

# A year after the lightning tragedy in the Tetons

By Brad Wieners, Sports Illustrated

Those wishing to climb to the top of the Grand Teton set out well before daybreak. It's safer to travel over any ice and snow then, when it's still likely to be frozen, and the early departure leaves time to hike all the way back down to the trailhead before dusk. One of the beauties of the Grand, the 13,770-foot signature peak of the sublime Wyoming mountain range and national park, is that it lies less than a full day's hike from the road. It's a world-class mountaineering experience that's also a weekender. There is another advantage to the predawn start: In the dark it is harder to discern the thousand-foot voids beyond the mountain's edge.

The appeal of the Tetons is obvious, even if you get no closer than a turnout on U.S. 89, 12 miles away. With no foothills, the 40-mile range rises from the earth's crust in one precipitous sweep, like an ax through a door. Upon seeing the mountains, Teddy Roosevelt is said to have remarked that they were ideal—the way a child draws them—and it's easy to see his point. The pinnacles are etched like a fever chart into the Western sky.

On Wednesday, July 21, 2010, the handful of parties hoping to summit the Grand Teton all awoke early. They were camped above timberline, some in a seasonal hut, others in tents; a few climbers, taking advantage of the clear night, had unrolled their sleeping bags between boulders and slept out under the stars. The day before, the forecast had been typical for the Tetons in summer: partly cloudy with a chance of thunderstorms by afternoon. But overnight the likelihood of a storm had increased, so the commercial guides hustled their clients out of their sleeping bags at 3:30 a.m. At close to 4:30, three

self-guided groups began pulling on their harnesses, helmets and headlamps, and a half-hour later they were making their way with coils of rope up through the talus and bands of cracked rock to the near-vertical terrain below the summit. They were aware of clouds on the horizon but determined to get to the top and back down before they closed in. They had less time than they imagined.

Leading the first of the three groups were two brothers from Newton, Iowa, Greg and Barry Sparks, and their old friend from Worthington, Minn., Bob Miller, all in their 50s. Their group was relatively large—eight in all—and had the widest range of age and climbing experience. The eight were relatives and church friends, such as Greg's son-in-law Tim Vogelaar, 43, a middle school art teacher. Over the years some of them had been up Devil's Tower, Gannett Peak and scores of Colorado's 14ers—mountains over 14,000 feet high. The Sparks group planned to climb via the Owen-Spalding route, the oldest and easiest way up the Grand.

This year Barry Sparks had invited his daughter Katie's boyfriend, Brandon Oldenkamp. A senior-to-be at Dordt College, a small Christian school in Sioux Center, Iowa, the 21-year-old Oldenkamp was a rally-starting sixth man on Dordt's basketball team, a three-point threat and an invaluable practice player. The kid hustled and was always there for his teammates and friends. He and Katie weren't engaged, "but it seemed to be moving in that direction," Barry said. "I hoped this trip would be a chance for him and I to get to know each other better." His prospective son-in-law jumped at the offer.

The Sparks group had the whole week to work with and began with climbs of the South and Middle Tetons. Everyone made it to the top of the South Teton, no problem, but the "old guys" decided to conserve their energy and leave the Middle to the younger four, who summited in brilliant sunshine on Tuesday.

The second group, the Tyler party, was a father-and-sons trip.

There was dad Steven Tyler; his two sons, Dan and Mike; their brother-in-law Troy Smith; and a work friend of Steven's, Henry Appleton. Steven, 67, had always been an outdoorsman, taking Dan and Mike backpacking from an early age. Steven had first topped out on the Grand Teton in 1966. In 1983, when Dan and Mike were 13 and 12, respectively, they'd all tried it together; bad weather kept them from the top that time. Still, it wasn't as if the Tylers felt they had unfinished business. They just wanted to take advantage of the fact that they'd finally found a week in which they could all climb together. Smith, 40, a lawyer with the Department of Defense, flew in from Odenton, Md.; Dan Tyler from Miami; Mike from San Diego. Steven Tyler and Appleton, 31, were already there, both working in Grand Teton National Park. The Tyler party also chose the Owen-Spalding route.

The third group, a couple and two friends from Bozeman, Mont., was led by Alan Kline, a 27-year-old climbing guide originally from Virginia. He had planned to go to Wyoming with only his friend Andrew Larson, 23, but at the last minute Kline's girlfriend, Betsy Smith, 26, and their friend Matt Walker, 21, rearranged their schedules and joined them. Kline and Smith had met in Yellowstone three years earlier and fallen in love over their shared love of the wilderness. The Bozeman group had climbed together, too, but not in the Tetons.

For their ascent, Kline settled on the Exum Ridge route. The Exum gets a little more sun than the Owen-Spalding, but it's on a ridge, so there is nowhere to hide, and it's trickier to descend than other popular routes.

After setting out that Wednesday morning, all three parties made good progress. By about nine or so, the Bozeman group had made it to within a hundred vertical feet of the summit; the Tyler party had made it up through the Owen Chimney, considered the hardest challenge of the route; and the Sparks group, moving a little more slowly because of its size, had just cleared the Belly Roll, a detached, car-sized flake of

rock bisecting a narrow ledge that requires one to climb up and over it, or out and around it. The handholds are solid, but climbers are exposed to a sheer drop of 800 to 1,000 feet. For someone new to climbing, it's terrifying to anticipate and enormously rewarding to overcome. When Oldenkamp made it past the Belly Roll he flashed a wide, goofy smile that made him look as if he had just won a junior high league championship with a shot at the buzzer.

**Read the whole story**