

Blind Flatbush Climber Takes On Mt. Kilimanjaro

By Trevor O'Driscoll

If all goes according to plan, sometime around the last day of August Flatbush resident Julius Wilson will reach the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest peak.

At the top of the three-and-a-half-mile high mountain, Wilson will take a moment to experience his surroundings — he will inhale a deep breath of the frigid and dangerously thin air, he will soak up the rays of the sun that is just that much closer and he will listen to the sounds that howl in the upper atmosphere.

But Wilson will never see the view. Julius Wilson cannot see.

"I just want to see if I can do this blind," said Wilson, who lost his sight from end-stage glaucoma eight years ago.

Wilson is heading to Tanzania, Africa on August 20 as part of a team that includes six other disabled, amateur athletes — four blind people, one arm amputee and one deaf asthmatic — and 18 volunteer guides. Ranging in age from 19 to 56 years old, the disabled athletes are members of the New York City chapter of The Achilles Track Club, a not-for-profit organization that encourages people with disabilities to exercise with the general public.

Adrienne Cooney, the Achilles Kilimanjaro project leader and coach, explained that the team's message is that "disabled does not mean unable."

"We aim to educate by example; showing the world that disabled people can regularly succeed at an extreme sport like mountain climbing," said the able-bodied Cooney. "This expedition is all about empowerment of the human spirit — for ourselves and hopefully for all those who hear about our accomplishment."

The group, which is making the trip with the funding of commercial sponsors, will arrive in Tanzania on August 22 after completing the two-day journey to Africa.

Following a four-day safari, the athletes, with the trusted assistance of the guides who will provide eyes, ears and limbs, will begin their ascent of Kilimanjaro. A long trudge through a dense rainforest near the base of the mountain will only yield views of peak on day two of the hike.

The group will eventually hit ice and snow at an altitude of around 15,000 feet. Climbing six to eight hours a day, the team expects to reach the summit on the sixth day of the climb.

All told, the group will scale approximately 19,300 feet and experience temperatures that can range from an equatorial 100° F to a bone chilling -30° F.

Wilson, who never climbed a mountain before the team hiked the relatively diminutive Bear Mountain in Upstate New York during a training trek two weeks ago, feels that by climbing Kilimanjaro he can motivate able-bodied people just as much or more than individuals with disabilities.

"I am doing this to inspire the regular guy. I want to make the regular guy see that there is nothing in his way," Wilson said.

However, the "regular guy" that Wilson refers to will have a great deal of training ahead if he or she is to match the athletic ability of the East New York native.

Prior to losing his sight, Wilson was an avid cyclist who every day commuted from his home in Brooklyn to his job in Manhattan, and vice versa, via bicycle. To fill the void that was left when he had to abandon his wheels ("I haven't been able to find a guide who is willing to steer the bike," Wilson joked), Wilson took up running. He has since competed in two New York City Marathons and four half-marathons.

In addition, Wilson is a devoted lover of a game called "goalball," a contest that pits two teams of three visually impaired athletes against each other on a net-less tennis court. The object of the game is to deposit a five-pound, semi-inflated ball in the other team's goal (the ball is equipped with a bell so competitors can locate it by sound). Wilson said that goalball, which requires quick reflexes and staunch defensive skills, fulfills his passion for basketball, a sport he loved to play.

But Wilson is not resting on his laurels when it comes to preparation for the climb up Africa's contribution to the Seven Summits (a term used to describe the highest mountains on each of the seven continents, one from each land-mass). Wilson and his teammates train at a gym four days a week, one of those sessions under the supervision of a personal trainer.

On Tuesdays, Saturdays and every other Sunday, Wilson can be spotted strengthening his legs hill training in Central Park. And though his climb-specific workouts sound like enough, the 35-year-old is still competing in races and marathons.

"Julius is a great athlete," verified Cooney, herself a former long-distance track star at Fordham University.

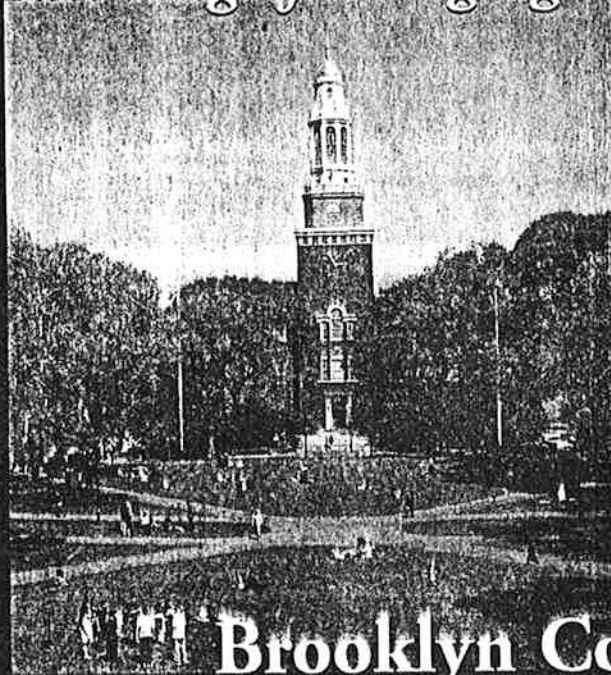
"Physically, I don't think it will be that challenging," Wilson said of the climb. As support for his seemingly immodest claim, Wilson added that the local guides hired to carry much of the group's equipment will easily pass the New Yorkers "in sneakers and flip-flops" as they forge along to set up camps ahead of the Achilles team.

Wilson's primary concern during the climb will be altitude sickness, something to which even the best-conditioned

Flatbush resident Julius Wilson (far left) is one of five blind athletes who will attempt to summit Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro next month. Also pictured and scheduled make the climb are blind Bronx native Lamar Brown and Achilles Track Club Project Director Adrienne Cooney.



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Continued from page 5

athlete is susceptible. The problems that result from the inability of the human body to adjust to a rapid gain in altitude are varied, and affect all climbers to a certain degree. In a worst-case scenario, a climber stricken with altitude sickness can succumb to fatal pulmonary or cerebral edemas, an accumulation of liquid on the heart or brain.

Since Wilson is a man who is undaunted by his lack of sight, it is not surprising that he is not letting the threat of altitude sickness, nor the opinions his wife, who according to Wilson, thinks he's "crazy," stop him from envisioning what it will be like when he reaches the top of Kilimanjaro.

"When we get to the ice, that's when the rush hits. That's when we'll know it's for real," he said.

However, the father of two boys is a bit worried about missing some aspects of life from home during the daily, six-hour hikes.

"The climb will be mentally straining. It can play tricks on you," he said.

In order to combat home-sickness and break up the gruel-

ing mental monotony of the weeklong ascent, Wilson will bear the burden of extra weight that a small stereo will add to his pack. The stereo will play the Motown classics he loves.

"I am a Motown junkie," Wilson admits.

The classic sounds of Smokey Robinson and Diana Ross will emit from Wilson's speakers for all to hear because, as he admitted with a laugh, "when you're blind you're not walking around with headphones on."

When Wilson's plans to provide a soundtrack to the trek were mentioned to Cooney, the group leader who obviously doesn't share Wilson's love for the oldies, chuckled and said that Wilson would be keeping the stereo's volume "low, thankfully." Cooney optimistically added that at a certain altitude, the stereo's batteries will no longer work.

Considering the unconquerable attitude and level of commitment that Wilson will bring with him when he attempts to summit and experience the top of the world without the sense of sight that most of the planet's population takes for granted, it's a safe bet that *his* batteries won't run out.

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