

STANFORD

M A G A Z I N E

Pioneer In the Sky

by Jackie Krentzman

He's raced dogs across Alaska, scaled mountain peaks and swum the English Channel. But his grandest dream still eludes adventurer Steve Fossett--to fly a balloon around the world.



When adventurer Steve Fossett gently set his hot-air balloon down in a farmer's field in Pirthiganj, India, in January, a local journalist wrote that the town had witnessed the descent of the Hindu Monkey God. The rest of the world was momentarily impressed, too. After all, Fossett, '66, had just set a balloon aviation distance and duration record, even if he had only made it halfway to his goal of circumnavigating the

globe.

What most people don't know is that Fossett has been challenging the odds for years. He holds the world record for crossing the Pacific solo by sailboat. He has completed the Iditarod, a 1,100-mile dog sled race from Anchorage to Nome, Alaska, as well as the Boston Marathon and Hawaii Ironman Triathlon. Fossett has climbed the highest peak in six of the seven continents and raced cars at Le Mans and in the Paris-to-Dakar auto rally. And he has swum the English Channel. "I'm doing these things for personal accomplishment, not the thrills," he says, relaxing at his Carmel, Calif., vacation home three weeks after the attempt. "I don't do these things because I have a death wish."

Fossett developed his self-reliance and adventuring skills early. As a child in Garden Grove (Orange County), Calif., he wasn't a natural athlete and didn't play team sports, so he gravitated toward individual activities that required endurance and doggedness. He climbed peaks throughout California with the Boy Scouts. By the time he reached Stanford, he was an accomplished mountain climber. His earliest claim to fame occurred during his senior year in 1965 when his fraternity enlisted him to swim to Alcatraz and



Up, up and
away: Solo
Spirit lifts
off from Busch
Stadium on a
six-day
odyssey.

hang a "Beat Cal" banner on the wall of the prison, which had shut down two years earlier. "I got it up there, briefly," he says. "Then a security guard pushed me offshore. Luckily, my frat brothers were following behind me in a fishing boat with a keg of

beer." The summer after graduating, he spent three months in Europe, climbing mountains and swimming the Dardanelles, the narrow strait between Europe and Turkey.

Fossett has been as successful in business as he has in adventuring. He received a bachelors degree in economics from Stanford and his MBA from Washington University-St. Louis. A trading floor veteran at the Chicago Board Options Exchange, Fossett formed Lakota Trading Inc. in 1980, the largest "market maker" firm in the country that matches buyers and sellers of options on the floor. "Both pursuits require a competitiveness," he says. "As a floor trader, I was very aggressive and worked hard. Those same traits help me in adventure sports."

You will never see Fossett jerking on a bungee cord like an out-of-control yo-yo. He's looking for a deeper challenge--not, he insists, simply to put his life at risk. "The most dangerous thing I've ever attempted, the closest I've been to death, was when I fell off my bicycle, riding slowly, without a helmet, on the streets of Chicago." He is reluctant to analyze what drives him to attempt so many different and daunting adventures. His philosophy is best summed up by the old adage: Because it's there. "I can't explain it beyond saying I like doing these things," he says. "I also can't persuade someone else to do what I do. All I can do is clear up the misconceptions. I'm not in this for the money. I simply do things I find interesting."

For years, Fossett, 52, pursued adventures in obscurity. No more. His attempt to fly around the world in a balloon hasn't exactly made him a household name, but it did garner headlines and win him feature slots on ABC's Nightline, PBS's Nova and a lengthy upcoming article in National Geographic.

Fossett jumped into the balloon race four years ago. "I identified it as one of the great adventures that hasn't been done," he says. He recruited a team of experts, including designer Donald Cameron and former world-record holders Bruce Comstock and Tim Cole. They developed, built and tested an 8,000- pound, 270,000-cubic-



Running on Empty: He ran out of fuel and had to end his flight in Pirthiganj, India, but Fossett still set balloon aviation distance and duration records on his journey.

foot helium and hot-air Roziere balloon, heated by propane.

Fossett lifted off in Solo Spirit, named in honor of Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis, at 10:45 p.m. from St. Louis' Busch Stadium on January 13. For the next six days, two hours and 54 minutes, he slept an average of two hours a night, withstood numbing temperatures well below zero, ate military field rations and used a bucket for a toilet. He stayed in touch with his meteorologist and other members of his support team via a laptop computer. He also exchanged faxes and e-mails with friends.

By the time he reached central Africa, Fossett realized he didn't have enough fuel to make it around the world. While crossing the Atlantic, he had used up too much propane steering Solo Spirit into the correct airstream. Then, to make matters worse, he had to skirt Libyan airspace for 12 hours while officials decided whether or not they would let him cross their country.

