits dangled a piece of chocolate over his head. This time, Kobold was able to finish.

The 2009 Everest trip began with Kobold's departure from the United States on April 1; he started his adventure in May, climbing from the great mountain's north side. He finally reached the summit – and raised the Navy SEAL flag – early on the morning of May 21, but not without some frightening moments. In a blog chronicling the experience, Kobold writes that he accidentally attached himself to an old rope from a previous season while negotiating the mountain's infamous Hillary Step, prompting a slide toward a deadly drop.

Kobold was able to grab the correct rope and make his way toward the summit, but on the way back down, he had another near-miss:

# WHEN A WATCH GOES prime time

While working his way through an ice fall, he had to jump over a 7-foot-wide crevasse. He made the leap successfully, but lost his balance on the landing, leaning backwards over the 80-foot-deep crack. By chance, his glove got caught in an ice hook on the side of a large chunk of ice, so he didn't fall in. But when he reached base camp, several expeditions were contributing to a full-scale search-and-rescue operation, not realizing that he had safely made his way through.

The next day, on his team's trek down to the helicopter landing site, several locals greeted Kobold by saying, "Oh, you're the guy they were looking for yesterday afternoon."

Following the climb, he was back in the United States by June. Apart from the SEAL training, Kobold also met with his employees to form contingency plans for his watch company in case he didn't return. But prior to leaving, he was remarkably sanguine, despite the horror stories about people who left for Everest and never came back – and whose bodies he passed on his climb to the summit.

"It's all about fear control. That's what I was taught at Carnegie Mellon; that's what I was taught in my life," he says.

The son of a German industrialist, Kobold became interested in watchmaking as a boy and made it his professional undertaking after earning an undergraduate economics degree at the Tepper School.

Though he struggled to compete academically, Kobold did conquer his afflictions to graduate, and now believes his education prepared him well for the trials of starting his own luxury watch business – training he also credits with giving him courage to pursue his exotic new hobby.

"I was trained by the best at Carnegie Mellon. And when you are trained, you can do these things," he says.

He recalls the advice of now-retired Jack Roseman, formerly the John R. Thorne Professor of Entrepreneurship, who told him: "There's always an extra seat on the boat, an extra chair in the classroom, an extra job opportunity at a company – even if everyone tells you no."

Once painfully shy, and still extremely modest, Kobold learned to beat his own drum to accomplish his goals. Hence, his watch company is among the world's smallest, and his expedition is tiny, "but we've been able to do the right thing because we made a lot of noise."

"Never take no for an answer," he says. "I'm king at that. I'm relentless. When I need something, especially if it's for a worthy cause, I don't take no for an answer."

> Follow Michael Kobold's account of his Mount Everest adventure at [www.everest-challenge.com](http://www.everest-challenge.com).



Well-known figures like Bill Clinton and James Gandolfini are part of the elite set who sport Michael Kobold's handcrafted timepieces, the product of his eponymous Kobold Watch Co.

Kobold's passion for watches began with the childhood gift of a Cartier watch from his father, a German industrialist. He became fascinated with its inner

workings and learned the art of watchmaking from Gerd Lang of Chronoswiss. Today, Kobold's watches are highly coveted by the jet set and retail at a starting price in excess of \$2,000 apiece.

He began the company in 1999 at the suggestion of Lang. Jack Roseman, from whom Kobold took entrepreneurship classes while at the Tepper School, advised his student to sell the watches online.

Since then, the company has expanded to include a few master watchmakers, although each piece is still built by hand, mostly at his company's unassuming headquarters in suburban Pittsburgh.

Some of Kobold's celebrity clients include actor James Gandolfini, who played the lead in HBO's *The Sopranos* and is a friend; adventurer Sir Ranulph Fiennes, who has twice taken Kobold to Mt. Everest; and former President Bill Clinton. Gandolfini famously appears in one of the company's print ads.

Part of Kobold's niche strategy is to limit production of his watches; he caps his output to 2,500 timepieces per year. He does not believe in discounts either, with the exception of law enforcement and military personnel.

He photographs the company's ads himself and does not pay his celebrity spokesmen. Most sales are by phone or Internet, with a handful of sales going through authorized retailers.