

EXCELLENCE  
*Be Extraordinary*

# High *ideas*

*For legendary speed climber Thomas Bubendorfer,  
the path to the top starts from within*

AS TOLD TO: CHARLOTTE METCALF PHOTOGRAPHY: GÜNTHER GÖBERL

**PEAK PERFORMER**  
Thomas Bubendorfer  
climbs the Mer de  
Glace on the northern  
slopes of Mont Blanc





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**W**hen I was 12, a mountain at the end of our valley seemed to ask: “How can you get to me?” and “How about climbing me?” It was the trigger I needed to stop being bored, so I started cycling to the mountain. I kept failing to find the path up but I persevered. It was something that came from within – there’s no other climber in my family.

By 14, I was already an extreme climber and had started solo climbing. I was close to my grandfather, a retired hotelier. I’d go to his flat and brag a little about all the physical training I’d done and he’d respond coolly by asking, “What have you done for your brain?” He said that not being physically ordinary needed counterbalancing. He had a huge library and sparked my interest in books. I was soon reading 100 pages a day of William Faulkner or Saul Bellow.

I know what my grandfather meant about balancing the physical with the mental. You’re out of sync if you’re one-sided. Today my life is balanced through my family and my work. Spending time off the mountain with my three children restores me and so do my clients, speeches and travel.

I’m not perfect, and relaxing is not one of my strong points, but I love swimming, especially in the summer in Monaco. Swimming is all about letting go. I don’t look at my watch or try to beat my own record. I swim without goal or intention.

Solitude is vital as it’s the only time we’re really ourselves and not doing what’s expected of us. I climb about 120 days a year and half of those I’m probably alone. I also relish spending time by myself in my Monaco flat.

#### **SIGN OF THE CLIMBS**

The Bentley ‘Be Extraordinary’ flag (top left) is placed on the summit during Thomas Bubendorfer’s Mont Blanc trek. The mountains teach you to take responsibility for your actions and to never complain



*If you’re trying to reach the top for fame or fortune, you will fail*

To reach the top you must have passion, commitment, dedication and intrinsic motivation. You have to do it for reasons within yourself so everything is connected with your contentment and vocation. If you’re doing it for fame or fortune, you will fail. These are the basic rules for mountain climbing and they apply to life.

Risk – venturing into the new or unknown – is essential. If you repeat an exercise, even at the highest level, your muscles will atrophy. It’s the same with the brain. I’ve made 900 speeches in 30 years and they’re all different. If I repeated one, I’d feel I was starting to shrink.

My next big goal is to write my eighth book (my first in English), *The Conquest of the Invisible*. It’s partly about when I fell and broke my back. I spent two months in

hospital. I was humiliated, depressed and my marriage fell apart, but I came out stronger. The mountains taught me that there’s no such thing as checkmate. You may believe you can’t go up or back down, but there is always some place to move to. Take responsibility for your actions and never complain. If there’s bad weather or you get cramp, those are the consequences of your own choices. Later on, when I discovered Zen and Taoism, I realised I’d been applying those teachings to my life for years without knowing it.

Everyone has the potential to be extraordinary, but it’s a state of excellence that involves a degree of achievement, and you don’t inherit it and you certainly can’t buy it. Anyone extraordinary lives through moments of hardship and crisis. You can only appreciate milk and honey if they’re balanced with the tough times. An extraordinary life is an adventure and by definition that is not an easy ride. If you’re not excited and a little scared, forget it.

*Thomas Bubendorfer shares his philosophy with Bentley on spectacular Mont Blanc at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=knsSTsJGU\\_k](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knsSTsJGU_k)*