

THE SATURDAY PROFILE

Why a Climber Battles Critics: Because They're There

By OTTO POHL

MONTE RITE, Italy

“SEE that mountain over there?” Reinhold Messner asked, pointing to a steep and icy peak here in the Dolomite Alps.

“In my head, I already see a line up that mountain,” he said. “I can see it and project it on the wall. Then I’ll climb it.”

That is not an idle boast. Mr. Messner is widely acclaimed as the greatest mountain climber of his generation, the first to scale Everest without bottled oxygen, the first to do it solo and the first to conquer all 14 of the world’s peaks over 8,000 meters (26,200 feet). Jon Krakauer, author of the best seller “Into Thin Air,” has compared Reinhold Messner to Michael Jordan for taking his sport to a level never previously imagined.

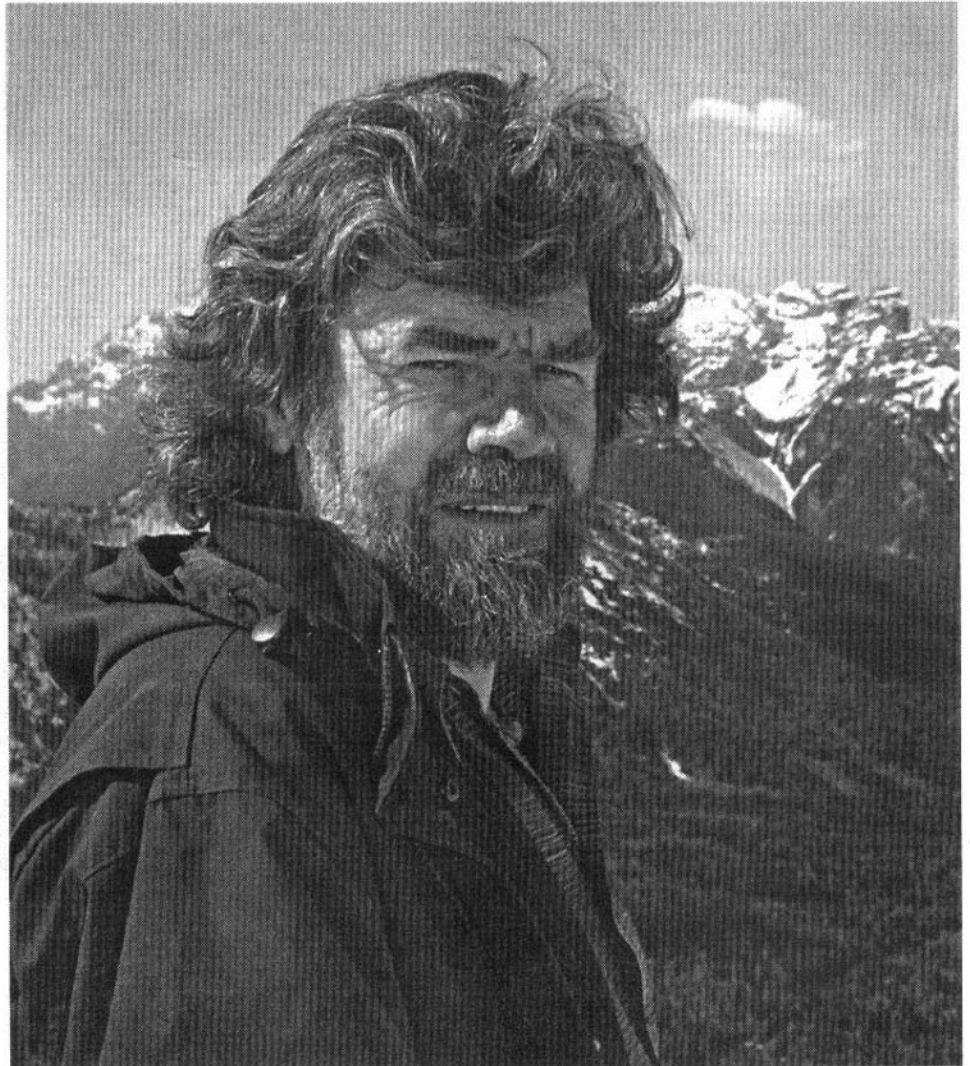
But the confrontational and combative nature that served him so well in conquering nature may now be turning into a liability. As he turns 60 and the world’s most daunting mountains are no longer his adversaries, Mr. Messner has turned his intensity on the people around him.

