

Preparation for an Alpine Ascents' Ama Dablam Climb

During this month-long adventure to the summit of Ama Dablam (22,493'/6865m) you will travel along superb alpine rock, ice gullies, a heavily corniced ridge, and technical snow and ice up to 50 degrees, using all your alpine skills including cramponing, ascending fixed ropes, and climbing mixed rock and ice, all at high altitude. You must build a high degree of strength endurance, high-altitude tolerance, and strong cardiovascular conditioning.

Just because you exercise regularly (up to 6 times per week) at low altitude does not mean you have the conditioning needed to reach the summit of Ama Dablam. Plenty of people who have the endurance to run a marathon or compete in triathlons fail to summit high-altitude peaks. Pure cardiovascular fitness is simply not enough. Focus on building the physical conditioning necessary to ascend 3,500 feet of vertical elevation gain on successive days carrying 35-40 pounds. This trip is a Himalayan classic that includes beautiful climbing in remote territory, and with it comes a very high conditioning requirement.

Prioritize your training efforts in the following way, assuming that you are in good health and injury-free:

1. Climbing conditioning – pack-loaded uphill hiking, walking, and stair climbing
2. Strength training for the lower body and core
3. Cardiovascular training, including both aerobic and anaerobic workouts without pack weight
4. Flexibility training

Most people will need to train specifically for their climb of Ama Dablam for at least 6-9 months, building up from a solid baseline of fitness. During your training, you will need to progressively ramp up your hike time, distance and elevation gain (at roughly 10% per week) to safely and effectively build your climbing-specific conditioning. Trying to rush this will increase the risk of experiencing some sort of training injury and not being ready for your trip. Below are more details of how to incorporate these four priorities into your training program.

Climbing conditioning - Hike along outdoor trails, gradually increasing your pack weight until you feel comfortable carrying a 40 pound pack. If you live where it is relatively flat, go up and down stairs or train on an inclined treadmill or stairmaster. Use whatever varied surface terrain (i.e. gravel beds, sand dunes, river banks) you have access to. A reasonable goal would be to ascend 3,500 feet carrying a pack of 40-50 pounds in a 2-3 hour period, or averaging roughly 1,500 vertical feet per hour over rugged terrain. A good training option for pack weight is to carry water in gallon containers or collapsible jugs, so you can dump water at the top as needed, to lighten the load for the descent.

In early season, start with a hike that gains up to 2000' elevation over 5-7 miles round trip, and carry a 20-pound pack; each hike try adding 3-5 pounds until you are comfortable with a 40-45-pound pack, then begin increasing the total elevation gain and mileage. When you can gain 3,000 feet while carrying a 45-pound pack, start decreasing rest breaks and increasing speed on each conditioning workout. A month from your climb, you should be comfortable hiking on successive days with at least 45 pounds on one of those outings.

Although you will not be carrying such weight on Ama Dablam, by conditioning your body to that degree of high tolerance you will have built extra reserves that will serve you very well on the mountain as you inevitably start to lose musculature and bodyfat from being at extreme altitude for a full month. This extra reserve will also make it possible to focus on the many, many other components involved in a climb of such extremes, rather than dealing with the added harsh reality that your physical preparation may have been somewhat less than adequate.

Two training techniques that will be useful for high-altitude trekking are 1) interval training and 2) back to back training (discussed in more detail in “*Putting it all together*” below.) To include interval training, find a steep hill or sets of stairs that will allow you to climb steadily for several minutes. Push as hard as you can going up, then recover coming down, and repeat for anywhere from 20-45 minutes depending on how close to your climb you are. Gradually add weight to your pack (no more than 10% per week) until you can carry 40 pounds the entire time. If possible, participate in as many hikes at altitude – and in winter conditions -- as you possibly can to learn how your body reacts in extreme cold and above 13,000 feet elevation.

Strength conditioning - Training with free weights, bands, a backpack, bodyweight exercises, or gym machines will help you build overall strength, particularly in the core (lower back and abdominals), upper back and shoulders, and legs. Developing strength in your upper back and shoulders will help you with such tasks as carrying your pack and using trekking poles effectively. The calves, hips, quads, hamstrings and glutes are all involved in ascending and descending steep, hard-packed snow and ice slopes, and a great degree of strength endurance is required in all areas of the legs and hips.

