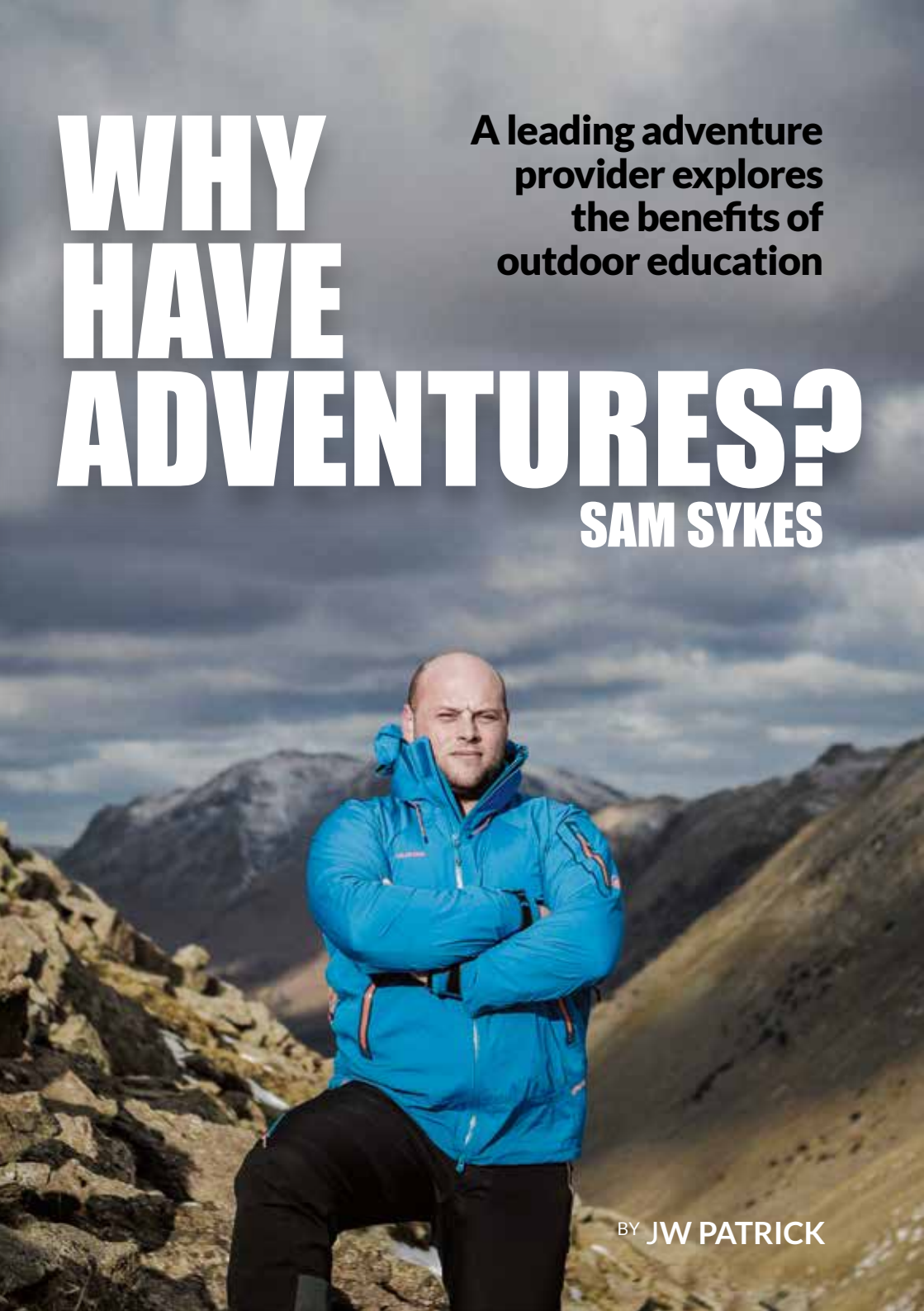
WHY HAVE ADVENTURES?

A leading adventure provider explores the benefits of outdoor education

SAM SYKES



BY JW PATRICK

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How outdoor education benefits young people

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James Patrick is a writer and publisher, who has written many documentary voice-over scripts for broadcast on American and British television. He currently publishes a number of local interest magazines available across Scotland and recently completed an adventure novel for children aged 10+, The Invincibles, which is available from Amazon.co.uk.

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WHO IS SAM SYKES?

Sam Sykes is an outdoor pursuits instructor who believes that challenge and adventure benefit young people for the rest of their lives. Sam believes that by learning practical new skills such as rock climbing, camping, map reading and kayaking, young people grow more confident in their own abilities. Confidence leads to self-reliance, which are core life-skills for a successful career. But that's not all:

Essential communication and team-building skills are honed by planning and undertaking expeditions to climb a distant summit, hike a long trail or paddle a remote lake. Also, setting clear goals and achieving them by working hard in difficult circumstances can forge valuable personality traits such as perseverance and determination. Adventure can also mean learning to take responsibility and discovering how to lead effectively. All of these key skills will have a positive impact on young people's lives, whatever their career choice.

"Nothing in the world," says Sam, "beats a group of young people working hard and working together to achieve a common goal."

But above all, Sam thinks that outdoor adventures are simply great fun, that the mountains are there for all of us to enjoy and that we should all have an opportunity to experience a proper adventure at least once in our lives…

Sam himself first slept on a mountainside before he could walk, wore crampons on an Alpine glacier aged just three, completed his Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award and climbed Mont Blanc, unguided, before he was out of his teens. *Why Have Adventures?* describes many of Sam's expeditions around the world, some successful, some falling agonisingly short, which between them illustrate how outdoor pursuits can develop life skills and traits such as:

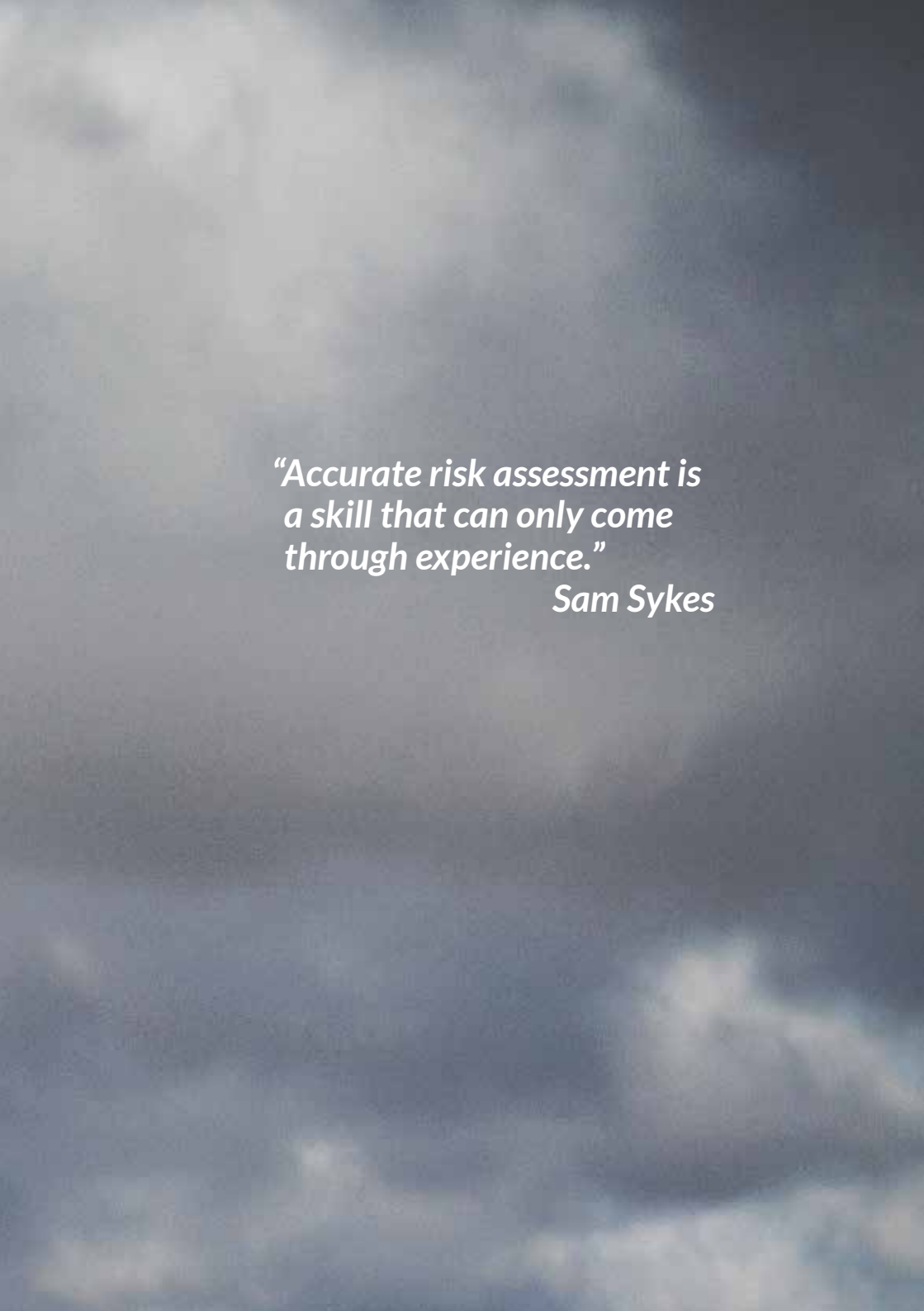
Risk Assessment, Self-Reliance, Team Work, Perseverance, Learning from Mistakes, Communication and Leadership

> ***"Sam Sykes is the sort of bloke you want with you. If you're going to go anywhere in the world, he'd be on my shortlist to take with me. I know I can rely on his judgement, there are not a lot of people you can say that about, even good friends. In mountaineering you have to rely on someone else's judgement, I can't really offer a higher accolade than that."***
>
> Sam C (school friend and climbing partner)

> ***"Sam is larger than life, literally. He pushes everything to extremes, including himself, in every way. If he's working, he works hard. If he's partying, he parties hard. If we go out for a couple of beers, we'll be out till the wee hours."***
>
> Jacko (school friend and climbing partner)

CONTENTS

RISK ASSESSMENT



"Accurate risk assessment is a skill that can only come through experience."

Sam Sykes

The Matterhorn 4478m

Hornli Ridge, Matterhorn Expedition 2009

The experienced two man climbing team were just 200m from the summit of the Matterhorn when word came down that a lightning storm was due to hit in the next couple of hours. A quick decision was needed but the men disagreed. Risk an attempt on the summit and hope to outrun the storm? Or head back down the mountain to find shelter?

Could twenty years of dreaming, eight months of careful planning, four months of intense training, three days of travelling and two days of hard climbing end in failure just 200m short of the 4478m summit?

> ***"When I'm on my own or with experienced climbing partners, I take risks, I push the boundaries, push myself to the limits. I have had misadventures and risked my life on expeditions, but that's how I've learned where the boundaries are, where the limits are and I want to pass these lessons on."*** says Sam Sykes

Sam Sykes and childhood friend Jacko had been climbing mountains all their lives and encountered far worse weather conditions. But this was the Matterhorn.

The Matterhorn, one of the deadliest peaks in the Alps has claimed around 600 lives since it was first conquered in 1865, it kills around a dozen climbers every year and is no place to be during a lightning storm. But all that planning, all that effort, all that expense just to turn around 200m from the top? When might they ever get another chance at the summit of the Matterhorn?

Eight months earlier

The Matterhorn expedition of 2009, like so many other expeditions before it, began with a group of old friends chatting in a warm pub in the Lake District.

As always with this group, ideas flowed as readily as the beer and over the course of the evening, some of the suggestions became increasingly ambitious. By closing time, there were one or two ideas for expeditions that had survived the inevitably ruthless cross examinations, ideas that got the lads thinking hard, with destinations that were considered difficult, but were still achievable.

Most weekends they enjoyed similar enthusiastic pub conversations but this was different. This time one of the group members phoned up the others the following morning. For these experienced adventurers, that was usually the clincher. When a good idea withstands both the night's beer and the foggy morning-after feeling, the group knows that someone has come up with a serious proposition.

It was the Matterhorn.

The Matterhorn, perhaps the most famous mountain silhouette in the world, has been climbed regularly for 150 years and remains one of the most popular climbing destinations. Fixed ropes and cables are in place across the most difficult stretches but it's still one of the world's great killers of mountaineers and can never be underestimated. The Matterhorn is especially unpredictable as it is prone to sudden weather changes and involves a long climb up narrow ridges with loose and falling rocks as well as snow and ice falls. Also, the more people that are out on the mountain at the same time, the more dangerous it becomes. A tumbling stone, the size of a fist, can knock a man senseless – and on the Matterhorn there are loose rocks the size of cars.

Sam Sykes has been dreaming about the Matterhorn since he first heard of it at the age of five and, as with many climbers, it's been calling to him ever since. Nearly 20 years later he was never going to pass up an opportunity to turn a long held dream from a Friday night pub chat into cold hard reality.

For this group of climbers, most of whom have been mountaineering

since their early teens, the planning process begins immediately.

Each of them goes away and starts researching the Matterhorn, reading guide books, phoning other mountaineers and short -listing the various climbing routes to the summit. The first priority, however, is to find a free window when they can all travel. Unlike in the old days when they were teenagers, the group all now have jobs and girlfriends.

A round robin, perpetual link email is set up and is copied and forwarded relentlessly, with suggestions, ideas, dates and potential costs. The proposed expedition team, the group from the pub, shrinks with every passing week as various real life commitments take their toll. Finally, there are just two remaining who believe they can make a feasible attempt on the Matterhorn within the next year. Sam Sykes is a freelance outdoor pursuits instructor and climbing wall manager but has no problem arranging time off; the outdoors is his job and the more experience he gains, the better. His kit is even tax deductible. But for the others it has been much harder to make time. 'Jacko' is now a successful salesman and it takes him two full months to persuade both his employer and his girlfriend to allow him time off to travel to the Alps with his best mate.

Next, it's imperative that they lock down the dates so there can be no last minute dropping out. Flights are bought, hostels booked and huts reserved so now it'll really cost them to back out.

Finally, they need to prepare physically and mentally for the Matterhorn.

The fitness programme begins four months before they leave and even though they are good friends, the climbing partners take no prisoners in their regime. A weak climbing partner is worse than having a passenger holding you back – it's downright dangerous. If your partner is the only thing between you and a thousand foot fall, you're literally trusting them with your life. So from now on booze intake is reduced or cut out altogether. They push each other hard on long cross-country runs and endure a lot of sand dune running. They hit the climbing walls to strengthen fingers and muscles and practise rope techniques out on the hills. In fact, they spend

every spare minute on the hills.

The Lake District is their back garden and they deliberately make life hard for themselves. This is a key element in the mental preparation for a big expedition because mental fatigue can be a killer out on the mountain.

When mountain conditions change suddenly, when a snow storm blows in and visibility is reduced to nothing, when your already aching limbs are stretched even further, when your feet can barely feel the rock beneath, when your ice cold fingers are so numb you can hardly open a carabiner… that's when you lose concentration and that's when you make mistakes that could cost you your life or the lives of your friends.

So to try and replicate difficult and unpleasant climbing conditions, the team attack the peaks in the Lake District with the wrong kit or not enough kit, or go climbing in poor weather, staying out on the hills longer than they would normally; anything to make themselves miserable, anything to push themselves harder, to test their limits.

They set themselves specific goals in adverse conditions that must be achieved within set times, no matter how they are feeling, because the faster they can get up and down the Matterhorn, the safer they'll be.

For experienced climbers there's simply nothing more important than trusting your climbing partner. Your life depends on knowing, really knowing, who your mates are. Understanding how each individual copes under pressure is key to every successful team.

During this training period, although the lads know each other well, they are still assessing each other's strengths and weaknesses and trying to foresee any potential problems before they leave. Jacko notices that Sam doesn't eat nearly enough on the hill - something that will definitely need to change by the time they arrive in the far colder Alps.

After three months intense training with just a couple more weeks to go before they set off, the climbing duo assemble their existing mountaineering kit. They examine each other's packs too, checking for

wear and tear, missing equipment and what needs to be adjusted. Having chatted to other climbers about the Matterhorn, they have a good idea now what can be left behind too, so loads are lightened. In fact, this process can become an obsession for many climbers as every possible gram is shaved from their load; excess straps are cut off, unnecessary mesh liners removed, clothing labels and even the little tags attached to zip fasteners are snipped off. There can be no messing about on the mountain: everything has to be simple. A roll of waterproof duct tape acts as an emergency repair kit for most scenarios. Ripped jacket? Slap on some duct tape. Torn rucksack? Wrap it in duct tape. Any missing items are purchased or borrowed and if a lighter version of a particular item of kit, say a caribiner, can be found then it will be exchanged. Job done.

Next stop: the airport.

Two days of travelling later Sam and Jacko arrive in Zermatt by train at the foot of the Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps. There is no road in so there are no cars, except silent, electric milk-float style vehicles. Zermatt was once a tiny, isolated village but now it's a thriving picturesque tourist destination with modern stainless steel and glass architecture merging seamlessly with the historic and traditional. It's not just a destination for climbers. Hikers, walkers and cyclists mingle with veteran mountaineers and there are even cable cars to take visitors up to various levels in the surrounding mountains.

"Zermatt feels special the moment you step off the train, it's so intimidating," says Sam. "The way the Matterhorn dominates the town, it seems to be staring at you, it really makes you nervous. There's a real sense that the mountain wants to kill you. It's atmospheric to say the least."

Sam and Jacko's initial plan was to make several simpler climbs up neighbouring lower peaks, such as the Breithorn, in order to acclimatise to the local Alpine conditions before attempting the Matterhorn itself. However, no sooner had Sam and Jacko pitched their tent in Zermatt,

they discovered that a storm was due to hit the mountain in three days – giving them no time for any warm up climbs and no time to acclimatise to the altitude. They must set off the following morning. Their intended route, via the Hornli Ridge, means they will overnight in the Hornli Hut and set out for the summit shortly before dawn.

The Hornli Hut, situated at 3260m, is more than a usual climbing hut as it can sleep 120, has a restaurant and receives 4000 visitors each season. Beds are often booked a year in advance. Water, though, can be scarce, so tempers often fray when trying to buy those last few bottles. This day was no different.