In a series of lawsuits, he is seeking to ban two books by former climbing partners and an edited version of one of those books, on the grounds that they threaten his reputation.

The lawsuits center on a 1970 expedition on 26,660-foot Nanga Parbat in Pakistan. It included Mr. Messner and his brother, Günther, lifelong climbing partners. Near the summit on the mountain’s southern face, the two were separated from the rest of the group. What happened next is murky, and the subject of the books and lawsuits. The one incontrovertible fact is that Günther never returned.

According to Mr. Messner, his brother was suffering from altitude sickness as they reached the summit on June 27, 1970. Mr. Messner said that as his brother’s condition worsened, he decided they should descend the less steep, but unexplored, western face. During a brief separation, he said, Günther was swept away in an avalanche.

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But questions always lingered about Mr. Messner's story. Max von Kienlin, one of the climbers on the Nanga Parbat expedition, now claims that he kept a diary during the 1970 trip. In it, he said, he recorded conversations in which Mr. Messner spoke of his longstanding plan not only to reach the summit but also to descend the other side. Mr. von Kienlin contends that Mr. Messner, determined to attain that goal and concerned that his weakened brother would slow him down, sent Günther back down the southern face and then crossed over to the western face alone.

Mr. Messner calls the story false and the diary a fake, but an expert recently authenticated the text by comparing the handwriting with that in another document written by Mr. von Kienlin in 1970.

THE dispute lay dormant while Mr. Messner surprised the world with achievement upon achievement, including climbing Everest solo and during the monsoon season — an achievement still widely considered the most remarkable in climbing history.

He became a celebrity in his home region in the Alps along the Italian and Austrian border, a household name in Germany and by all accounts a very wealthy man. He has published dozens of books and appears regularly on television.

But at a news conference in 2001, Mr. Messner took the feud public, blaming the other members of the Nanga Parbat expedition for Günther's death because they failed to search for the two of them on the western face. To counter a charge they believed to be out-

rageous, Mr. Messner's former partners gave their version of the story, that Mr. Messner sent his brother down alone.

In April, Mr. Messner announced that a bone found on Nanga Parbat in 2000 had been genetically proven to have come from his brother's body. Since it was found on the western face, the bone proved his version of the story, he said.

The bone seemed to be significant evidence, since it was found by a reputedly independent climber and underwent DNA analysis at the respected Innsbruck Medical University in Austria. But Mr. Messner's critics say that the climber had worked with Mr. Messner and that Mr. Messner paid for the DNA analysis.

Still, many wonder why Mr. Messner insists on creating so much publicity for a dispute that seemed to have been snowed under by the passage of time.

"The others were quiet in public for over 30 years," said Michael Pause, host of a climbing program on Bavarian television that has often featured Mr. Messner. "It shows a self-destructive streak."

Mr. Messner explained his motivation differently. "I live with the guilt of surviving," he said.

In "The Naked Mountain" (The Mountaineers Books, 2003), Mr. Messner tells how his father one day whipped Günther so savagely that the boy could not walk. Mr. Messner said he had come home to find his brother in the doghouse, hiding from their father.

For Reinhold, who often clashed with his father, the experience made the brothers "accomplices united against the rest of the world." They began climbing together because they "wanted to get away, away from our au-

thoritarian father and away from the injustices of this world."

Conflict as motivator remained a theme. His biggest successes, like Everest, were to a great degree intended to prove others wrong.

"For the rest of the world, Everest without a mask was impossible," he said, when asked why he insisted on climbing it without oxygen.

WHILE his lawyers fight in court to ban the books, Mr. Messner is looking for new challenges. He has recently spent much of his time working on a museum here dedicated to mountain climbing on a 6,000-foot peak not far from his childhood home. "This museum is impossible," he says, to explain why he sought to create it. He plans to open five more throughout the region.

He is retiring from one challenge in which he failed to make the impossible possible: politics. Five years ago, he was elected to the European Parliament as an Italian member of the Green Party. He admits that his personality made his political career difficult. "Politics is the ability to compromise," he said. His term ends in July, after which he will focus his energies on his museums. "Here I can do my thing," he said, "and deliver what I promise."

Mr. Messner has also embarked on another effort to push himself to his limits, a solo desert trek likely to last three months. In an interview before he left, he declined to say where he was going, but said he planned to apply the same strict principles as in his mountain expeditions: no support staff, minimal gear and no emergency communications equipment. Still, he sees it as safer than his past exploits.

"It's just like mountain climbing," he said. "Except you can't fall down."