Training primarily with free weights will give you the functional, climbing-specific strength that will help you most in the mountains. Free weight-training requires that you balance the weights as you would your own body, weighted with a pack, in three-dimensional space. When starting any strength conditioning program, complete two full-body strength workouts a week for 45-60 minutes each, focusing on compound exercises such as squats, lunges, step-ups, dips, pull-ups, rows, dead lifts, bench presses, pushups, and overhead presses. Incorporate 1-2 weekly gym climbing sessions as well, focusing on building endurance in calves, forearms, and core.

In the beginning phase of strength conditioning, focus on building a foundation for harder workouts; to that end, keep the weight light enough to concentrate on good form and complete 2 sets of each exercise for 8-10 repetitions. As you continue to train, you will shift focus to building strength (generally lower reps 5-8 with heavier weight). 4-6 weeks before your climb, shift your training to focus on strength endurance (higher reps 10-15 with light weight) to turn the newly gained strength into greater strength endurance. Each training phase should vary the weight used, repetitions completed, number of sets, and rest intervals. Regardless of training phase, always be sure you maintain proper form in order to prevent injury or strain.

Cardiovascular conditioning – Include spinal-loading aerobic training options 4-6 times a week. Appropriate options include trail running, walking on an inclined treadmill, doing stair stepping or step mill training, jogging, working on an elliptical machine, walking up and down hills, or participating in step aerobic classes. While biking, rowing and swimming are aerobic options for the earliest stages of training, be sure as you get closer to your trip that you include activities suggested above that load the spine and legs the same way that hiking will.

When first beginning a cardiovascular training program, begin with three weekly workouts of 30-45 minutes of sustained activity at a moderate intensity, and build to 4-5 aerobic sessions of sustained effort for at least 45-60 minutes. Be sure to include a 5-10 minute gentle warm-up before working at your target heart rate for the day (for most workouts, choose a level of exertion that allows you to connect a few words together in a phrase, but leaves you feeling comfortably tired at the end of the workout), and cool down with 5-10 minutes of appropriate stretching of the muscles you use most in your activity, including lower back, calves, hamstrings, hips and quadriceps.

Flexibility conditioning – Be sure to include at least 5-10 minutes of targeted stretching following every workout, specifically for the hamstrings, glutes, hips, calves, forearms, lower back and quadriceps. If you have any areas of concern early season, add emphasis to making sure you have normal range of motion about all your joints. This will become even more important as you add weight and distance to your conditioners

Putting it all together --

Roughly a month before your climb, you should be at the conditioning level where you are comfortable hiking on consecutive weekend days, what is referred to as *Back-to-Back training*. This involves hiking with your target climb pack weight (40-45 pounds) on the first day for at least 3,000' gain, and a somewhat lighter pack (30-35 pounds) for greater mileage or elevation gain (or both) on the second day to simulate the back-to-back requirements of long days on your trip. This will not only be helpful physically but also prepare you

Day	Climbing Specific	Strength	Cardio	Flexibility
Mon		(Optional) climbing gym 1 hr.	45 min. recovery level (<65% Max HR)	10-15 min. at the end
Tue	Hills, Stairs, high ramp treadmill 45 lb pack, Interval level (short bursts >85% Max HR)	Full body, 12-15 reps / set, 1 hr.		10-15 min. at the end
Wed		(Optional) Climbing Gym 75-90 minutes	75-90 min. no pack distance level (65-75% Max HR)	10-15 min. at the end
Thu		Full body, 8-10 reps / set, 1 hr.	45-60 min. no pack tempo level (75-85% Max HR)	10-15 min. at the end
Fri				
Sat	Hike 8-10 miles, 40-45lb pack, gain 3,000 feet			As needed to prevent stiffness
Sun	Hike 10-12 miles, 30-35lb pack, gain 4,000 feet			As needed to prevent stiffness

psychologically for the challenge of repeat high-effort days without any recovery days in between. A sample week of training *a month prior to your climb* might look like the chart above, in an effort to help you build as much stamina as possible.

Be sure to include at least one recovery day per week and listen closely to your body. Take the final week to taper or gradually reduce intensity and volume of training so that by the time you leave for your trip you are well rested and physically and psychologically up to the challenge.

You can find additional training resources at www.BodyResults.com for the following:

- Training Articles
- Training Books and DVDs
- Customized Online Mountaineering Specific Training

Special discounts are available for Alpine Ascents Customers at the page www.BodyResults.com/aai

This training information was provided by Wilderness Sports Conditioning experts Courtenay and Doug Schurman of BodyResults.com. They are the exclusive conditioning resource for Alpine Ascents. They oversee all client training, are co-authors of the book, The Outdoor Athlete (2009) and are creators of the Train To Climb Mt Rainier DVD.