Traditionally, it's the local guides and their clients who leave the Hornli Hut first, usually around 3am. So, as Sam and Jacko were unguided, they had to wait their turn. They didn't mind too much because the start of the Hornli Ridge route to the summit can be quite difficult to find in the dark. The mountain was very crowded, which was not surprising really as the storm warning had created a rush to take advantage of the last good weather window, for what could be weeks.

For experienced climbers, the Hornli ridge is considered moderately difficult (AD+/III+) and it's long. The summit is 4478m which means a vertical climb alone of more than 1000m from the Hut.

Four hours later, Sam and Jacko remained focused, they were free climbing (not using ropes) and avoiding using the fixed cables wherever possible, attempting as pure a climb as they could manage. Barely a word was spoken between them; they were climbing well but both already knew they were behind schedule. Those lost acclimatisation days were costing them dear.

Suddenly they started meeting climbers coming back down the mountain and not all of them had even reached the summit. It had to be the storm. Nobody wants to find themselves on the side of a mountain, in a lightning storm, attached to long wet ropes and cables made of metal.

Sam and Jacko had climbed the best part of a vertical kilometre in six

hours, they were just 200m away from the summit of the Matterhorn. The long held dream, the months of planning and training, the sheer hard slog of the last couple of days; could it all be for nothing? There would be no second chance this trip, the weather had seen to that. It was now or never.

"We were nine tenths of the way up, we'd done the hardest part, the summit was there for the taking." said Jacko.

But Sam wasn't convinced. He'd been in the valley before, he knew the weather forecasts were generally accurate. They could see that experienced climbers and local guides were heading back down. Could a couple of English climbers risk a summit attempt, when even the locals wouldn't? Sam suspected Jacko had tunnel vision, that he believed they could make it to the summit and back to safety before the storm hit. They'd been talking about this moment for years, the trip had cost a lot of money, they'd trained hard, they were in good form and climbing as well as they ever had. Would they regret this for the rest of their lives?

The clock was ticking. Every moment they remained stationary, nervously glancing at the skies and arguing, was a wasted moment as the storm drew ever closer.

But still the friends debated furiously. One moment, Jacko felt as if he'd finally persuaded Sam but then a few minutes later he wasn't so sure. Sam felt that maybe, just maybe, if no one was in their way they could make it up and back in just enough time to avoid the storm. But so many climbers ahead of them were turning back as all the best routes were already taken. They would therefore have to veer off the beaten path to avoid the descending climbers, and that would make their ascent even more arduous and time consuming.

"We were not acclimatised and we were knackered as it was," said Sam.

Climbers far behind them were now also turning back so a bottleneck was fast developing along their descent route too.

Jacko said "When you know someone that well you just end up pushing each other's buttons, trying to get their real decision… to make sure you're both absolutely happy with it. Also neither of us wanted to look soft."

They took 10 minutes to make up their minds.

"I could see there was no changing Sam's mind," said Jacko "and I couldn't exactly go on alone."

Sam said "It's not worth it. The mountain will always be here". This was a lesson Sam's dad had drilled into him since he was young.

They turned around, thunder crashing in the distance, rocks already tumbling down the mountainside and headed back down.

A couple of young German climbers immediately behind them made the opposite decision, going for broke – hoping to make it to the summit and back before the full force of the lightning storm hit.

Sam and Jacko couldn't help the doubts creeping up on them as they replayed all their key decisions over and over. Should they have manned up? Could they have pushed harder and earlier? Had they chosen the best routes?

But the descent was a free for all now. The Alpine guides were 'short roping' their clients down the mountain as fast as possible. Short roping is when a guide attaches himself to the client – and nothing else. The guide essentially climbs with one hand, as the other holds on to the rope attached to the client, which means if the client stumbles or falls off, the guide can take the full brunt of the fall. Also when things turn bad, it means the guide can quickly get his client off the mountain, simply by lowering them down the difficult sections. Experienced short ropers are highly skilled at making use of natural belays such as rocks wherever possible. (Short roping is also a popular technique for boosting the confidence of inexperienced climbers).

Short roping wasn't the only measure the guides took to expedite their descent. Sometimes they simply attached their clients to fixed ropes and slid them down.

Jacko remembers, "This American climber had been getting too close to me for some time, I'd shot him a look telling him to stay back a few times. He and his local guide wanted to get by but there was nowhere to pass. He slipped and his crampon went into my arm, slicing my new coat. I ended up really shouting at him and Sam had to step in to calm things down. I was so irate. I could see it was going to happen. I'd told him and still he kept coming.

"People were panicking a bit, it was a race to get off the mountain – it was horrendous. I was abseiling down, my arms getting more and more tired, lifting the weight of the rope, clipping into two points and heading down. But people were just using our ropes without asking. Some people above us were even complaining we were going too slow!

"It became every man for himself – which is something we'd never experienced before on a mountain. We were appalled, particularly as a lot of them were local. Perhaps it was just our British queuing mentality, patiently waiting for people who didn't care!"

Sam agreed, "It's a pretty serious breach of mountain etiquette to clip on to someone's rope without asking and I let them know it. I don't think I strained English-Swiss relations too much…

"It was a very difficult descent though. The routes were crowded, everyone was climbing down too fast, inexperienced climbers were holding up the rest, the better climbers became frustrated. When your fingers are numb from the cold, when you can't clip on properly, when you're soaked through, and tired – that's when you make mistakes. That's why most accidents on a mountain occur on the descent."

When Sam and Jacko eventually reached the Hornli Hut, wet, cold, tired and bitterly disappointed, they stocked up on food and water but decided not to stay the night and instead continue their descent, simply wanting

to get off the mountain as soon as they could. They had been aware of the deep thud-thud-thud of the mountain rescue helicopter even through the driving rain and they could see a stretcher beneath one.

Finally, they arrived back in Zermatt, exhausted, soaked, covered in mud to find their expedition tent billowing in the driving rain.

Realising the weather wasn't going to get any better, they booked early flights home, disappointed that such a trip had ended so unceremoniously.

Jacko added, "It was still the best climbing day of my life, we moved so well that day. Unlike some mountains where 90% of your time on the mountain is a long walk-in, a ramble or a hike just getting there, the Matterhorn is so intense from the start. You use every muscle in your body, you're scrambling, climbing. Although we were so disappointed by not capping it off with the peak, we had just never had a better climbing day. That's what it was all about, that's why we were there. We'll be back one day. We need to finish it off."

Later on that night, while enjoying a well-earned beer and a steak they learned that the storm had in fact proved deadly. There had been several serious injuries and at least one climber was dead.

"Were they the ones we saw just a few hundred meters from the summit?" Sam wondered. "I don't know. I don't really want to know to be honest. I can't use someone else's death to justify my own decisions. It just doesn't seem right. But it does put things in perspective."

WHY TAKE RISKS AT ALL?

"There can be no challenge without risk. That's where outdoor education is so good."

"A young person standing at the top of a 60 foot cliff is taking a risk. But if he's attached to safety ropes with calm experienced climbers instructing him then the actual risk is negligible, but he's still afraid. He still has to overcome this fear if he wants to abseil down that cliff. "

"Abseiling, caving, rock climbing, kayaking, ridge scrambling, map reading – they're not just great fun, they don't just help develop useful skills, they safely put a person in seemingly risky situations which need to be dealt with. I truly believe young people can take something positive from these experiences that will benefit them for the rest of their lives."

"There's always risk in life.

Anyone can turn their ankle in a rabbit hole on a hike, but what worthwhile endeavour is without risk?"

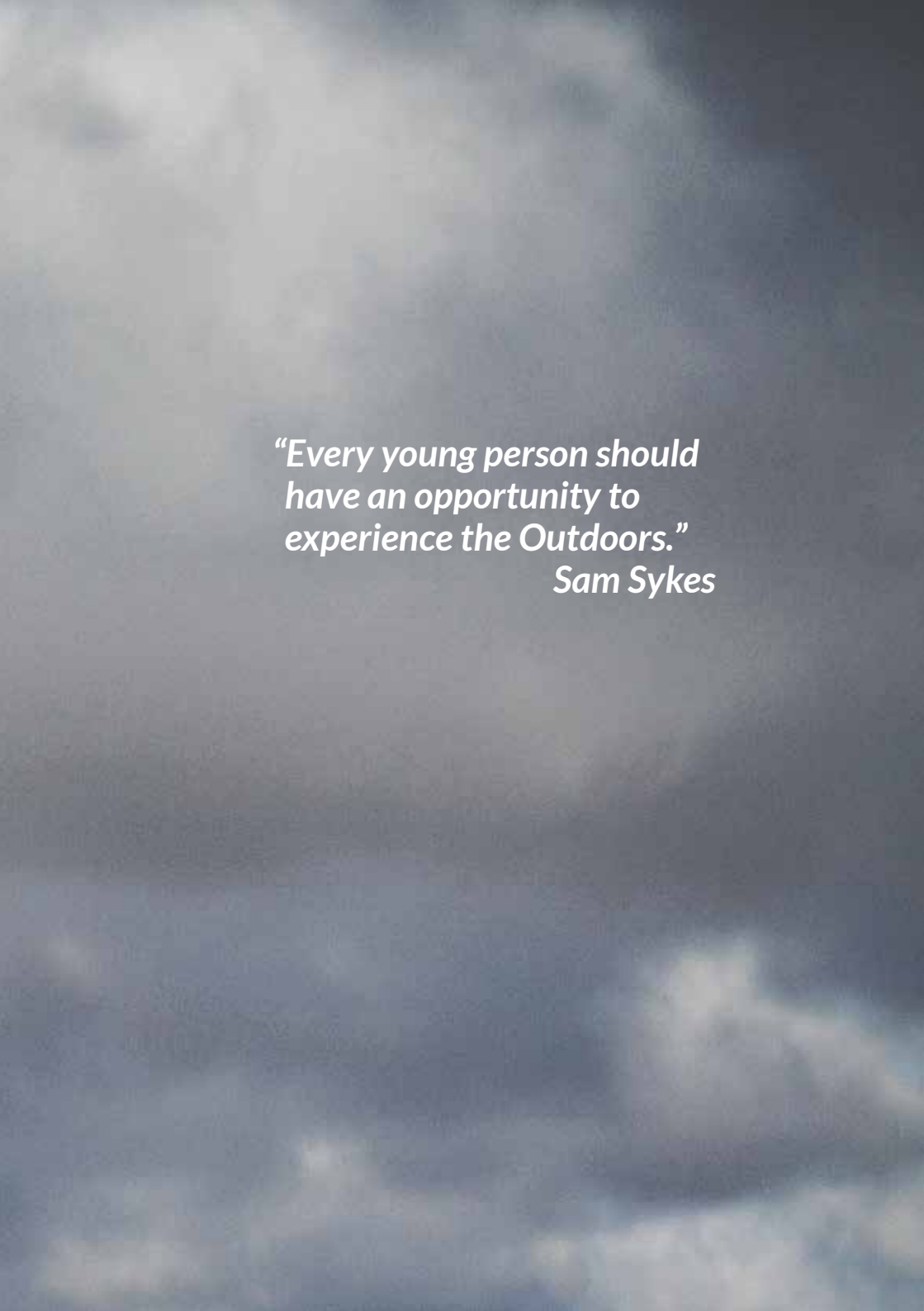
Sam Sykes

"Confidence breeds confidence-it's contagious. If you're around someone who is comfortable in their environment, who is at ease and everything they do appears effortless, then your own confidence rises by just being around them. It's good for young people to be around confident, able people. It's safer too. Nervous people can create panic and are more likely to make mistakes."

"Outdoor education can give young people that sense of risk and conquering a fear without ever really putting them in any physical danger. It's the difference between Actual Risk and Perceived Risk. I can put a young person in an environment well outside their comfort zone with lots of Perceived Risk, but still keep them very, very safe. The confidence boost they gain from overcoming their fears is immense."

"The reason we want children and young people to experience risk, to feel under pressure is because that's how they learn who they are. People develop confidence when they succeed at something difficult. So young people need to experience unfamiliar environments, they need to learn how they react under pressure, how they cope with fear, how they deal with others when under stress, how to face up to new and difficult challenges and successfully overcome them. This is how we all grow as people."


SELF
RELIANCE



"Every young person should have an opportunity to experience the Outdoors."

Sam Sykes

Sam Sykes' passion for outdoor education is firmly rooted in an extremely active family life that has celebrated outdoor pursuits for many decades. Sam's father, Stuart Sykes, has been running Duke of Edinburgh Award Expeditions for nearly 40 years and has been awarded an MBE as a result. Stuart's own love of outdoor pursuits began as a child in post-war West Germany where his father, a police officer seconded to British Military Intelligence, was involved in decommissioning the Wehrmacht, the German Army.

The building next door to the school Stuart attended had been used to manufacture munitions, as the Germans knew the Allies would never intentionally bomb a school. But because there was so much unexploded and unused ordnance remaining in Germany, normal life simply had to continue until the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers could get around to clearing their school. In other words, Stuart and his fellow pupils attended school each day alongside several hundred tons of live explosives.

The stored ammunition was unstable, so the children were asked to leave the premises during the day while the ammo was actually being removed. As the school promoted a practical as well as academic ethos, (common in many German schools before and since) self-reliance was considered key. So the staff took the children out into the woods where they hiked, learned to camp, made fires – all the while continuing with their regular classes. For Stuart, these were thrilling times and the few occasions when they heard booms in the far distance and returned to school later that evening to discover shattered windows and holes blown through the roof only made it even more memorable. It set in stone a passion for the outdoor way of life that has never left Stuart and which he has passed on to his family and countless others.

Like Stuart's father and grandfather before him, he ultimately went on to join the police force, the Lancashire Constabulary and became responsible for the regional Juvenile Bureau – dealing with young people who had committed offences. But while sitting in yet another court watching yet

another young person being dealt with, Stuart decided there simply had to be a better way of dealing with these troubled young men and women. As far as he was concerned, the outcome of the Juvenile Court's decisions never seemed to be to the advantage of the young person concerned.

Consequently, Stuart took a proposal to his Chief Constable with a view to starting a local programme where young people could use the outdoors to develop confidence, self-reliance and learn some skills that might benefit both themselves and society.

"Isn't it better for young people to get a qualification rather than a conviction?" asked Stuart.

He wanted to be able to put young people through the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, no matter what their social and economic background.

The scheme launched in Lancashire in 1978 with intakes following the school terms of autumn, spring and summer. It accepted up to 200 kids at a time at the starting level, Bronze.

Case Study

Stuart and the other volunteers from the police force that joined his project, used to take teenagers from the local schools on a weekly hike, 30 at a time, up into the hills of the Lake District. On one occasion, at Haweswater, one of the volunteer police women was having particular trouble with a very difficult lad who had never been out of the city. He was clearly not happy to be on his first visit to the countryside and so regularly and colourfully voiced his discontent.

Eventually, the boy said he was going home and there was nothing anyone could do to stop him. So off he went. In completely the wrong direction. Stuart let him go.

Stuart, a veteran of these hills knew that the boy was headed into a dead-end valley and that he couldn't get lost by steaming off on his own for a couple of hours.

Later that afternoon the boy came trudging back to the group at which point Stuart gently informed him that as it was a drought year, he could have died out there had he really got lost. He also inquired if the boy might be interested in learning some new skills so he might never get lost again. Stuart then mentioned that they happened to be in the valley with the only eagles in England and if he was interested, there was one he could watch right now. The boy ran off up Riggindale, mesmerised by the eagle and didn't say another word. The following Monday, the boy's teacher rang and asked if he could come with them again. The boy formally joined the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme and over the next two years progressed through Bronze and Silver and went on to earn his Gold Award.

"I thought, there must be lots of youngsters like him," said Stuart. "It was worthwhile trying to see if I could help more."

After Stuart's retirement from the police force in 1989, he decided to continue the outdoors project under his own steam, as a volunteer. As he already had all the relevant qualifications he registered with the local authority and started up his own youth development group. He rented a white windmill outside Blackpool to use as a clubhouse, which the young people helped renovate, and they called themselves the Windmill Youth Group.

Windmill Youth Group

The Windmill Group's aim is for all young people, from all walks of life, to be able to achieve and enjoy reaching their full potential and be ready to face the world with confidence and every chance of success. It is not easy in the Windmill Group and some fail, but for the majority who win through, that in itself is their testimony.

www.windmillyouthgroup.org.uk

The Windmill Group's intake grew year on year as did the frequency, scale and reach of the expeditions. Every weekend involved a local trip, every summer saw a major expedition.

Sam's birth barely interrupted the schedule at all.

At just six months old Sam was popped into Stuart's papoose and made the ascent of Fairsnape Fell, a 500m peak in the Bleasdales in north west England. He would spend a lot of time in a papoose over the next couple of years, with an improvised umbrella over his head. Before he could even walk Sam had also summitted Cross Fell, the highest peak in the Pennines as well as many peaks in the Lakes and Scotland.

At three and a half, Sam was taken to the Dauphinee Alps in south east France (just west of the main range of the Alps). Stuart made him a little ice axe and a pair of mini crampons and carried him in his papoose up to the snow line, where he walked on his first glacier. That trip also saw their tent washed away by a storm, almost followed by their van. Stuart couldn't even see the road for floodwater when he piled his family in, hit the accelerator and didn't stop driving for another eight hours.

Sam Sykes was born into a family that simply didn't do traditional holidays. For the Sykes family, time away just had to involve adventure, whether it was planned or not. Hiking, climbing, trekking, kayaking are must-do activities for many families but travelling off the beaten path and always,

always looking to find out what is over the next hill can sometimes result in more thrills than were originally planned for. Not every family gets held up at gun point while trekking through Yugoslavia and not every English family ends up on the Falls Road in Belfast in a camper (with a Union Jack painted on the bonnet). "Just where do you think you're going?" asked the curious (and heavily armed) British soldier who stopped them.

The Sykes family took a camping trip almost every weekend and every summer they enjoyed six weeks of either holidays or expeditions. German speaking Grandma Sykes also came along and helped out, cooking, hiking and sleeping in the camper van, well into her late 70s. Sam was expected to keep up.

By age four Sam had his own rucksack and carried it all the way up Helvellyn by himself to enjoy his first overnight camp, with his family on one of the Lake District's highest peaks. That was soon followed by conquering Skiddaw near Keswick. In addition to family trips, he was beginning to join his father on many of the Duke of Edinburgh Gold expeditions organised all over Europe for the Windmill Group including hill walking, kayaking on the Dordogne and climbing in the Pyrenees.

