

'Reinhold Messner, the Italian climber, is one of the great sports heroes of Europe. His claim to fame is not so much that he climbed all 14 of the world's highest peaks. Messner's primary achievement is that he introduced a totally new way of climbing – the direct alpine approach – which uses little equipment and no oxygen support to reach the top.

Conventional mountaineering strategy is based on massive amounts of support, including extra oxygen, thought essential for climbs over 25,000 feet. Men such as Sir Edmund Hillary and Chris Bonington relied on hundreds of guides who carried food, oxygen and other supplies; an American expedition to climb Everest in 1963 included 900 porters trudging up the mountain with 300 tons of equipment.

Messner argues that under this strategy, the slowest man sets the pace. His goal is speed of execution. Although assisted by guides up the base of a mountain, Messner usually makes the final assault by himself, or with one other person, in a single day. He scaled the north face of Everest solo, without oxygen – one of the most severe mountaineering challenges ever attempted.<sup>16</sup>

When Hillary and Tenzing became the first mountaineers to climb Everest in 1953, they took seven weeks. On 22 May 2004, Pemba Dorji Shelpa took 8 hours and 10 minutes using the direct alpine approach.