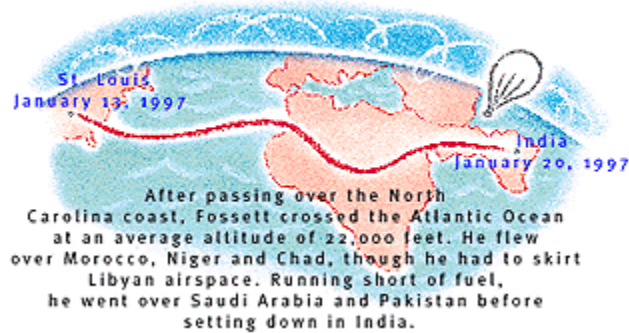
The low point, other than running out of fuel, was probably when his gas-heating burners malfunctioned over Africa and he began descending at 500 feet a minute. Methodically experimenting with different solutions, he quickly discovered that he had merely kicked the plug out. "That was a worrisome situation," he says laconically. The most spectacular moment: flying over the Sahara Desert. "I've seen the sand dunes in French Foreign Legion movies before, but it was a great sensation to see it from up high," says Fossett. "It was very remote, with no roads."

Thirteen men attempted to fly balloons around the world before Fossett. Just five days before he launched, an English team led by Virgin Atlantic president Richard Branson set off on a trip that lasted only 20 hours due to mechanical failures. Flying solo, Fossett traversed 10,360 miles, breaking his own record of 5,435 miles. Had he completed the circumnavigation, he would have flown 20,600 miles.

Despite his athletic records, Fossett is unimposing and understated. Rival Branson calls him "a sort of half android, half Forrest Gump," but he looks more like Bob Newhart. Slightly shorter than average, he has a burly build and thinning, closely cropped gray hair.

Fossett trained for his trip by cross-country skiing and snowshoeing at 10,000 feet near the home he and his wife, Peggy, own in Beaver Creek, Colo. He finished the Hawaii Ironman Triathlon in October, three months before balloon lift-off, and spent several nights sleeping in a pressure chamber that simulated oxygen conditions at 18,000 feet. As a result, his conditioning was such that even at 24,000 feet, he only needed an oxygen mask while doing repairs. He admits he's in fine physical shape, but doesn't like to call himself mentally tougher than the next guy, at least the next adventure freak. And he insists he's not flying halfway around the world in a capsule the size of a photo booth or racing dogs across the Alaskan tundra to prove how tough he is.

Around the World . . . Almost



"In our modern civilization, you don't need to risk your life anymore to test yourself," he says. "You can do that today in business, or other fields. I just think that we're able to take on other interesting projects. That's why the adventure travel industry has boomed. People are going on very expensive, very exotic trips because they can afford them and have the time."

Having flown significantly further than his competitors, Fossett is considered the front-runner for next winter's long-distance ballooning season. (With fewer thunderstorms and stronger winds, winter months are preferred.) What's noteworthy is that Fossett spent a mere \$300,000 on his attempt, compared to several million dollars each by the Swiss and English teams. Fossett's effort was decidedly low tech in comparison. "The others tried to make their equipment so sophisticated, and they didn't have the time to test its reliability, so they broke down," says Cole.

Significantly, Fossett's most important piece of equipment--himself--didn't break down. His competitors' largest expense was building a pressurized capsule so they could withstand the oxygen loss at high altitudes. But because of Fossett's intense

conditioning, he was able to fly in an unpressurized capsule. Not only did that reduce the scale and cost of the project, but it allowed Fossett to venture outside his capsule to repair broken equipment.

Fossett attempted his around-the-world flight a scant four years after taking up the sport. His critics said he was able to do so only because he had enough money to fund the project, while other, more experienced pilots couldn't get the financing.

Steve Mills, a Chicago Tribune writer who covered Fossett's balloon journey, wrote that it was a stunt and an act of self-promotion, calling him a millionaire dilettante and consumer of exotic vacations, not a true adventurer. Fossett also has been "flamed" on ballooning world wide web sites by some expert balloonists for not paying his dues.

The record holder considers his critics full of, well, hot air. "It's obvious that the (Chicago Tribune) writer didn't have much of an understanding or appreciation of what I was trying to do," he says. "And one of the misconceptions about adventure sports is that you have to devote years to it. I don't want to minimize my training in each sport, but these sports are approachable, for anyone."

Maybe so, but not just anyone can set world records. One of Fossett's salient traits is perseverance. It took him two tries to finish the Iditarod (the accomplishment that gives him the most satisfaction, he says) and four attempts to swim across the English Channel. He has no doubt that one day he will fly a balloon around the world.

Now, after setting the distance record, the stakes and expectations are even higher. Fossett will have a few more competitors next winter, but he owns the advantage because he knows his equipment works and he won't panic at the first sign of a problem. He's already planning to have his team build a 25 percent larger balloon and carry 50 percent more fuel than he thinks he'll need. He used 4,000 pounds of fuel in January but will carry 8,000 pounds next year.

Meanwhile, Fossett is both basking in and shrinking from the glow of this year's success. A man who spent his life choosing lonely pursuits has now been thrust into the spotlight because of one. He maintains he is uncomfortable with all the media attention, but he's proud of the fact that the Solo Spirit capsule is on display at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington,

D.C., opposite Apollo 11. Fossett knows that flying a balloon around the world is one of the last frontiers in aviation history; if he succeeds, his name will be entered in the record books alongside those of the Wright brothers, Lindbergh, John Glenn and Dick Rutan, the first man to fly a plane around the world nonstop. "To fly a balloon around the world would be a milestone," Fossett says. "Once it's done, somebody can do it faster or better, but only one person can do it first. It would mean a lot to me to be part of aviation history."

Jackie Krentzman, a Bay Area writer, is a frequent contributor to Stanford.