By age 10 Sam had accumulated so much experience that he found himself helping out a group of 18 year olds during the course of an expedition. Such were his capabilities that he had become an unofficial assistant to his father and by age 12 was accompanying the supervisors who monitor expeditions from a distance, usually this involved taking far more difficult routes, across rougher terrain than the expedition participants themselves.

One valuable lesson that Sam picked up from these expeditions was the sense of responsibility DofE expeditions engender in young people. Youngsters are expected to learn from their own mistakes and accept the consequences. Even though Sam was not officially part of the expeditions he wasn't cut any more slack than anyone else. In fact, Sam believes he was pushed harder than most of the others and his father concurs:

"I think it's important that expeditions always test you, so fit and experienced kids should be set harder targets than kids who have never visited the countryside in their life before. Also nobody likes a big-headed kid and it was important Sam didn't ever think he knew it all," said his father Stuart. "It would affect team morale, never mind the fact that over confidence can be a serious issue in the outdoors."

By age 14 he was camping overnight with friends around Coniston. (Later on at university, he was amazed to discover that there were 18/19 year olds who had never spent the night outdoors or even away from their families).

By the time Sam was old enough to enter the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme for himself, he'd received far more training and gained much more outdoor experience than any of his peers. He sailed through all three levels but it was his Gold Expedition near Moffat in the Scottish Borders that was particularly memorable.

His father had always tried to ensure Sam didn't get too full of himself during his expeditions. Nothing would be surer to alienate him from the other boys, and it was important for the rest of the team to learn from their own mistakes if they were to gain the full benefits of the expedition. But even Sam's dad couldn't have arranged what happened on the second night of the three night expedition.

Expedition supervisors have to ensure safety at all times but the expedition must still remain close to nature. So all camps are 'wild camps' ie. they would never use a commercial camp site. On this night the wild camp area had been checked out before the boys made camp, it was a flat piece of ground about six feet above a burn with room enough for three tents.

At 2am there was a true Scottish deluge and water cascaded down the hill into the tents, washing their contents into the burn and causing panic . In the dark, Sam took it upon himself to gather everyone together and, while up to his knees in rushing water, dismantle the tents and recover as much

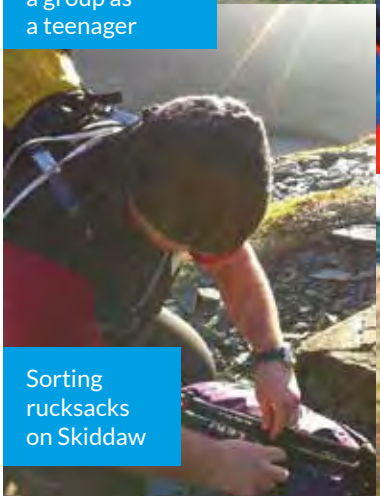
kit as possible before moving the camp off the hill to the pre-arranged Point of Safety, where the supervisors were camped for the night. There, an emergency bivouac was set up for them all.

The next morning they took all their kit to a launderette in Moffat, had everything tumble dried and the expedition continued a couple of hours later. As all good Duke of Edinburgh Award instructors will tell you, the expeditions are meant to be a challenge but they're not meant to be British Army yomps or US Navy Seal endurance tests. The overall objective, after all, is to stimulate a love for the outdoors that will last a lifetime rather than, as the DofE charity itself puts it, 'sitting on the sofa watching life pass by.'

Sam completed his Duke of Edinburgh Gold award at 17, the earliest possible age. (DofE entrants are eligible to complete the Gold award until the age of 25).

Sam supervising a group as a teenager

Kayaking as a lad at Waterhead, Windermere



Sorting rucksacks on Skiddaw

Sam as a young teenager on expedition

Family Holiday

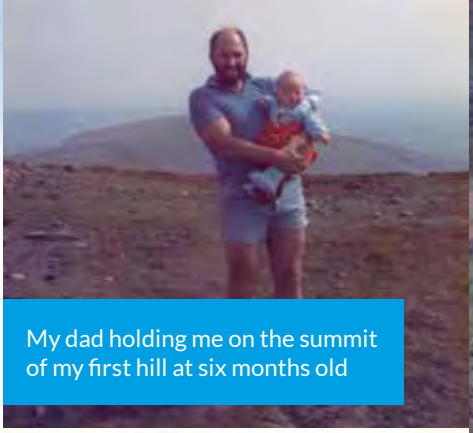
Climbing in the Lakes as a boy

An early ski trip

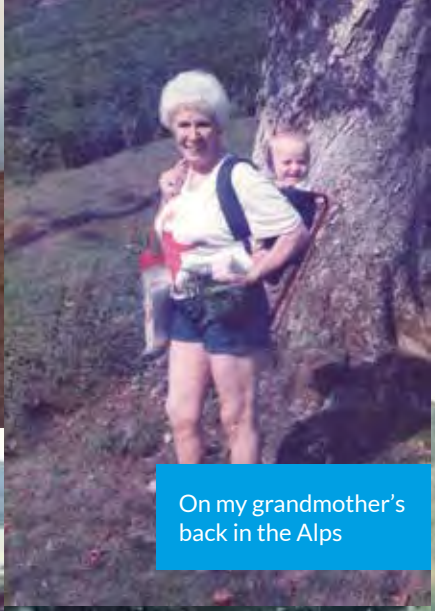
Family holiday in the expedition truck

Canoeing as a lad

Sam abseiling as a child

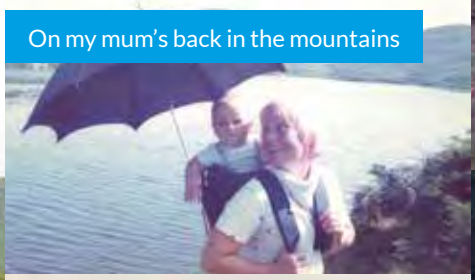


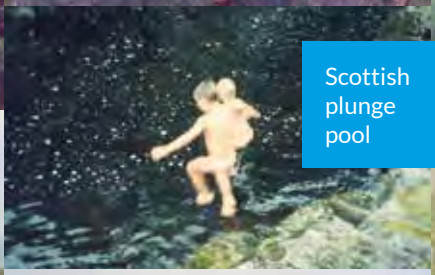
My dad holding me on the summit of my first hill at six months old



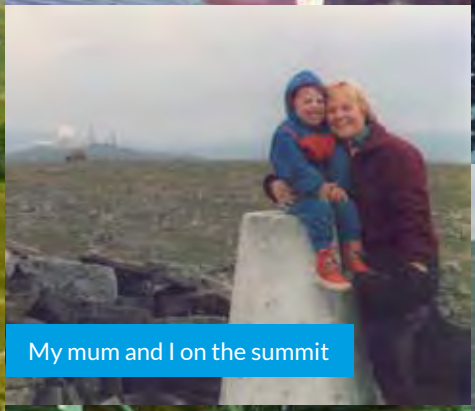
On my grandmother's back in the Alps

On my mum's back in the mountains





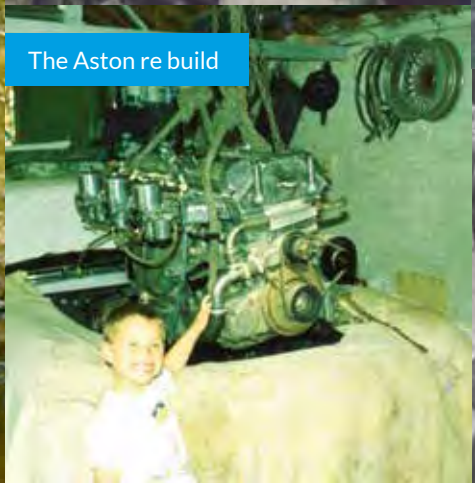
Scottish plunge pool



My mum and I on the summit

Hellvellyn summit camp

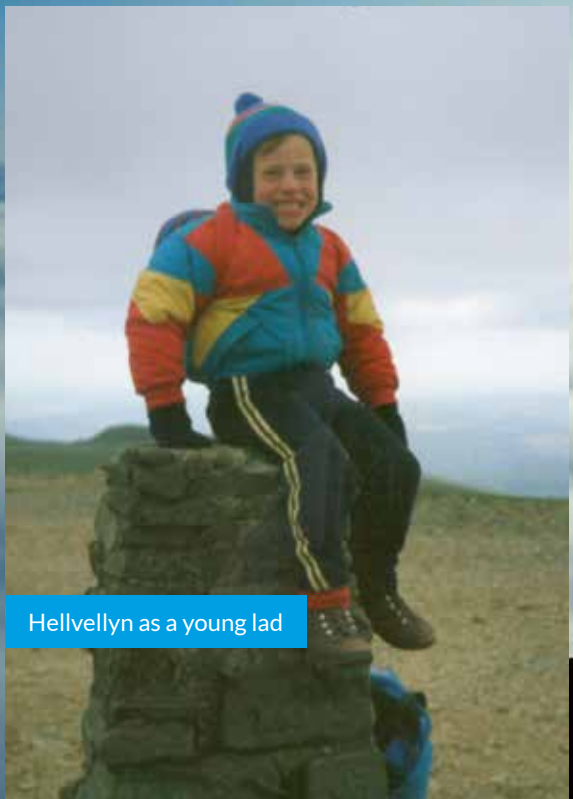
The Aston re build



Second world war bomb shell

Sam as a boy - Pyrenees

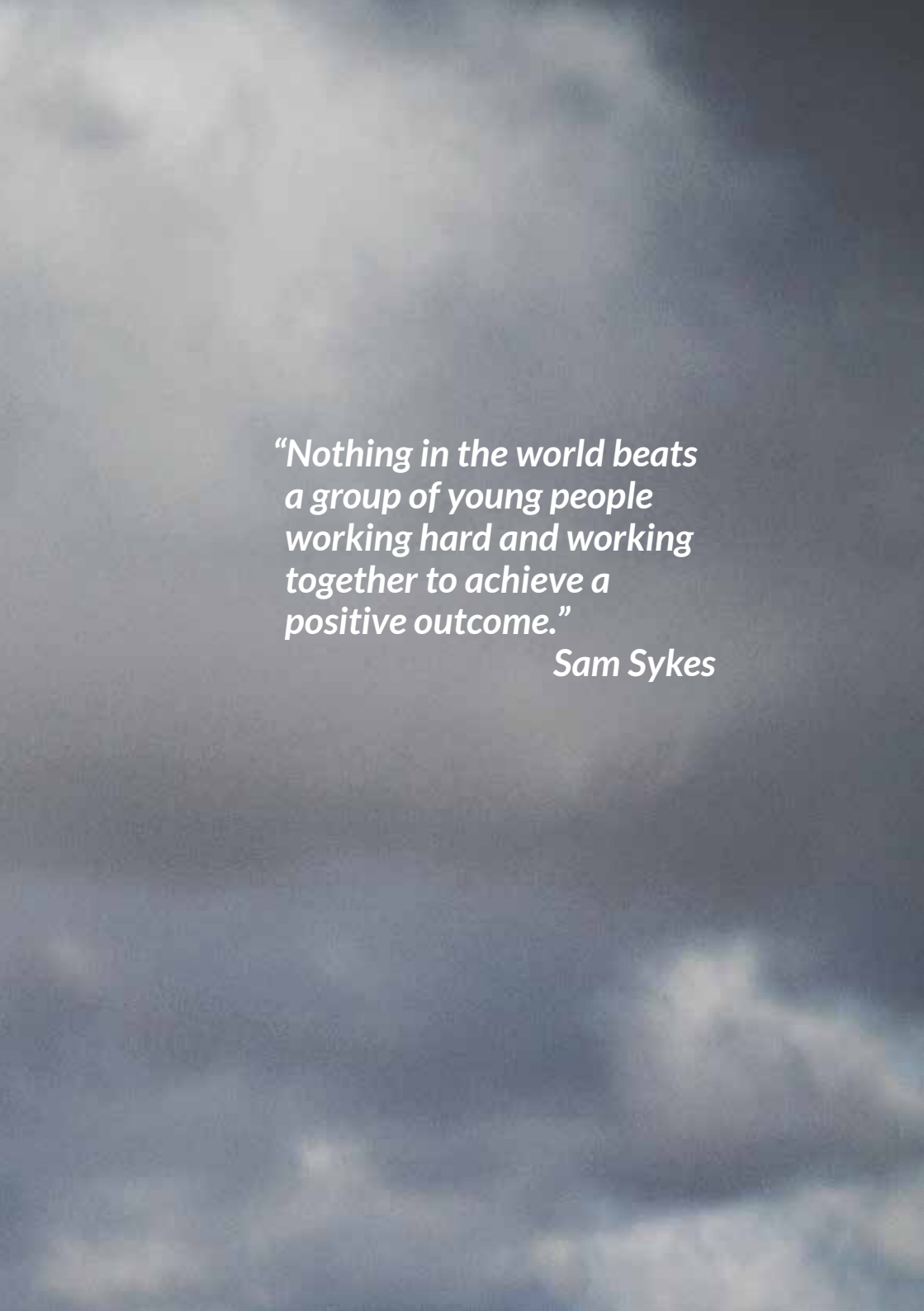
"My favourite mountain remains Helvellyn. My dad, with the help of the Windmill Group, rebuilt the highest mountain hut in England up there which is run by Outward Bound. We carried all the roof beams up the mountain using these fighter jet missile loaders from British Aerospace Engineering! They're massive pieces of wood but we also carried up stone and slate. I must have been up and down that valley a thousand times since I was three years old. When I was working for Outward Bound Ullswater I'd take groups of young people up there to Ruthwaite Lodge, it was quite special knowing I'd helped carry up those roof beams. Swirrel Edge, Red Tarn, Striding Edge… it's truly amazing up there."



Hellvellyn as a young lad

Striding Edge - Hellvellyn


TEAMWORK



“Nothing in the world beats a group of young people working hard and working together to achieve a positive outcome.”

Sam Sykes

While participating in his DofE Gold Award, age 16, Sam was fortunate to gain his first work experience placement with the famous sports and race car manufacturer, TVR whose factory was just outside Blackpool. He was put on the Tuscan R project and Tuscan Race Team where he learned to strip and re-assemble a V8 engine. Not long after he was making jigs that would actually be used on the production line for the Tuscan road cars.

As a teenager doing his design A-level within the TVR design and development team, he was working alongside people building some of the first carbon fibre road cars in the world.

It wasn't just the practical skills and getting to mess about with one of the world's super cars that made the experience at TVR so valuable to Sam, it was the environment of achievement itself.

"The people who worked at TVR really loved what they were doing, they worked longer and harder to make things happen. It was a real eye opener to what people working together can accomplish." said Sam.

That summer Sam was able to put into practice some of what he had learned at TVR.

For the annual expedition that year, the Windmill Group would attempt to climb the Grossglockner in the Austrian Alps.

The Grossglockner expedition was made up of a mixed group of teenagers, all with different levels of climbing abilities. Sam was the climbing leader, in other words he would be climbing up front, checking the route but returning to the group to monitor progress and help the weaker climbers. The Grossglockner is an ambitious peak to attempt with a large team of inexperienced climbers but if all went well they believed the team could summit within the available time frame.

The 600m Glacier on one side and the deep looming gulley on the other were intimidating enough but when some of the boys, full of bravado, started to give the more nervous girls a hard time, the group soon became

Grossglockner, Austrian Alps

The Grossglockner is 3,798m above sea level. It is Austria's highest mountain and the second most prominent mountain in the Alps after Mont Blanc.

demoralised and the pace of the entire expedition began to suffer.

"If we didn't do something about the constant pettiness," said Sam, "we knew we would never make it to the summit. So we paired up certain boys and girls as 'buddies'. Each would have to support the other. This broke up the gang of boys and meant the girls didn't feel so threatened any more. Also the boys' bravado was instantly transformed from a negative energy into a positive, as they all just loved being knights in shining armour, looking after 'their' girls up on this mountain side."

As the sun melted the snow, the ground underfoot became increasingly difficult as the loose shale became dislodged and slippery. But the newly re-arranged team performed well, leapfrogging and body belaying their way towards the top.

As lead climber, Sam was roped to a less experienced climber. They had stretched ahead of the others and were now less than 100m from the summit.

"The ridge to the Grossglockner summit dips slightly and this was packed with snow forming a bridge, but just as I reached the far side, this snow bridge partially collapsed. I felt the snow move and grabbed on to the lip on the far side as the ground gave way beneath my feet. My climbing partner was left on one side, with me on the other."

With the rest of the group catching up, Sam had to assess their new situation and make a decision. Could they still make it to the summit? What had previously meant a slow hike up to the top would now involve a five metre vertical rock climb. They were already under time pressure, the melting crumbling surface was making life difficult, some of the team members had no alpine climbing experience at all and above all, they needed to be off the mountain by nightfall.

Sam decided to turn around.

"I could have easily made it to the summit myself, I could have unclipped from my partner, raced to the summit and been back in 15 minutes. I

could have. But I didn't. We were a team – it was all of us or none. But I could have thrown a tennis ball on to the summit, we were that close and I've never forgotten that feeling.

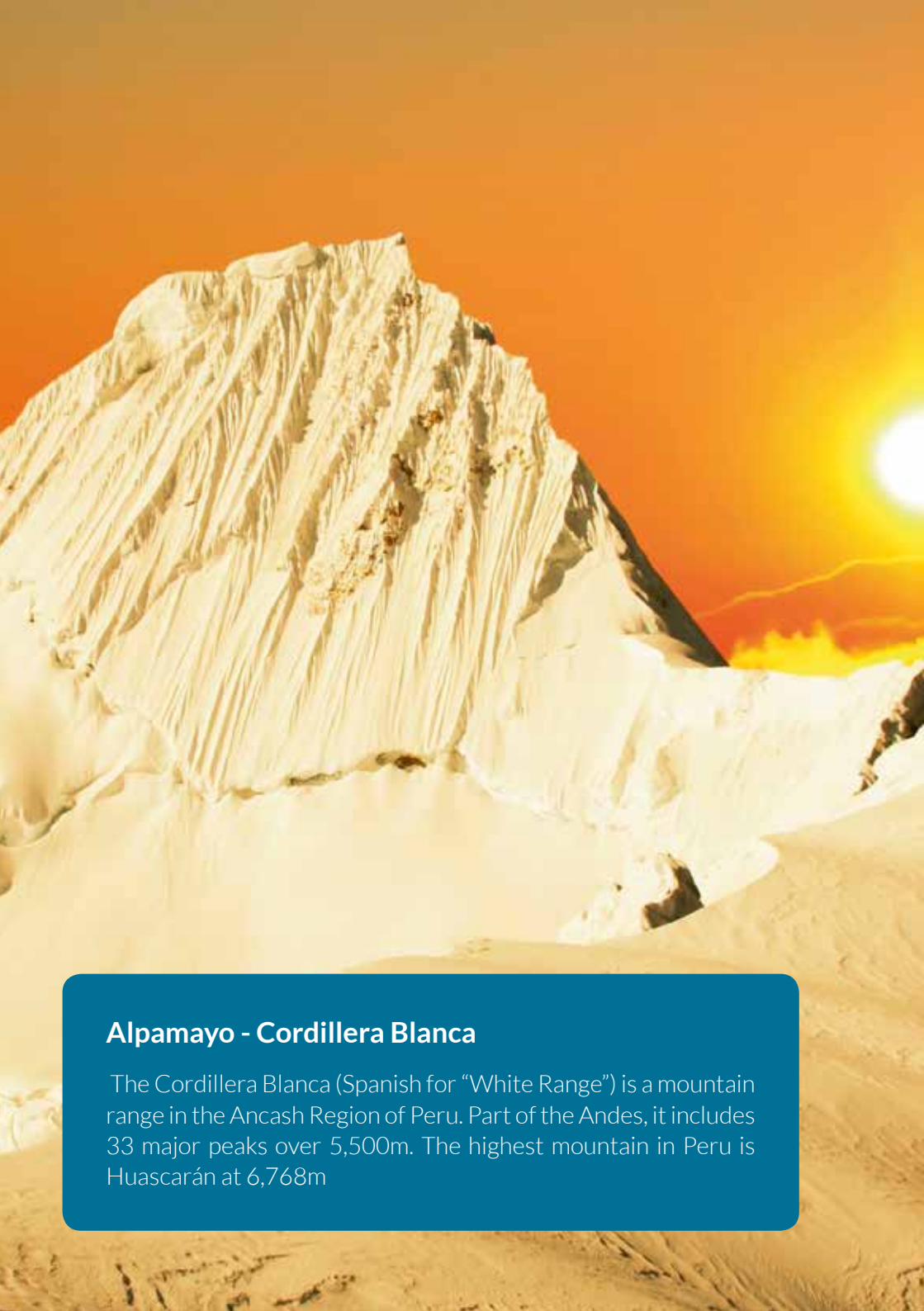
"We still achieved something amazing though – getting that many people, with that level of inexperience that close to the summit of the Grossglockner. That's pretty impressive, it simply couldn't have been done without everyone working together, without teamwork Seeing the detrimental effect that personality clashes can have on a group's overall performance was a very valuable lesson for me indeed. A successful team requires people to gel properly."

The following year, in 2002, the Windmill Group attempted an even more ambitious expedition: to the Peruvian Andes. This would be the first time Sam joined an expedition as an assistant team manager . It was a big step up and this trip was unusual from the start.

The team building process of any expedition begins with the planning and preparation of the expedition itself. The Andes would be the furthest afield expedition the Windmill Youth Group had ever undertaken which meant it would be complex and expensive to mount. Everyone needed to raise their own funds to be able to join the expedition and all were required to join in with numerous fundraising projects such as washing cars or packing bags in the supermarket. But if you didn't help out, you couldn't go and in the end, just 11 of the 20 or so who started out were allowed to travel.. As it happened these were all girls.

Sam was 18 and, at the time, training to become a Royal Marine Officer candidate. Finding himself assisting on an overseas expedition comprised entirely of 17 and 18 year old girls would present a very different challenge to any previous expeditions. But as always, if the mission was to succeed, the group would need to be forged into an efficient working team.

"I wasn't the most sensitive and diplomatic of teenagers but by now I did understand this: For a team to work, everyone has to feel valued. There



Alpamayo - Cordillera Blanca

The Cordillera Blanca (Spanish for "White Range") is a mountain range in the Ancash Region of Peru. Part of the Andes, it includes 33 major peaks over 5,500m. The highest mountain in Peru is Huascarán at 6,768m

can be no passengers. My job from the outset was to ensure the right people were delegated the right task. Treasurer, secretary, transport manager, cargo manager etc. Everyone had a role on this expedition."

As part of the expedition, it was planned that the team would deliver educational supplies to a school in the area. So during the previous months they had been collecting books, stationery and old computers to donate to mountain communities. It was all put in a shipping container and sent to Lima… where it was all promptly stolen. Corrupt local officials had simply helped themselves to everything.

In response, the teenagers pooled what money they could spare to buy some more books in Lima and transported them up into the remote mountains to where people really needed them. Even then their cargo wasn't safe as each time the bus stopped someone climbed on to the roof and tried to steal their cargo barrels. So the expedition members had to sleep in shifts, taking it in turns to guard the supplies until they reached their destination.

"The people in the mountains were just so welcoming," said Sam "but it was the little things that really struck us. The kids were so proud to go to school that they were absolutely immaculate. They live on dusty roads with farm animals all around but their school shoes were still always immaculate and highly polished. They were so proud just to be learning and going to school."

The expedition visited the base camp on Alpamayo, which is widely considered to be the most beautiful mountain in the world. The classic shark's fin, a pyramid of ice, has a famous route to the summit called the Ferrari Route with incomparable views but it's a technically difficult ice climb – well beyond the capabilities of the team members. For Sam, just watching the mountaineers at the base camp geeing themselves up for the ice climb ahead was inspiring, and he hoped he would at least be allowed some time off to attempt a less technical peak, Huascaran.

But because the finding and delivering of the replacement books had

cost them so much precious time, there was now no available window to attempt something this challenging. The team also didn't have all the right kit because an ice climb had never been part of the expedition plans.

"I was angry at the time, having worked so hard to raise the money to get to such an incredible place ,seeing where I wanted to go right in front of me and knowing I couldn't. But ultimately the expedition was a team venture, it wasn't about me. I vowed to go back one day, and I will."

Sam was eventually released for an 18 hour window of free time and took off with one of the expedition muleteers who challenged him to a run. The altitude they were running at was equivalent to the summit of Mont Blanc in France and the Peruvian muleteer had lived at this altitude all his life.

"He was wearing a hundred litre rucksack on his back full of stuff (which looked the same size as him) and he still absolutely hammered me."

"Afterwards we did manage a short climb, The Unnamed Peak at 5800m and reached the top which was fantastic. Suddenly we saw a massive avalanche on the other side of the valley. Thousands of tons of snow came crashing down the mountainside and the only people in the whole world who saw it were me and him. It was a very special moment.

"I was also pretty glad we weren't on that mountain."

Canoeing expedition on Windermere

Paul and Sam in the mountains

Jacko, John, Sam and Sam in the Dolomites

SHOULD OUTDOOR EDUCATION BE ON THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM?

Sam Sykes says...

"I believe that every young person should have the opportunity to camp somewhere beautiful for at least one night and have an open fire at some point in their school career.

"They should have a full 24hrs outside, with no electricity, no running water, no electronics like MP3s or cell phones so they can experience proper darkness and cook for themselves.

"But I don't believe in ramming things down people's throat, the outdoors shouldn't be elitist. It's not about the size of your rucksack and going up a hill in the cold driving rain – that's unpleasant for anybody. I'd hate to think anyone was put off the countryside because someone made them carry a really heavy rucksack in the pouring rain. A rucksack is a means to an end, it's so you can be independent.

"It's not supposed to be a physical test, some sort of special forces selection procedure, it's about being outside in a natural beautiful environment appreciating a different environment to your own. It's also about learning new skills and having fun with your friends!

In Canada, outdoor education is part of the national curriculum. Schools own their own kayaks and go on week long expeditions during term time. They cook on open fires, and catch fish to eat. They have bears in Canada! Their health and safety regulations are just as strict as ours but they get on with it without fuss.

"I honestly believe you can't teach kids everything in the classroom. They have to go out and make mistakes for themselves, learn about consequences, learn by messing up and by making fools of themselves.

"Also consider those kids in other countries where they have a completely different attitude. Aren't we at risk of creating a generation of 'soft' kids and kids who are simply spectators. They won't stand a chance in the future. Wouldn't it be nice to have a robust, self-reliant population?

For those who say teachers already have enough on their plate, I say that's where we and other organisations like us come in. Let us do our job."


PERSEVERANCE


*“Without challenge
there is no achievement.”*
Sam Sykes

Having taken part in numerous mountaineering, kayaking and hiking expeditions throughout Europe and the Americas, latterly as an official assistant expedition leader, Sam Sykes reached the end of his school career and decided it was time to go it alone. He and his childhood friends Sam C and Jacko were determined to plan and undertake an expedition on their own, with no local guides and no supervisor.

They reviewed all the places they'd visited over the last 10 years such as Grossglockner in the Austrian Alps and others in the Alps and Pyrenees but knew they had to choose one of the 'Big Mountains', one of the famous peaks that anyone who calls themself a mountaineer must conquer at least once in their lives.

The three school friends were now attending different universities so the planning process involved months of phone calls and accumulating research. Ideas were batted back and forth, risks assessed and doubts raised. Just as one team member would find himself geeing up the others, the following week he'd be the one with all the doubts.

It was also difficult for each of them not knowing how much the others were training. Every climber depends on his team mates to be fit and able, there can be no passengers. It's far too dangerous, especially on a 'big' mountain.

So at just 18 years old, the three school friends and former members of the Windmill Youth Group decided to attempt Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps and Western Europe. With little snow and ice experience between them and a fierce determination to summit without any help from the local guides, Mont Blanc was an ambitious mountain for the teenagers to cut their teeth on.

"We were quite young and naïve to be attempting a big mountain and probably didn't have the experience", says Sam C. "A lot of people don't get to the top of Mont Blanc, don't get anywhere near the summit, for many different reasons: fitness, weather, the way they prepare."

Jacko adds, "Mont Blanc was definitely achievable as far as we were

concerned. We were all experienced climbers for our age, we'd almost summited Grossglockner in the Austrian Alps a couple of years before. OK, Sam C had no snow experience and I'd done one snow expedition but we had been up big mountains already and as Sam Sykes had climbed in the Peruvian Andes the previous summer, this made him our reluctant leader."

They drove down to Chamonix from Blackpool in their expedition vehicle, an old Peugeot 405 diesel estate car with two massive 220 litre drums of fuel strapped on to the roof (and a broken engine cooling system).

"When the car reached top speed, the drums created lift and the front wheels rose up off the road!" said Sam.

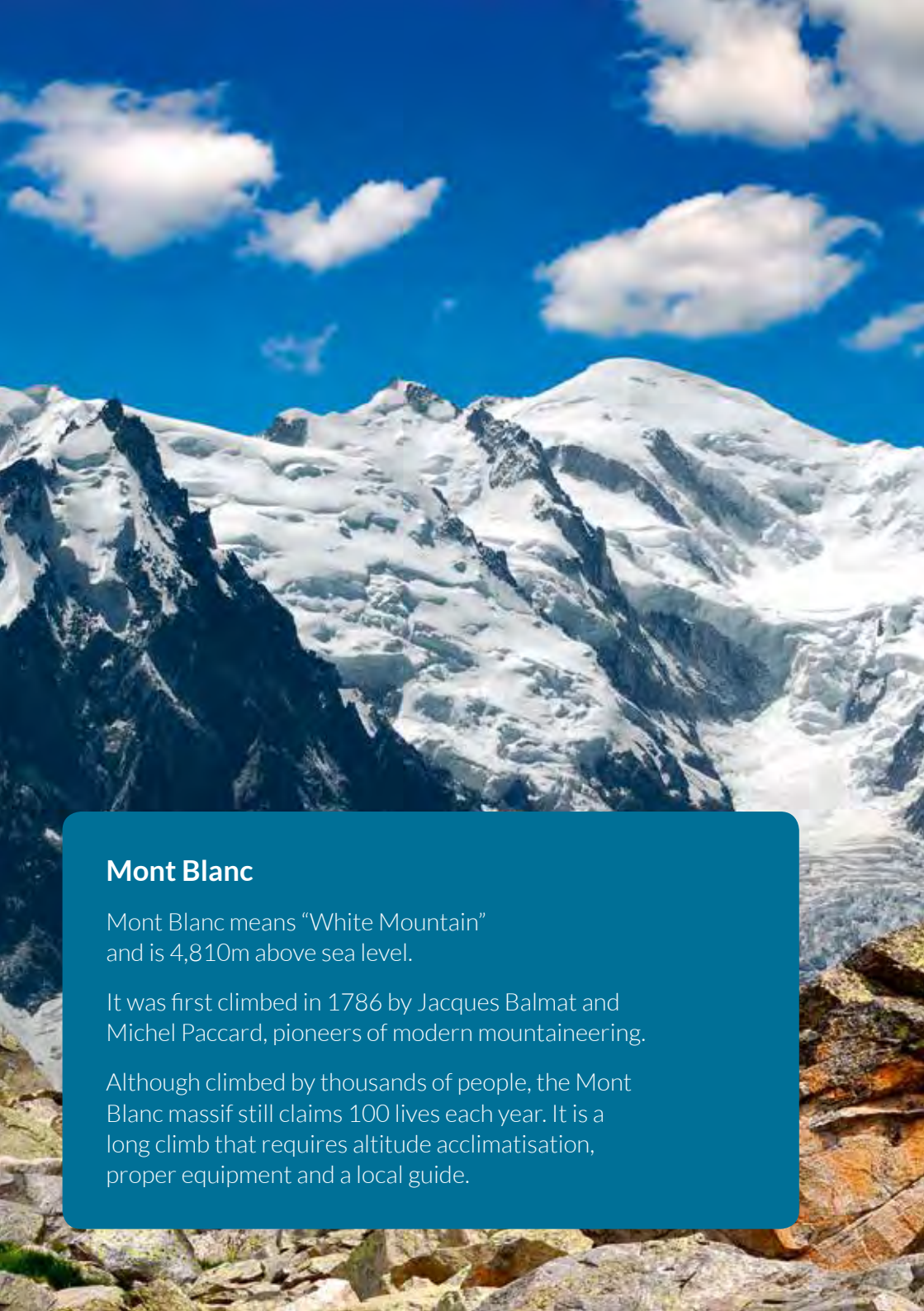
Not everything else went to plan either…

Poor weather forced the lads to stay almost an entire month in their base camp in Chamonix, sleeping in a big old borrowed 1970s tent with floral patterns and draining their euros daily. They had purchased a classic old French cast iron cooking pot but eventually they were unable to afford much to eat except rice while they waited for the right weather window to attack the summit.

"It was a really hard time," said Sam. "We couldn't do much, we stayed fit with the occasional run but couldn't afford the 40 euro train tickets to get above the treeline and acclimatise. Trying to stay harmonious was almost impossible because we were so bored, every little niggle was magnified into an angry row."

A local Welsh barmaid at the Queen Vic took a shine to them and gave them the odd free beer but otherwise there was little to do while they waited. It hadn't taken the teenagers long to realise despite all their planning and preparation, they were woefully unprepared for the climb.

"Money was tight, we'd been at uni for a year so let's just say our kit was wanting. It was safe though," said Jacko, "and we did have some new stuff."



Mont Blanc

Mont Blanc means “White Mountain” and is 4,810m above sea level.

It was first climbed in 1786 by Jacques Balmat and Michel Paccard, pioneers of modern mountaineering.

Although climbed by thousands of people, the Mont Blanc massif still claims 100 lives each year. It is a long climb that requires altitude acclimatisation, proper equipment and a local guide.

"Yes," said Sam "We all had matching outfits by Mardale, as I'd sold them to all my mates to raise petrol money! But to be honest we looked like idiots. We also had far too much kit, ready for some kind of epic Himalayan trip when really Mont Blanc is just two days up and down."

Some of the locals were especially unimpressed with the three Englishmen attempting to climb Mont Blanc. Sam remembers a French lady berating them in the bar one night:

"'How dare you go into the mountains without a guide! My father puts his life on the line for idiots like you.' Was pretty much the gist of what she was shouting. Sam C was pretty shaken up by her tirade and she definitely got us doubting ourselves. Should we have had a guide? It would have been safer and in a way we were doing someone out of their living by going up alone. Ultimately, though, I wanted to stick to my principals and climb unguided, that's not to say you don't listen to local knowledge when it's available but I just don't think you have really climbed a mountain if some guide has pulled you up on the end of a rope."

It's normal for Mont Blanc climbers to spend at least a few days acclimatising to the altitude in a hut higher up on the mountain but because of the lengthy weather delay, the team could no longer afford it. Booking the necessary three spaces for just one night in the Tete Rousse hut, stretched the budget as it was.

Some of the mountain huts on the Massif are little more than corrugated sheds but the Tete Rousse is newish with a shimmering galvanised exterior and timber interior and serves hot food and drink. It's located at about 3,000m and although it's not technically difficult to get there, the hike is long, quite steep and stony underfoot.

But what happened on arrival stunned them.

The three teenagers were turned away. The hut manager claimed they had no reservation.

"He didn't speak a word of English but it was quite clear we weren't

coming in, he didn't care that we had a reservation. I still can't believe it today. In the Alps it's just not the done thing to turn away climbers." said Sam C.

"It was a nightmare," added Jacko. "After all that planning, all that waiting to get on the mountain and we were wrecked too. It had such been a long day. We were just 18, didn't know any better and took his word for it, I don't think we would have done that nowadays! I'm not even sure they're allowed to turn away climbers."

They now had a big decision to make.

Turn back? Or push on to the next hut up, the Gouter? As they were expecting to overnight in a hut, they didn't have a tent with them to bivouac. So the decision was made to push on up, to cross the dangerous Grand Couloir and climb another 1500m up to the next hut. This is one of the most technical sections of Mont Blanc with loose falling rock and ice which becomes more prevalent late on in the day as the sun melts the ice.

"Maybe it was naivety to carry on climbing up or maybe we were head strong but if the next hut had also turned us away we would have been in trouble. Coming back down the Grand Couloir exhausted and at night would have been an issue for us. Then we would have had no choice but to bivvy overnight on the mountain without a tent," said Sam C. "That would have been interesting. Or we could have walked all the way back down the mountain, which would have also been dangerous at that time of the night."

The team eventually reached the Gouter hut at about 8pm and discovered it was also fully booked.

But this time, they were allowed in, which didn't impress the other climbers staying there. As it usually takes a full day to climb to the Mont Blanc summit and return before nightfall, climbers tend to arrive at the hut early, eat straightaway and then bed down to get as much sleep in preparation for the arduous day ahead which usually begins at 1 or 2am.

So, by the time Sam and his friends arrived at 8pm, the meal had already finished and all the canteen tables and benches had been pushed to the side. As far as they could see, every single square inch of space in the hut was taken by climbers trying to sleep, even the café's table tops were crammed.

No one in the hut was pleased to see three poorly equipped English teenagers turn up on the mountain so late. Several locals even tried to persuade them to turn around and go home and not to attempt the summit in the morning.

'At your age only Frenchmen should be on this mountain!' was just one of the comments they heard.

Undeterred, they managed to get served some food which was surprisingly salty, considering the trek they'd all just been on.

"I'd never tasted anything so salty before or since." said Jacko.

The three then each had to step through the tangled mass of interwoven bodies to try and prise themselves some space within the heaving throng of men.

"It was just horrendous," said Sam C. "I ended up sleeping on a set of stairs in the galley, my bum on one stair my head on another, lying down as best I could."

Sam was on the same stairs, almost topping and tailing with Sam C. Jacko found himself lying on his side, squeezed into an area half the size of a coffin between two massive weather hardened German climbers.

But although exhausted after such a long day, sleep wouldn't come easy for any of them. Sam C was woken up when another climber accidentally tipped a pan of boiling water over him. Jacko got trodden on. They all woke up stiff but worryingly, they all had cracking headaches. Those extra two hours climbing last night which had been forced on them by the other hut manager, plus the lack of sleep, and general dehydration had all been

exacerbated by the overly salty couscous from last night's meal. Even worse, they had no more water remaining…

They had been expecting to purchase more water from the hut but the hut's own stocks were now low due to the sudden influx of climbers who had all been waiting for the weather window. Also, they had no stoves with which to melt snow. (They would have been reluctant to do this anyway, due to Mont Blanc's notoriously unsanitary climbing routes which had led to its nickname, 'Mont Noir').

As the hut was so packed, there ended up being a mad rush for the last remaining bottled water, everyone elbowing each other out the way.

"It was like a post apocalypse film," said Sam C. "Climbers were literally fist fighting amongst themselves to get bottled water."

Sam Sykes knew they couldn't have continued without the water so pretty much wrestled the very last three bottles of water for his friends and finally at 1am after just a couple of hours of broken sleep, the three English teenagers set off to conquer Europe's highest peak.

It was a long hard slog up the remaining 1500m of the mountain. As they hadn't acclimatised their bodies, like many of the other climbers, they found the initial hike up the incline very difficult and slow going.

But they simply had to make the summit by 11am. That was the cut-off point. If they hadn't made it by 11am, they would have to turn around. Any later and they would get benighted, in other words they wouldn't be able to make it back down safely before dark. Nobody wants to be scrambling around Mont Blanc, after dark, using head torches, following two exhausting days of climbing with little or no food and water.

Sam Sykes, their unofficial leader now, remained upbeat as always, using his favourite catchphrase to maintain spirits: "It could be worse".

For someone else, it was.

"The day before," said Sam "a German climber got knocked out cold by a

falling rock and had to be taken down. He wasn't doing anything wrong, it was just the luck of the draw. You do your best to minimise risk but sometimes you just have bad luck."

The long slow walk up the Gouter Dome included crossing a crevasse field before they came to the Vallot Refuge, the last emergency hut before the summit.

Sam C had got almost no sleep the night before, they were all knackered, their cold fingers were dropping kit and yet they still had several more to climb so they decided to break for an hour to rest and get warm. The Vallot Refuge is an emergency hut, so it cannot be used for any other purpose, but nothing prepared them for the scene within. The simple corrugated iron shed was stinking with human waste but still there were climbers inside.

"They were like castaways or the living dead," said Jacko "One climber looked as if he'd been lost in the Himalayas for a month, staring at the wall vacantly, his face sunburned to a raw pulp. But his team members said he was OK, so we left them to it and pushed on up."

The final domes, or bosses, required them to rope up for safety and were painfully difficult for tired legs.

"It was really hard going, so we had to switch to economy pace, take 10 steps then have a rest," said Sam.

Finally, nine hours after they left the Gouter hut, the three teenagers from Blackpool made it to the summit of Mont Blanc. Aged just 18, they had planned, self-financed, and executed a successful attempt on the summit of Europe's highest mountain.

"You couldn't have wanted for a better view," said Jacko "It was awesome, awesome that we'd all got to the top together."

Many climbers reach the summit of Mont Blanc every year, some of them even holler in triumph like Sam did but very few of them do what Sam did

next. Following a bet with his friendly barmaid down in the valley, Sam removed all of his clothing and had his photo taken with a sign (covering his privates) from the Queen Vic bar where she worked, which he'd carried with him all the way up the mountain!

"I was adamant to prove to myself that after all that I still had some gas left in the tank to celebrate, getting my kit off though was a hassle."

For the other two there was a strange numbness brought on by sheer exhaustion.

"I was absolutely battered," said Sam C. "It didn't feel like anything because I was so tired, so dehydrated. It was an anti-climax in many ways."

Jacko was so shattered he just wanted to turn around and head for home. It was 10am.

So just a few minutes later, they headed back down the mountain. It was only much later, that a sense of achievement gradually began to sink in. They'd done it. They'd really done it. It was that euphoria (helped by the steady lessening of altitude sickness as they descended) that helped force their weary legs into another eight or nine hour trudge back down to the cable car which would take them all the way back down to the valley, to their car and then base camp.

Their return journey down the mountain was speeded up by deploying a fun trick on the snowy areas: lifting their feet up and sliding down the mountainside on their rears, using ice axes to steer and brake for up to 200 metres at a time, laughing all the way down.

But despite this happy injection of speed, the three were stunned to arrive at the small Mont Blanc tram station, Nid D'Aigle, to discover that they'd missed the last tram car back down to the valley.

They'd been on their feet since 1am climbing and hiking up and down Mont Blanc's steep incline for nearly 16 hours straight. They were shattered, had now run out of water, Jacko especially was becoming seriously

dehydrated, Sam's face was red raw and all their lips were cracked badly.

Now they realised they had yet another long hike still to go, the equivalent of walking down Ben Nevis in Scotland, just to get back down to their campsite. What should have been a short tram ride was now to become a gruelling walk into the night.

"Finally, we trudged down the valley and hit the outlying village at midnight, (14 hours after summiting) absolutely spent. Physically we'd never been through anything like that. We'd just been so naïve about the amount of water that we'd need and over those two days on the mountain we'd dehydrated badly," said Sam C.

Sam's lips were bleeding and cracked, Sam C's nose was burned red raw, like a radiation burn because they'd neglected their sunscreen. Jacko was exhausted, dehydrated and beginning to hallucinate. He simply couldn't continue and collapsed spread-eagled on someone's front lawn. So Sam and Sam C wrapped him in two jackets and wedged him under a hedge for shelter while they went to look for their car.

Sam Sykes was so thirsty he could no longer think straight and banged on a stranger's door at 1am and begged for a drink of water. They were fortunate to find an understanding local who obliged.

Sam and friend Sam C made it back to the car, circled round the village a few times until they found where they'd hidden Jacko. The three sat in the car in silence, contemplating their achievements, as they drove back towards their campsite at Chamonix. The old Peugeot didn't help their numbed state of mind, it had been sitting in the baking August sun all day and its cooling system was broken.

Suddenly one of them then spotted a public water trough and fountain which simply proved too tempting… and they all piled in.

This refreshed them just enough to make the fatal rookies' error of heading down the Queen Vic pub to mix alcohol with extreme exhaustion and severe dehydration.

"For three 18 year olds, to have raised the funds ourselves, to organise a cross Europe expedition and then to successfully climb to Mont Blanc summit with no guides and no prior experience of the mountain was quite something. It's still on all of our CVs," said Jacko.

Sam C added, "Mountaineering is a good preparation for the rest of your life: the planning, the preparation, the commitment involved. It's all those key ingredients that make a good employee, a good friend or whatever it may be. People who go up Mont Blanc aren't the sort of people who can't be bothered, they're the sort of people who do things, who get on with it. There can't be many 18 year olds who could have pulled this off. There was an enormous sense of achievement." Sam C is a former Royal Marine Reserve and now a police officer.

"The Mont Blanc trip helped my career massively," said Jacko. "It also made me realise how much I needed money. I quit my course and applied for a course at a hospital which they paid you to attend. I went for the interview, in front of a panel of three, and they were so impressed by the trip. The organising, getting it together at that age, planning it, finding accommodation, getting the kit, and the climb itself. I see it as a significant marker in my life that paved the way in my career. Expeditions give you confidence, they make you realise you don't need to rely on anyone else to get things done. When you can prove you can do that, it demonstrates your capabilities way beyond just the physical aspects."

Sam Sykes concludes, "The Mont Blanc expedition was the culmination of everything I'd learned so far. It was like a rite of passage. The confidence boost it gave me was enormous! "

Summit of Mt.Blanc naked

The Lake District scree run as a boy

EVERYONE SHOULD HAVE AN ADVENTURE!

"Adventures should challenge you…

If you ever find that you've bitten off more than you can chew, that's when you really learn about yourself, your mates and the people around you.

When you get back from something like that, it puts everything else into perspective."

Sam Sykes

"I'd like to see adventure in the UK made more accessible to everyone," says Sam "a bit like what they've done in the Alps. The Italians have used old wartime iron ladders and rails (called a via Ferrata) and built a network of hotels and restaurants along them. Non-climbers can get right up Alpine peaks, it's incredible. In the UK we could make climbing more accessible to people, climbing walls have their merits but nothing in comparison to outside climbing. The jump is too big. A climbing wall is just a gymnasium and a long way from the real thing.

"So the national parks should embrace it more, like in Yellowstone Park USA and the Alps.

"The Chief Executive of the Lake District National Park is definitely looking in the right direction. The landscape is not a museum to be enjoyed from a distance, it needs to be used by people. It's perfectly possible to develop the landscape and make it accessible

without damaging it for future generations. That's what managed footpaths do for example; keep people on unobtrusive but stable paths. We simply need to develop the land for more use, without ruining it. People are perfectly capable of being responsible.

"Loads of people come to the Lake District – if we could tempt just a few more of them further into the hills, on more adventures, ridge scrambling, gorge walking etc. just to get more people doing things and learning new skills. I know people would really respond to that. I think there's a market for that.

"I'd also like people to start looking beyond all the famous peaks, the well-known names, it's not all about bagging a peak and telling your friends. Being outdoors should be a personal adventure. There are loads of mountains you can still go up and never see a single soul, there are always new routes to find that nobody will have ever done. That's my idea of perfect!

"Take Everest. Why would you want to spend all that time and money just to be in a queue with 200 people? Why would you want someone to haul you up or even help you? I'm not sure somebody who does that really understands what climbing is all about.

"I'd urge everyone to check out some of the less climbed peaks. Like the Ecrins National Park in South eastern France, it's unspoiled, there's no infrastructure. It's purer, nearer to original climbing.

"There's just still so much to do in the world. You only need some imagination. You're not going to climb the highest mountain on earth for the first time. But why does it always have to be the biggest, the tallest, the hardest etc? In the UK, you don't just have to do Ben Nevis or Scafell Pike, there's so much choice!

Anyone can still have an adventure. There's always another route to find, there are hundreds of unclimbed peaks. You couldn't scratch the surface in a lifetime.

I really do think everyone should have an adventure. You've wasted your life if you haven't had at least one adventure: something

that's challenged you, made you a bit nervous. Taking a bit of risk, looking over the next hill, that's what got us out of the caves…"

"If it's easy… it's not an adventure!"

"But be prepared... Mountain rescue is run off their feet by people who are often unprepared and ill-equipped. People see the Lakes on TV and come up here, that's fine, they're here for everyone. But grown-ups have to take some responsibility. Mountains are dangerous places with inherent risks. You can't just call up a Mountain Rescue team because you're tired and happen to have a mobile phone in your pocket. If you didn't bring a map, you didn't bring a compass and a torch then you're a fool.

"I do believe those people who have been rescued because of their failure to prepare should be asked to present a cheque afterwards to mountain rescue. They should offer some donation to help pay for kit or support the Land Rovers and helicopters. Mountain Rescue Teams are amazing, they have to leave their jobs and their families to risk their lives on the mountain in inclement and difficult conditions and they need to be available to people who have had accidents or who are in real danger.

"Once on Brown Slabs, in the Lakes, I fell and broke my ankle. There was no way I could call mountain rescue. I never would have been able to live it down amongst my friends and peers in the outdoor industry. It's just not what you do on the mountain. If you are able to help yourself, then you must. So I had to walk off the hill back to my car and drive to the doctor with my talus broken in three places.

"It's not about being a hero it's about keeping resources free for people that really need it, people that have had a serious accident."

Ghyll Scrambling in the Lake District

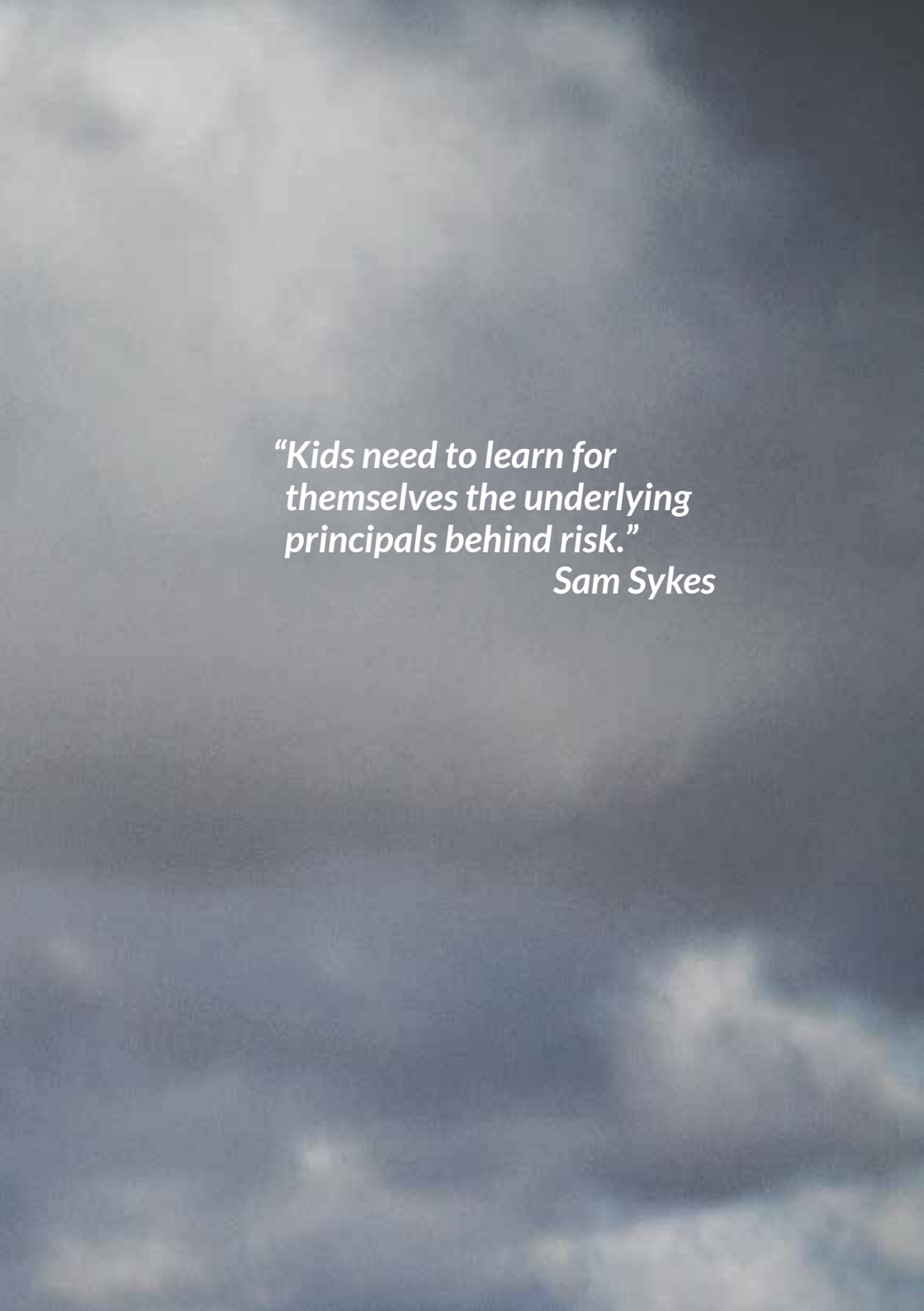
British Columbia expedition

Descending Hellvellyn

British Columbia expedition

Jacko (Sam's long term climbing partner) and Sam - Zugspitze, Germany

LEARNING FROM YOUR MISTAKES



"Kids need to learn for themselves the underlying principals behind risk."

Sam Sykes

"Outdoor Education is great for learning from your mistakes," says Sam "Too much cotton wool means that once kids leave their protected environment and step into the real world they're going to hurt themselves because they've never had the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes. They need to be exposed to risk gradually, in an environment they can learn in, but where no actual damage can be done.

The more things you do, the more places you go the more mistakes you will make and you will learn from them. Surely it's better to start this learning process as early as possible? I've made a lot of mistakes in my time but then I've done a lot of things too.

"We all learn through experience, so the more expeditions you go on, the more activities you try, the more skills you will develop and the more your judgement will improve…"

"Look at some of the mistakes I had to learn from."

Young and Dumb?

"No one in my family gets wrapped in cotton wool," comments Sam wryly, remembering some hairy moments from his childhood. "I once managed to get hold of a large hunting knife as a young lad and slashed my hand open.

When Sam was 12, he copied some of the older kids and tied himself to a rock to climb a rock face. The rope wasn't tied properly and he fell and broke his ankle.

Another time, at the start of a canoeing expedition in Canada to paddle the Pioneer Trails of Ontario, a shout went up that a bear had been spotted in the garden of the house the team were camped at. Sam immediately grabbed a baseball bat and ran out in the garden, charging about till he turned to see his family at the window killing themselves laughing.

But one of the moments that made the greatest impression on him during

this period was the time he forgot to bring the kayaking team's buoyancy aids. Everyone had to wait three hours while they were fetched from Blackpool.

"I got the row of my life.. My mistake didn't just cost me, it affected everyone else too. That hurt, and I've never forgotten it to this day."

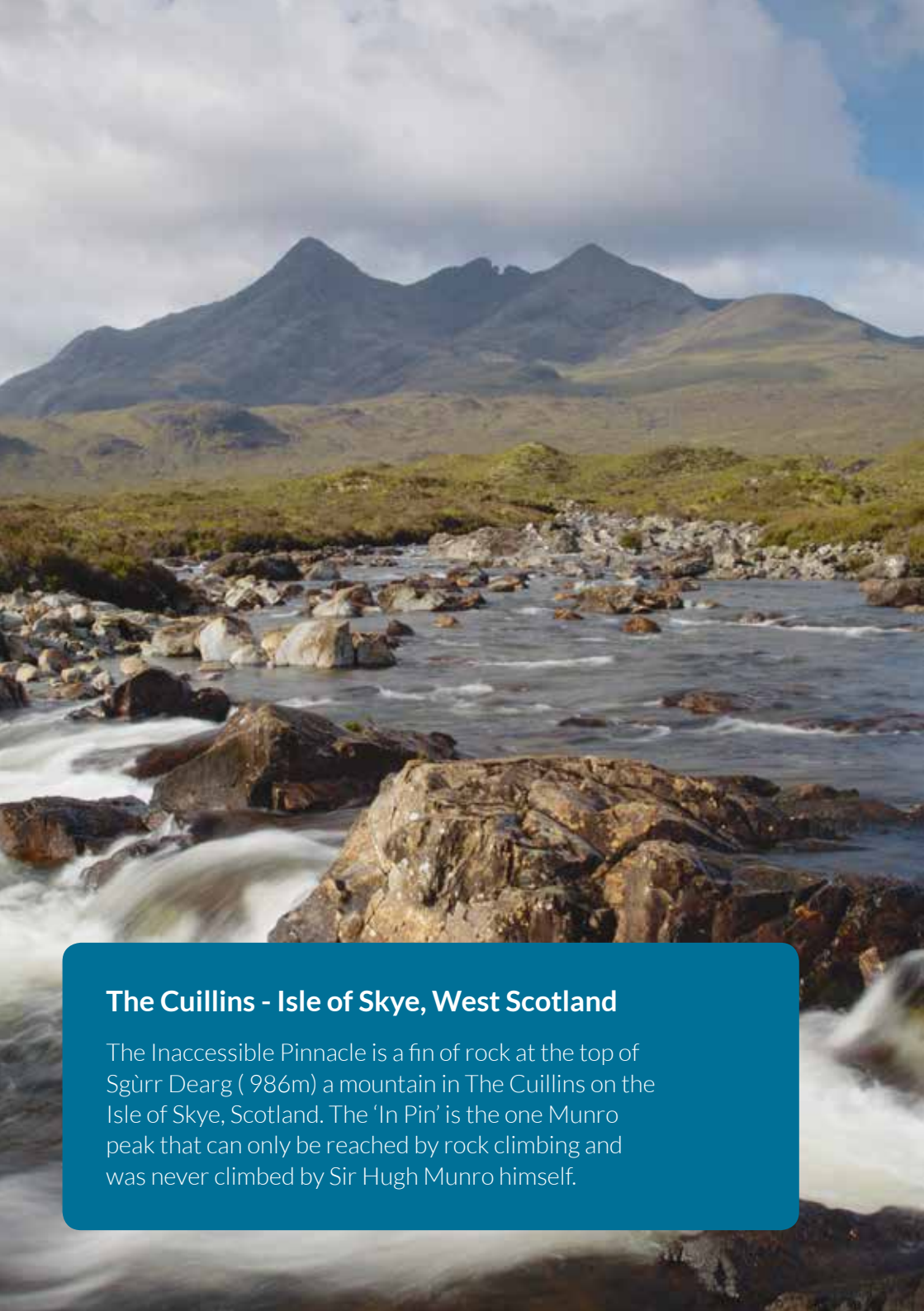
You Live and Learn…

"Take our experience with the water on Mont Blanc – basically we were naive, we didn't take enough water, we ran out and dehydration really hurt us. There are plenty of places in the world where a mistake like that could get you killed. We also relied on the huts too much, which couldn't supply enough water for all the climbers on the mountain that day. So I never rely on the huts anymore and I also always carry an emergency kit with water, foil blanket and rations. I have a kit to melt water too if need be. Self-reliance is all about good preparation."

Never Climb with a Hangover!

"It was wet and windy and I'd solo'd up to the top of the In Pin but on the way back down, I didn't take the map out and went down the wrong route. I came to a cliff, which I couldn't get down, so I decided on a 500m traverse across towards a steep grassy slope which looked an easier descent. I got to this big rock, about half the size of a small car, which I thought was part of the mountain. I took a step off, and grabbed it but it moved. I jumped clear out of the way as this massive five ton boulder crashed down the cliff to the bottom of the valley where there were people walking. I felt pretty guilty about that but if I hadn't jumped out of the way I'd have been a goner. I nearly was anyway as I didn't have a very good hold of what I'd grabbed on to.

"My judgement that day was severely compromised because we'd been out drinking the night before and I still had a hangover."



The Cuillins - Isle of Skye, West Scotland

The Inaccessible Pinnacle is a fin of rock at the top of Sgùrr Dearg (986m) a mountain in The Cuillins on the Isle of Skye, Scotland. The 'In Pin' is the one Munro peak that can only be reached by rock climbing and was never climbed by Sir Hugh Munro himself.

Take the Road Less Travelled?

"I've always loved owning Land Rovers," says Sam. "Especially back in the day when diesel was affordable. I rebuilt a Series 3 myself and moved onto Defenders. I did a lot of off-roading for the challenge and the adventure. Also it's good practice because as we worked in the outdoors, we needed to be 4x4 capable. There are many situations where 4x4 handling skills are necessary, especially abroad or in remote locations.

"When Coniston in the Lake District was open to 4x4s we were up there all the time. Once I snapped a chassis in half coming down a step – that was a learning curve and a half!

"I've snapped drive shafts, had to freewheel down mountains, broken things but the worst situation I got myself into with a Land Rover happened at university.

"Myself and two uni friends drove over Old Man of Coniston and came back via Wrynose Pass. For some reason, and to this day I don't know what was running through my head, I thought I could come off the road and drive across the fields to the other side of the valley.

"Within 30 metres of leaving the road, the vehicle nose-dived into a bog right up to the windscreen. All three of us hit our faces on the windscreen because we stupidly weren't wearing seatbelts. The rear wheels were spinning vertically up in the air, sticking out of the bog. But when the Land Rover started to sink we got out of the vehicle to reassess our situation...

"It righted itself a little when we exited but not enough; the back wheels still couldn't touch the ground. I had no spade, no winch gear, nothing useful at all. So we used our hands to dig all the mud and muck away from the air intake so the engine didn't get killed.

"I tried to reverse it out with the back window open so I could escape if necessary, but we just sank deeper. So we started digging it out with our bare hands. One of my passengers, a university friend threw all his toys out the pram and stomped off down the road. My other mate and

I just got on with the digging so we got absolutely covered in muck and drenched in bog water.

"We flagged down a Land Rover going the other way who luckily had a 10m tow rope. But as soon as he drove onto the grass he started to sink too. Then a third Land Rover, a Discovery, turned up. They hooked up to us as well and everyone got out to push. A few other cars stopped for their passengers to help so with 20 people pushing all three Land Rovers and me screaming the engine in reverse, we finally popped out of the bog. We were lucky that day! We thanked everyone sheepishly before we left… and none of us said a word on the way home. I learned a few lessons that day, that's for sure."

Delusions of Grandeur…

"Another time, I bought the most extreme Land Rover I'd ever had. It was a 90, race prepared, with massive 36 inch tyres (£1500 each!), side exhaust, internal battery, with winches and parts of the body chopped away to make space for the wheels. It was a full on, ready-for-anything vehicle.

"As part of an adrenalin tour for the events company I was working for, I'd take customers out on a 4x4 course at night, bouncing around in the back, roaring around this track, finding amazing angles etc. It was all great fun but I started to think it could do anything…

"One New Year's Eve party in Robin Hood's Bay, Yorkshire the tidal access road to the youth hostel got cut off with all their bags when it was time to leave. So I braved it, and drove out into the sea with this enormous Land Rover to get the bags. Which worked. By this time my bosses had been cut off too. So I went back for them. But the tide had come in a bit more.

"The three of us were sat in the front but the back axle lifted up off the sea bed, it just floated and the cab started to fill up with water. Waves were crashing over the roof, against the windscreen and one of my passengers

wouldn't stop screaming once the water reached her waist. I had a snorkel for the exhaust so we could keep on moving and we eventually made it to shore. When I opened the passenger doors, the sea water cascaded out. The youth hostel owner said it was one of the most amazing and most reckless things he'd ever seen anyone do.

"In hindsight, driving through the North Sea in a Land Rover with my employers sitting next to me was a mistake! Being gung ho with other people's safety is never appropriate."


ADVENTURES
ARE
SERIOUSLY
REWARDING!

"Sometimes the Outdoors is just about spending time with your friends or family, in the most amazing places on earth and having the time of your lives..."

Sam Sykes

White Water Rafting on Ottawa River

"This was an awesome trip!" says Sam. "The Ottawa River is more powerful than anything you get in Europe and the rapids are big… There are stoppers and waves bigger than double decker buses. You do need to be proficient but it's just great, great fun."

Lake District (Possible) World Record

Aim: To paddle all the main Lakes of the Lake District in one day.

"Me and my friend Callum paddled all the main lakes of the Lake District in one go, wearing head torches after dark. It was very well organised, we had expedition trucks, walkie talkies etc. As soon as we got to the end of one lake, we drove over to the next one. I reckon we set a benchmark by completing our objective in 21 hours. The sense of achievement was incredible, we were so knackered.

We're still pretty sure we set an unofficial world record!"

Road Trip: Blackpool to Picos De Europa (Northern Spain)

"This was one of the epic trips of my life. I had 24 hours to arrive in Spain in order to complete a module on my university course. If I didn't make it, I'd fail that year at uni. I'd recently just bought a Tiger Cat kit car, a sports car like a roller skate, really quick. I photo texted my friends, who were already in Spain, saying I was still in Blackpool and I'd see them in a bit.

Then I drove from Blackpool, crossed the Channel, drove right through France into Northern Spain and reached the campsite in 21 hours flat, hitting 145mph at one stage. It was so low, it even went under the French toll barriers.

God it was hard work though. I had a hydration pouch clipped to me and couldn't stop for a wee, so used an empty bottle. When I had to fuel it was

like an F1 pit-stop. I ended up deaf in my right ear for four days because the exhaust was right next to my ear."

Picos de Europa (Northern Spain)

Solo Expedition

"For a solo expedition, you go off on your own and cut yourself off completely, high up in the mountains for a week. No one to talk to, no phones, no books, no iPods etc. You don't see another soul and become a prisoner of your own thoughts. I kept a diary, wrote down all my thoughts, regrets and hopes. It was very upsetting as I'd just broken up with a girl I loved. But I found myself thinking about my family and friends with a clarity I'd never felt before. It changed the way I thought about everything from then on.

Maybe everyone should try a solo at some time in their life, it's very profound. Helps you prioritise the things that are important in your life."

Toubkal, Atlas Mountains (Morocco)

Toubkal, Morocco's highest peak = 4,167m

"Whereas the Mont Blanc trip felt like work, this wasn't, it was more like a holiday. The Atlas Mountains are very different compared to the Alps, a completely different climbing culture. You're a lot more out of the way – and we rode a mule to get up to the snow line. Compared to the Alps, it was nice having some space to yourself in the huts. It was one of the best climbing days I'd had; we were moving well and having a laugh. So we set ourselves a challenge to overtake everyone – and we did, we got to the summit first and the sun was shining."

Road Trip: Morocco North to South

Following their successful climb up Toubkal in the Atlas Mountains, Sam and Jacko decided they could make it all the way down to Morocco's southernmost border, so they could say they had set foot on the Sahara desert, and still make it back in time to catch their flight home.

Jacko continues "We got to the desert and wanted to hire quad bikes and spend a night out on the sand well off the road. But the company wouldn't let us take them as they were sure we'd cross the border into Algeria and never see their bikes again. But we had a few hours trying to catch air on the quad bikes nearby in the dunes, which was really good fun. We even found a place that served beer which was brilliant."

"On the way back, a rock got thrown up by a lorry," says Sam "which smashed the windscreen of our rental car and put a massive dent in the pillar. Then at the end of the trip we got food poisoning from a roadside café with a pig's head roasting in the open air and ended up vomiting blood in our dodgy, awful hotel room in Marrakesh. Turned out I'd got giardia and I had it for nearly two years.

Still one of the best trips ever, though!"

Ice Climbing in Telemark (Norway)

Sam (with occasional climbing partner 'Jaques')

"We followed part of the route of the Heroes of Telemark," says Sam "Norwegian resistance fighters who helped sabotage the Nazi nuclear programme. The film had Kirk Douglas in it.

"It was an extraordinary adventure, it gave us a real sense of what previous generations had to endure and it was hard enough for us. Can you imagine having to do that with the kit they had in the 1940s and knowing that everyone out there was trying to kill you?

"That trip didn't end so well for us though: we'd abseiled down a cliff onto

a frozen river when my friend, Jaques, took it upon himself to climb up an icicle one and half stories high. It collapsed bringing tons of ice crashing down onto his foot…"

Bochette Way, Dolomites (Italy)

A famous Via Ferrata or 'Iron Way'

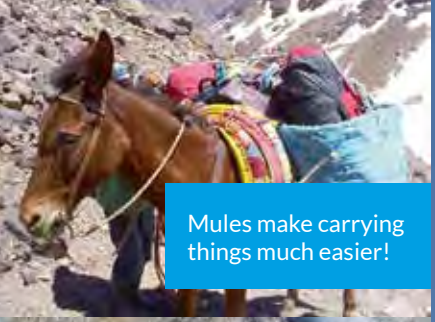
Sam visited this Via Ferrata with friends Sam C and Jacko.

"A Via Ferrata is a trail constructed of iron trails, ladders and walkways built by the Italian army during WW1 to speed their passage through the mountains. We walked for 8-12 hours a day for five or six nights, the huts all along it are like restaurants, like lodges with nice food. The iron itself hums when there's lightning in the air. It's amazing and well worth a visit." says Sam.

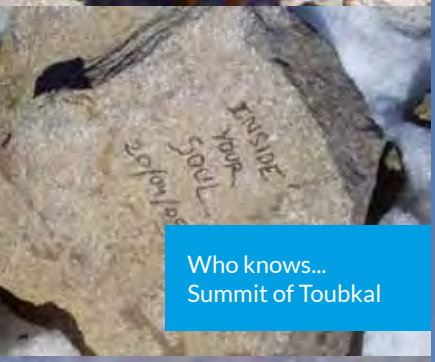
Sam C adds, "It was just a really nice environment to be in. You spend all day on these narrow ridges with 300 foot drops, so you get up really high on the mountains, have all this exposure and amazing views but you're still very safe. I don't think we needed to rope up once. It's very accessible, you could take your mother up there."

Jacko says, "We visited this cave, a Catholic memorial with crosses, photos and candles to all the Italian climbers who had died on mountains throughout the world. There was no one there, it was so quiet and looking at all their pictures and dates of birth and realising how many were just 14 or 15 year old lads who'd died, it was poignant, worrying. I think we were silent for an hour after that. It was the sheer number of them. We all know it's dangerous but to have it all concentrated in that one cave, it really bears down on you; makes you tread more carefully.

"Overall, this trip was a pleasant trip, just the right balance between the physical effort and the rewards like the views. It was nice to be sat around together… we almost wished we'd done something like this before Mont Blanc, cut our teeth. But that never would have happened. We needed to do a big one at that time."

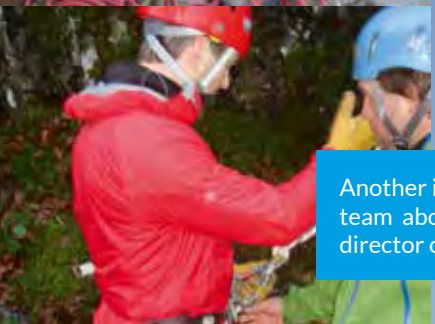


Mules make carrying things much easier!



Who knows...
Summit of Toubkal

A member of Sam's team managing the big abseil at Cathedral quarry in the Lake District



Another instructor from Sam's team about to send the marketing director of Barclays down a big cliff

Zugspitze - Germany

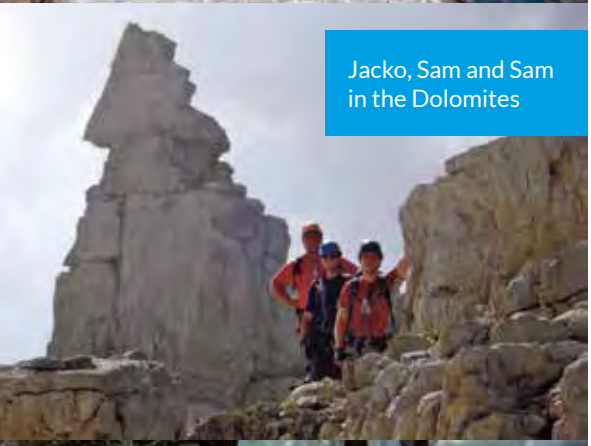
Jacko on the popular summit of Toubkal

Arctic basecamp

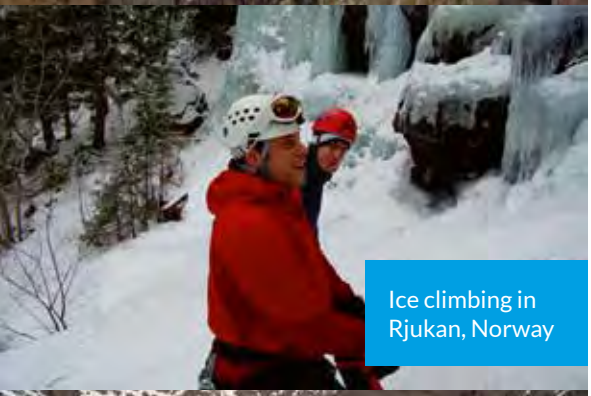
Moroccan tea - more sugar than you can handle

On the way to Toubkal

Jacko, John and Sam, Via Ferrata in Italy



Jacko, Sam and Sam in the Dolomites

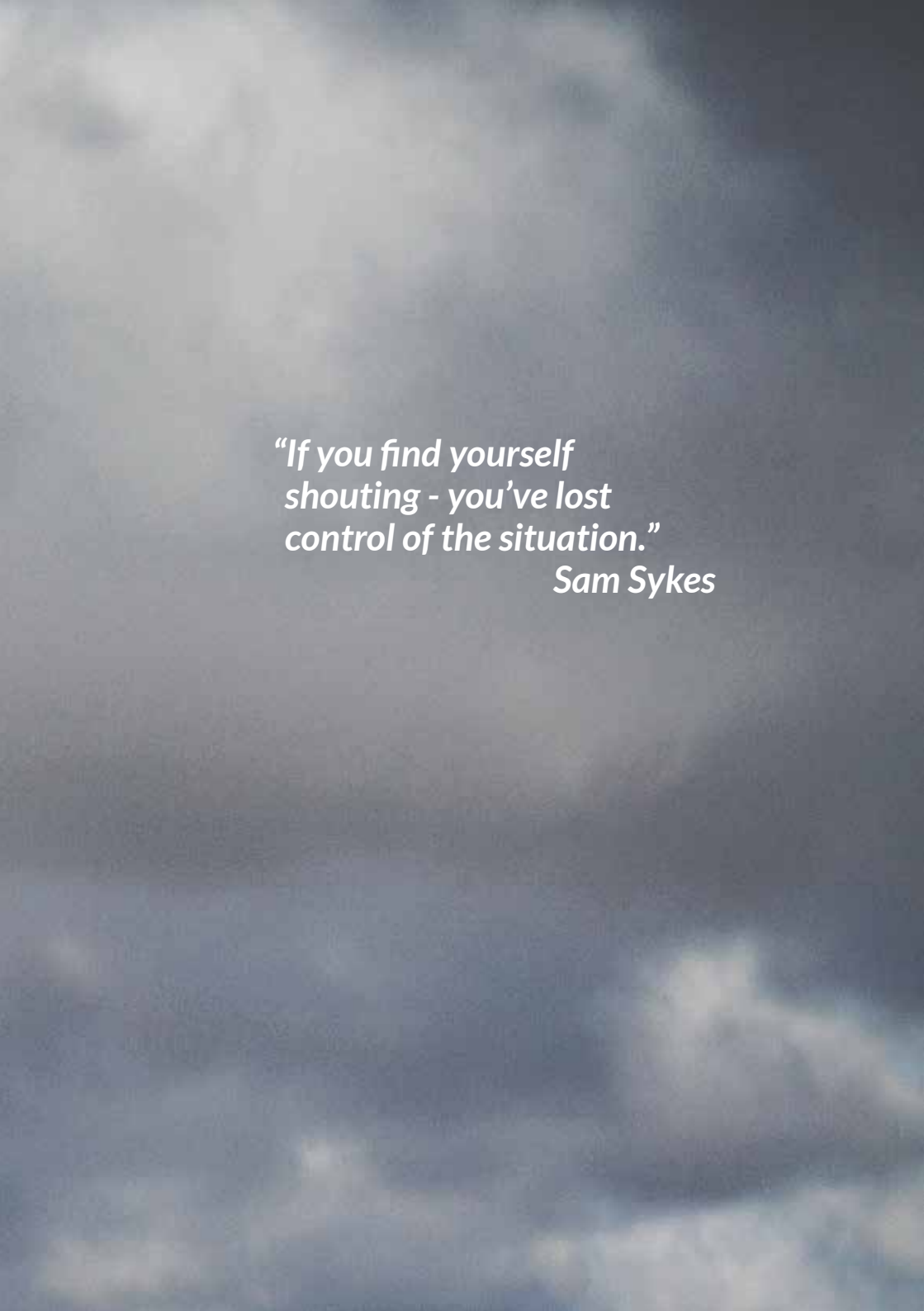


Ice climbing in Rjukan, Norway

Descending Toubkal

Bochette Way - Italy


COMMUNICATION



"If you find yourself shouting - you've lost control of the situation."

Sam Sykes

Canoeing in Ontario, Canada 1999

In 1999 the Windmill Group took a group of 15 teenagers, all aged about 16, kayaking for 29 days around various Ontario waterways: the La Verendrye Provincial Park and the St. Lawrence.

"This was a really tough trip," says Sam "We'd all trained very hard and we were well qualified but nothing ever prepares people of that age for stepping so far out of their comfort zone. How my dad maintained morale of a group of teens in the face of injury, fear, exhaustion and some of the scariest looking spiders you've ever seen – is a testament to his patience and to his incredible communication skills."

The first thing that strikes most visitors to Canada from the UK is the sheer size of the country: destinations take a long time to reach, forests seem to stretch out forever, rivers appear never ending. It was no different for the party of youngsters from North West England who had never travelled so far from home or spent so much time apart from their families.

The network of waterways linking the Great Lakes to the Atlantic ocean were, for hundreds of years, the region's main transport and communication channels for natives and Europeans alike, particularly the French explorers or Voyageurs. One of the projects of the Windmill Group was to research the trappers and pioneers who had adopted the natives' bark canoe as their cargo boat of choice for shipping their furs across the continent's thousands of kilometres of waterways. The group soon got a taste of just some of the hardships faced by the trappers and voyageurs, particularly when it came to portaging. Portaging is carrying the canoe between two stretches of water or around obstacles. The canoe and all its contents such as supplies (or cargo) need to be hauled out of the water and carried across land, often through insect-ridden forests to the next waterway or lake.

"We had two-man modern lightweight fibreglass canoes with all our kit in modern watertight barrels and it was still difficult," says Sam "The longest portage we did was 15km and the insects were just awful. We're

used to midges but these beasts were big: they could bite right through clothing. Imagine what it must have been like for the fur trappers. They had big canoes, eight to ten men crews with 500 pounds of furs plus their supplies, which could be up to 2000 pounds of food. Then imagine the bugs. And the bears. For days on end. You had to respect them.

"We wore thick-gauge clothing to keep off the mosquitoes but during one portage a girl wore shorts and the tops of her legs were eaten alive. The resulting infection got pretty bad but we were three days from the nearest town. Our guide, a hard bitten local called Bill, who claimed to have killed a bear once with his hunting knife, managed her situation well but it could have got serious. She couldn't carry her share of the load so keeping a bunch of teens focused after that was quite a challenge for the team leaders."

Then there were the Wolf Spiders. Wolf Spiders are robust, agile hunters with excellent eyesight who pounce on their prey or chase it for short distances. Their bodies often grow to more than an inch in size so together with their legs these spiders can appear to be about the size of a palm. Wolf Spiders, however, are most famous for their huge central pair of jet black eyes, which are highly reflective.

Sam said "The Ontario waterways we were travelling along were sometimes intersected by highways and instead of building bridges they just channelled the water through a series of pipes, in effect sewage pipes, which ran under the road. The pipes were just big enough to take the canoes but not quite big enough for us to paddle through, so we had to use our hands to push us along these narrow, damp, dark, claustrophobic tubes… packed with Wolf Spiders. It wasn't pitch black though, there was just enough light to see hundreds of these glistening, black, beady eyes which turned towards you as you passed by. To say these spider-infested pipes were a 'test of character' would be a bit of an understatement, especially if you've ever seen that film Arachnophobia.

"…another time on a jetty while we were unloading the canoes I saw a Wolf Spider shoot up a friend's leg and into his shorts. It wasn't funny at

all actually, we were genuinely scared for him, until he shook it loose and neatly punted it into the water!"

Bugs and spiders aren't the only wild life to make expeditions in Canada somewhat more adventurous than the UK. All visitors to the Canadian wilderness need to undertake Bear safety, awareness and avoidance training. As the Windmill Group's canoe expeditions would involve nearly a month of wild camping, keeping bear encounters to the minimum was a priority. It's essential to keep food well away from the tents at night, so separate eating and sleeping areas are usually established at least 100m apart. Then all the food containers (which in this case were waterproof barrels) are suspended from a tree by rope.

"We had had a bear alert soon after we arrived in Canada, staying overnight at my sister's before we headed off," said Sam "when a neighbour's dog was killed. That was the occasion that I ran into the garden with a baseball bat, which is never a recommended course of action with bears… So from the outset there was a very real awareness that we were in bear country, which gave all our wild camps an energy, a nervousness that we'd certainly never experienced in the Lake District.

"On the whole, the expedition members were fairly conscientious about never keeping food in their tents overnight, apart from the occasional bar of chocolate which resulted in reprimands. In fact, the worst thing that happened was when one of the boys roped his watertight barrel to a tree that was too small for purpose. The branch snapped and the barrel fell on his head knocking him unconscious. We were a four day drive from help, so had to maintain head injury procedures for quite some time until we could eventually get him seen to.

"Overall, paddling through the Ontario waterways was an incredible adventure. For ten days at a time we paddled eight to ten hours a day and covered maybe 20km. It was hard, we were tired, we got sunburned, we got blisters, we got bitten and stung but we got so much out of it. Flat water canoeing is quite different to many outdoor activities because you can socialise, you can chat and hear each other talk. So as you can

imagine, 15 knackered, hurting teenagers shooting the breeze all day and camping together at night in the middle of bear country made for some great drama at times!

"For me, this Ontario trip was the beginning of my interest in the outdoors as a possible career. To see Bill, our guide, lead a group of teens and maintain morale through some pretty scary moments and some will-sapping periods was so impressive. I could see how much my friends benefitted from the adventure. Above all though, I came away thinking all young people should have a chance to do this if they want. Canadian kids take the outdoors for granted, it's part of their curriculum, and I'd certainly like to see more of that attitude here in the UK. The UK has so much to offer and compared to Canada… it's all so close!"

It's trips like these that Sam credits with helping to develop, above all, his communication and leadership skills. They were instilled in him from such a young age that by the time he left school and entered the work place, the skills were immediately obvious to his employers and colleagues.

Years and years of observing his dad plan and lead expeditions, watching and listening to how he talked to other adults such as parents and colleagues and especially those years of seeing him draw the best out of the teenagers in his youth group gave Sam a solid grounding in effective communication that has proved vital throughout his career.

Sam had entered the workplace early, he'd had to ("In my family, if you want a car you get a job!") so he'd worked in his parent's dry cleaning shop, then had a spell of work experience at TVR and of course had freelance outdoors work with his father's expeditions and others. He'd also done a bit of wheeling and dealing to make money in order to buy kit or go on trips.

After school Sam took a number of jobs on building sites and in bars as well as in security where he found himself in some of the toughest night-spots in town. In fact, as far as Sam is aware, he was Blackpool's youngest ever head doorman. With a rugby player's build but a diplomat's calm

demeanour he found himself able to extinguish trouble before it began and quickly realised that security and club management was a profession he was well suited for. Indeed, Sam would later be offered a job at Europe's largest nightclub.

"Conflict resolution is the skill to extinguish trouble with intent, with the correct look and the gift of the gab. If individuals are beyond reason, and many drunk people are, then any trouble needs to be quickly managed towards the door and well away from everyone else who is trying to enjoy themselves. The main objective is always to protect everyone else."

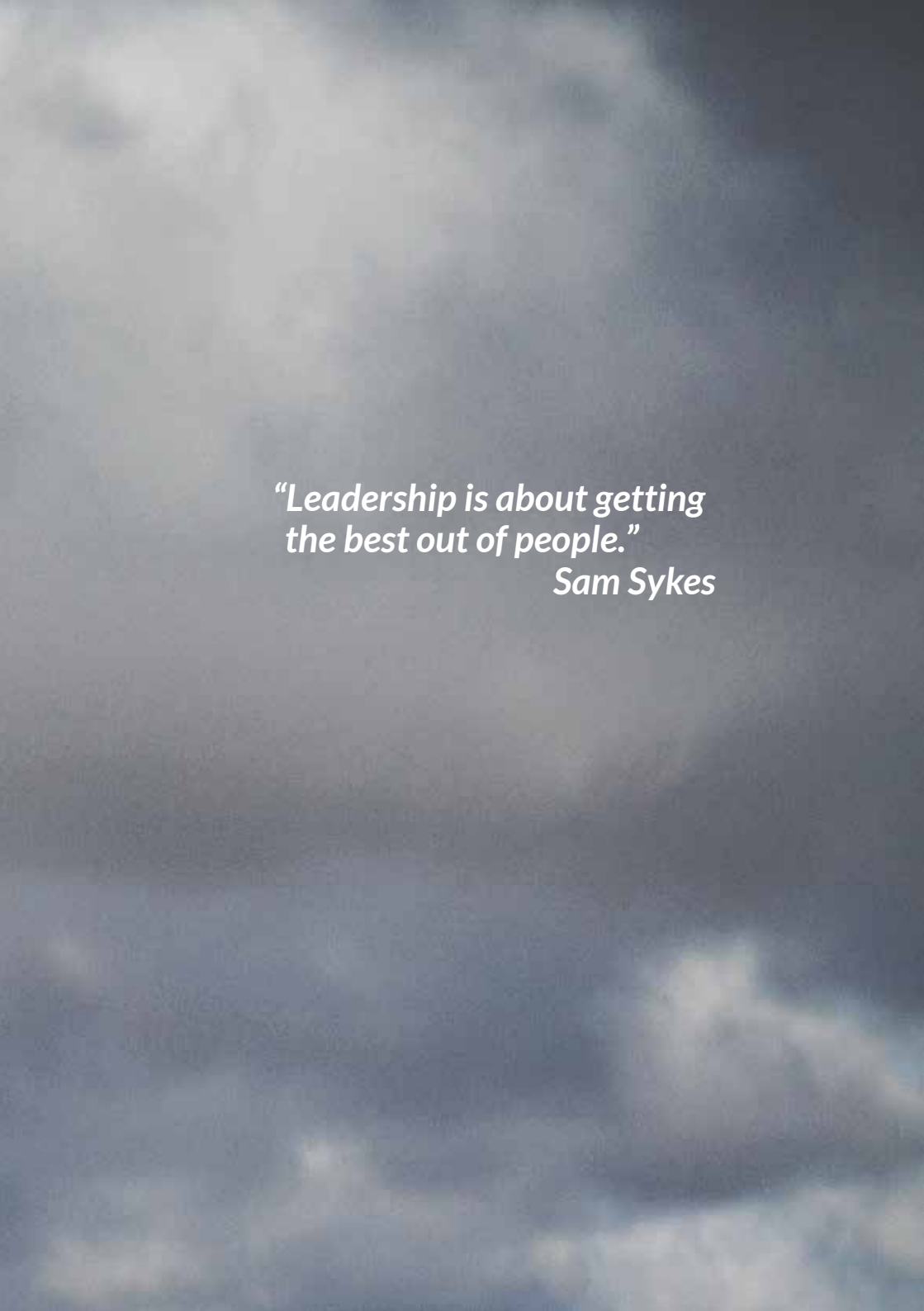
Another job that utilised and further honed Sam's communications skills, was working with youngsters with challenging behaviour in East Lancashire.

"On one trip, gorge scrambling in Yorkshire there was this one lad, who was a bit mouthy. He seemed to like me though, as I talked straight. The other counsellors were perfectly nice but not everyone responds to that. We got to a stage which involved a 20 foot jump into the pool below, at which point he announced he couldn't swim. Some of the lads did it, some didn't. No one had to. But this lad really wanted to – he just couldn't swim.

"It took me an hour to talk him into jumping in with me. He was so ecstatically happy that he'd done it and I felt brilliant too. Later on during the walk back down to the mini buses the boss of the company told me that it was the best piece of outdoors instruction he'd ever seen. It was a big thing for me to hear that from a guy I respected, and then to see the lad still grinning when he got back onto the bus and I waved goodbye. It made it all worthwhile. I'd only met him two hours before but in that time I'd earned enough trust for him to leap into the water with me."

Jasse du Play - Vercours


LEADERSHIP



“Leadership is about getting the best out of people.”

Sam Sykes

A lot of books have been written about leadership – from Machiavelli's The Prince written in the RENAISSANCE through to the memoirs of great generals and presidents right up to the numerous management manuals and self-help guides that keep bookshops afloat today. That's because leadership skills are essential for success in most careers – and everyone knows it. No matter what career path you choose, at some stage you will need to persuade someone else to join you in achieving a common goal: you will need to lead. No matter how many books you read, no matter how many leadership training courses you attend, there really is no substitute for practice. Sam Sykes believes that outdoor pursuits and adventures provide young people with an invaluable bedrock of leadership skills. Someone who regularly hikes, climbs, sails, paddles and camps during his childhood and teens will find themselves streets ahead of their university peers and job seeking rivals in terms of confidence, social skills, problem solving abilities and expertise.

By planning expeditions, organising themselves, setting targets and attaining goals in the face of adversity young people are training themselves to be good leaders; all while they're having fun.

Sam says, "Some people think that shouting, bullying and owning a flash car is what leadership is all about. It's obviously not. For me, leadership is about getting the best out of people to ensure that you achieve your goals. It's about harnessing the power of your team not wielding power over them. To lead well you need to inspire trust and confidence."

Be flexible

"People often think strong leadership is about sticking to the plan, whatever," says Sam. "It's not. It's OK to change a plan, to change your mind but it has to be for the right reasons. Safety is primary. You can't let people sway you. Nothing else matters. If there are any consequences to face, make sure they happen later, when you're off the mountain."

Observe good leaders

"I learned about leadership by watching good leaders up close," says Sam, "observing those people who achieved their goals while keeping their team inspired and motivated. My father and several bosses I've had demonstrated traits that I believe are essential for all good leaders. They are usually calm under pressure, decisive, good communicators and know when to be firm or when a quiet word of encouragement is needed.

"Obviously I learned a lot about leadership from my father, watching him interact with young people, teachers, parents and school governors. It's his approach I find myself using today. I often think about how he would deal with a situation. "Two other managers I learned a lot from and admired were Chris Runciman, a project manager at TVR who demonstrated to me what a well-motivated team could achieve. Chris is always so laid back, so assured and never over-promised. He has that way of calming people down and handling any situation with composure. His team accomplished so much yet everyone was just so enthusiastic in their work. He really showed me the way,

"Also Will Galbraith", a manager at Go Ape, the treetop adventure and woodland activity centre. Will worked his socks off and no matter how long a drive he'd had, he was always so pleasant and met the team with a big smile. It takes a certain kind of person to make people that comfortable. I took a lot from that attitude.

"There is such a clear link between a good leader and a successful team."

Sam Sykes

Learn from bad leaders

"I've also seen some really poor leaders in the outdoors and in the workplace," says Sam "and watching how not to lead can teach you many valuable lessons too. Bombastic people people that come in all guns blazing, just look like idiots. Also, people that stress easily can demoralise a team in no time, as can bullies. These people just make bad leaders.

"A few years ago I was managing a new climbing centre and some climbing walls for a council but soon became disillusioned with the whole enterprise as so few people appeared to be using what should have been a world-class climbing venue. The financial priorities were so skewed, millions of pounds had been invested but they weren't spending the money where it should have been – so not nearly enough people were visiting and none of the other managers seemed interested in getting the visitor numbers up. The gap between the facility's income and expenditure was absurd but nobody working there seemed to care. It was such a waste of public resources. It still makes me cross today. There was a complete failure of leadership."

Take responsibility

"Learning to take responsibility is one of the first steps to becoming a leader," says Sam "I was being trained without ever realising it. From a very early age my father started making me responsible for a certain section of the expedition planning. For example, as a 10 year old it was up to me to make sure the expedition had enough buoyancy aids, and that role gradually expanded over time until I became a supervisor. By the time of the Gross Glokne (Austrian Alps) expedition, age 16, I was the assistant team leader. The following year I needed to ensure I organised delivery to Peru of enough supplies and kit for 13 people to survive for two weeks in the mountains as well as the container full of books and supplies for schools we'd collected. That was ultimately my responsibility."

Learn to delegate

"Leadership and taking responsibility doesn't mean doing everything yourself. Learn to delegate tasks accordingly. Everyone in a team needs to feel valued or else they become demoralised. Nobody likes passengers or even feeling like a passenger themselves. So a good leader learns to delegate, to make sure the right people are doing the right jobs."

"For the Peru expedition we needed a transport manager, logistics support, mules and guides hired, and some security as we were taking 11 girls to a developing country. That presented its own problems too so I had to mature fast!

"On an expedition you obviously spend a lot of time with people you'd perhaps not choose to. (Just like most work places). That environment really encourages you to find ways to get along with people. You learn to button your lip, swallow your pride and walk away from situations you might normally not. You grow up fast.

Fundamentally, it teaches you that team effort is the greater good."

Make your mistakes while you're young…

Sam says, "When I was a teenager I made an idiot of myself countless times by being overly aggressive, then on the following week's expedition I'd go the other way until finally realising I wasn't being assertive enough! It's all about finding that right balance.

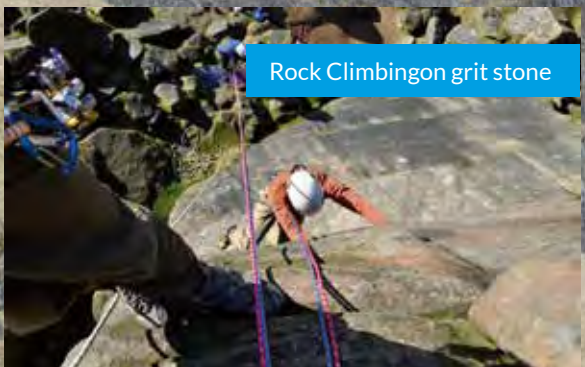
"After every single trip I'd replay all the key moments in my head, should I have acted differently? Said something else? Spoken more softly? Taken a harder line? Then the very next week, on the next trip, I'd have an opportunity to try again. Of course I made mistakes over and over but if you keep pressing forward gradually your judgement will improve. You will develop a thicker skin, became more self-assured and people will see you as someone they can rely on.

"The point is this: the more expeditions you go on, the sooner you'll learn these essential life skills, these leadership techniques. Isn't it better to make mistakes like this on a hillside with your schoolmates rather than five years later in an office where poor management could cost you and your colleagues your jobs?

"For me, Outdoor Education has the potential to develop so many skills that are vital on a CV: self-reliance, teamwork, communications, risk assessment and perseverance. But I do think it's leadership where outdoor education excels. Good leadership skills are essential to success in life, they will take you far in whatever career you choose.

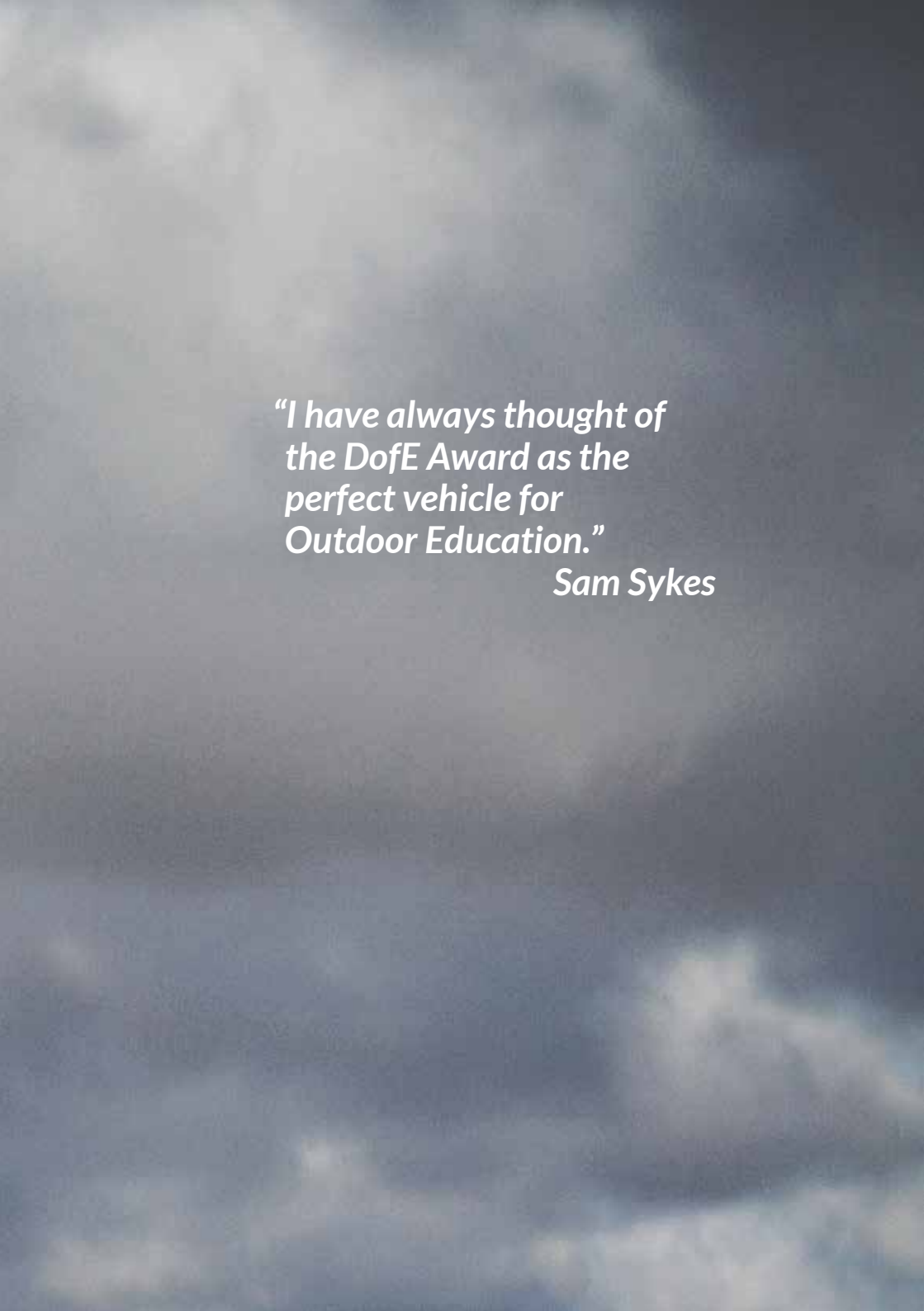
"Actually, that's why the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme is so good. On a DofE Expedition – everyone is required to spend time as team leader."

Saharan sandstorm - Morocco expedition



Rock Climbingon grit stone

PROVIDING DUKE OF EDINBURGH EXPEDITIONS



"I have always thought of the DofE Award as the perfect vehicle for Outdoor Education."

Sam Sykes

Sam Sykes had long considered different careers, including the military, but he had mostly remained in the outdoor industry in various capacities from facilities manager to expedition supervisor until gradually he came to realise that outdoor education wasn't just a stepping stone to something else: it was exactly what he wanted to do.

"I am, and essentially always have been since I was 12 years old, an outdoor pursuits instructor," says Sam, "so I decided to focus my life entirely on getting more people outdoors, starting with the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. It made sense as I already had the qualifications, the correct licences and I'd been through the DofE myself as well as having assisted on numerous DofE expeditions. That's why I decided to become a full time Duke of Edinburgh Award Expedition provider."

Sam started his business in the spare room of his parents' house in Blackpool with a second-hand van and borrowed expedition kit while still freelancing for others in order to pay the bills.

"It was a struggle. Starting any new business is tough but I was dedicated – I had to be. It's certainly cost me at least one relationship, working these kind of hours, out on the hills most weekends. And what a learning curve! Marketing, accounts, all that stuff was completely new to me. But I still never let that side of it detract from why I was doing it:

"I supervised all the early expeditions myself and it was awesome. This was what I loved doing. Seeing the kids have a great time, getting them to head into the outdoors with their mates possibly for the first time ever, learn a bunch of new stuff and still have a complete blast. It makes such a difference to them.

"The approach I take is to give young people confidence but at the same time I want them to feel completely independent, to feel that an instructor is not really there. It's a delicate balance. Myself and the team try to give people an adventure, which they wouldn't get if an instructor was stood next to them all the time.

"Our job is to give people the skills to be happy with themselves on the trip

and enough freedom to feel like the responsibility is all on their shoulders. It never really is because we are always there. But the young people need to 'own' the expedition. They need to be involved in the planning and the decisions. So we allow them the freedom to make their own mistakes, up to a point of course…

"This approach really went down well and proved popular as word spread that we'd done a good job for numerous schools and councils."

Case Study - 'Tom'

"We had this massive 14 year old lad from Manchester, from a deprived area, whose English wasn't perfect and who had arrived in his dad's steel-cap building site work-boots with worn through leather and odd laces. He's wearing track suit bottoms, a t-shirt and a shopping bag. For the three day trip his parents had supplied him with a packet of noodles and three tins of tuna. That was it; that was all they could afford. Instead of a sleeping bag he'd been sent with a sheet. It took my breath away. My point is this: I know that lad isn't going to get as many opportunities in life as some people. So I'm glad he's here, that he's with us and he'll get something out of the three days he has here.

At the end of the expedition (we'd lent him a sleeping bag) he's got a massive beaming smile, he's dead happy. He said he'd never done anything like this before, he'd never slept in a tent, never cooked on a stove; he was over the moon, I shook his hand and wished him well. A few weeks later his teachers emailed to say how much the experience had meant to him.

That makes it worthwhile. To give people opportunities who might not ever get them again is special. There must be thousands of kids around the country who would benefit from a trip like this.

Don't tell me that's not money well spent."

Case Study - 'Rosie'

"Rosie was quiet as a mouse, no one appeared much interested in her or what she had to say. But we'd noticed she was pretty adept with a map on the practice expedition. And when they got into a bit of a mess she was ready.

By the time of the assessed expedition, the rest of her classmates had realised this and she became their lead navigator.

Everything changes on an expedition: previous popularity or brashness stands for nothing. It's all about teamwork.

Even her teachers noticed her improved confidence afterwards."

Unfortunately, many young people who wish to participate in the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme cannot, for a number of reasons: Funding is one issue, as DofE can be prohibitively expensive. But there are other barriers too. Sometimes no one in their school or area has the correct outdoors qualifications to supervise an expedition. Sometimes there is no available teacher or parent who is willing to accept the extra work and risk associated with supervising in the wild. Or perhaps there are health and safety concerns.

"That's where we and other outdoor providers come in!" says Sam "That's what we're here for.

"We have all the equipment, all the qualifications including Criminal Records Bureau checks, massive amounts of experience, know our area like the back of our hand and this is what we do all year round."

"Let people like us take the stress of organising and supervising an outdoors expedition, that's our job. We and other outdoor providers are here to take the responsibility and the pressure off the teachers. The buck stops with us here. Teachers need no extra training or extra cover and the kids require no extra kit."

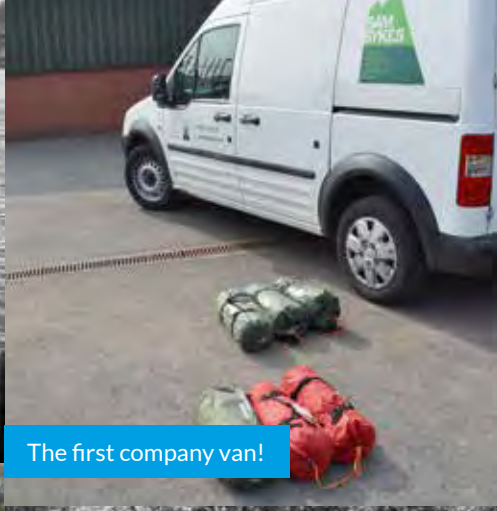
But even with the enthusiastic backing of parents, schools and the local education authority, sometimes it's simply too expensive to allow young people on DofE expeditions.

This time Sam has no easy answer.

"Duke of Edinburgh expeditions are expensive but that's how much it costs. Taking a group of kids safely on a trip into the outdoors with all the compliant health and safety measures is expensive. There's no getting away from that, and why would you want to? What would you cut? Highly trained, experienced staff using quality, reliable equipment costs money. But it's such a shame to hear from a council, that they can only afford twelve Duke of Edniburgh places this year. Why should other kids miss out? Everybody should have a chance to experience the outdoors. Hopefully when the economy picks up and the council's funding increases we can persuade them of the value of outdoor education.

Perhaps, as an industry, we need to do more to get the message out there. We need to be demonstrating the benefits of Outdoor Education. We need to make it obvious that spending that money now, on inspiring young people and teaching them new practical and interpersonal skills is money well spent. If they go on to better jobs and keep out of trouble then society will benefit too!"

Windermere canoeing expedition with rescue boat



The first company van!

Striding edge

Sam Sykes instructor

Learning to cook on a camping stove

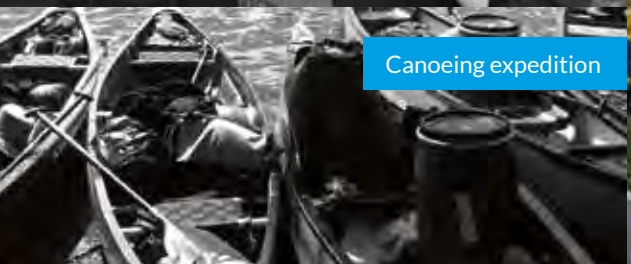
Equipment barrels

Base Camp - With film crew

Bronze expedition training

Expedition training

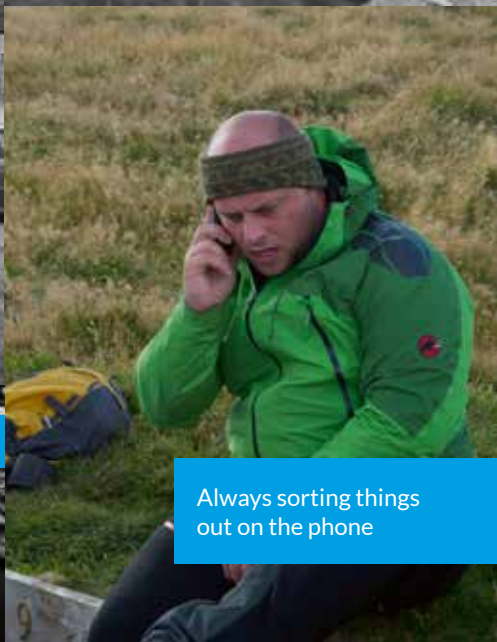
Sam Sykes Instructors



Canoeing expedition

Canoe Bivvy - Ullswater

DofE camp near a stream



Always sorting things out on the phone

Harris and Lewis expedition

WHY I AM AN OUTDOOR PURSUITS INSTRUCTOR

"I have the best job in the world!"

Sam Sykes

"I honestly believe that what I do means something. If my expeditions make a positive contribution to people's lives then I've done my job. I might not grow rich but if I can reach old age and be proud of what I've done, that'll be enough for me.

"My aim is simply to get as many people involved in the outdoors as I can. I have a1001 tasks and all of them are aimed at getting young people to have a positive experience outdoors. It's not even just about young people really, adults should be able to have adventures too, especially here in the Lake District! So if I can knock down the barriers, make it easier for people to experience the outdoors then I'm achieving what I need to achieve. The harder I work, the more people get to experience the outdoors.

So why not get out there and have an adventure? Take the kids rock climbing, kayaking, gorge scrambling, hill walking and more. Get googling, prepare properly and head outdoors. It's good for you, your spirit, your family, your friendships and, above all perhaps, your children's future."

Ghyll Scrambling Lake District

Striding edge with Red Tarn

APPENDIX 1

What is the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme?

The Duke of Edinburgh Award (DofE), is an award given for completing a programme of activities that can be undertaken by anyone aged 14 to 24 and each level can take from one to four years to complete. There are 3 levels: Bronze, Silver and Gold.

The activities are: Volunteering (undertaking service to individuals or the community); Physical (improving in an area of sport, dance or fitness); Skills (developing practical and social skills and personal interests); Expedition (planning, training for and completion of an adventurous journey in the UK or abroad) and Residential (Gold level only and involves staying and working away from home).

According to the DofE organisers, the Award develops the skills and attitudes young people need to become more rounded, confident adults. Qualities that colleges, universities and employers are attracted to. So when you put your backing behind your child's pursuit of a Duke of Edinburgh's Award, you're investing in valuable skills. Setting the tone for a lifetime of achievement.

WHY HAVE ADVENTURES?

Just ask SAM SYKES

Sam Sykes is an outdoor pursuits instructor who believes that having adventures can benefit young people for the rest of their lives. Learning practical new skills such as rock climbing, camping, map reading and kayaking can not only be great fun but also help young people grow more confident in their own abilities. He believes that "Without challenge there is no achievement".

Sam first wore crampons on an Alpine glacier aged just three and climbed Mont Blanc, unguided, before he was out of his teens.

Recalling Sam's own adventures, some successful, some falling agonizingly short, while drawing on a lifetime's experience of leading young people, *Why Have Adventures?* vividly illustrates how outdoor pursuits can help develop positive life skills and traits including:

Risk Assessment, Self-Reliance, Teamwork, Perseverance, Learning from Mistakes, Communication and Leadership.

"Nothing in the world beats a group of young people working hard and working together to achieve a positive outcome".