

# On Top

# of the World

*Ashley Schmon '04, Daphne Schmon '05, and Diana Mellon '05 climb one of the world's most famous peaks.*

by Jessica Shambora

At the northern base of the iconic Matterhorn, the town of Zermatt, Switzerland is a main gateway for climbers attempting an ascent of the peak. Zermatt is also the host of Swiss Semester, a program that for over twenty years has offered U.S. high school students an alternative education experience during the fall semester of sophomore year. For Swiss Semester students, computers are forbidden and rock climbing is a required activity. From their rooms, students have a postcard view of the Matterhorn, reminding them to think big—14,693 feet kind of big.

Ashley Schmon '04 attended Swiss Semester in the fall of 2001. Her younger sister Daphne '05 was so impressed by the impact the program had on Ashley that she applied the following year and convinced Diana Mellon '05 to join her. Rock climbing was new to all three women (as was writing term papers by hand), but they embraced the challenge with zeal, heeding Swiss Semester's personal growth ideology. For Daphne and Diana this new state of mind was especially compelling. Combined with their growing exuberance for climbing—cultivated in the shadow of the fabled peak—it yielded a gutsy pledge: one day the girls would ascend the Matterhorn together.

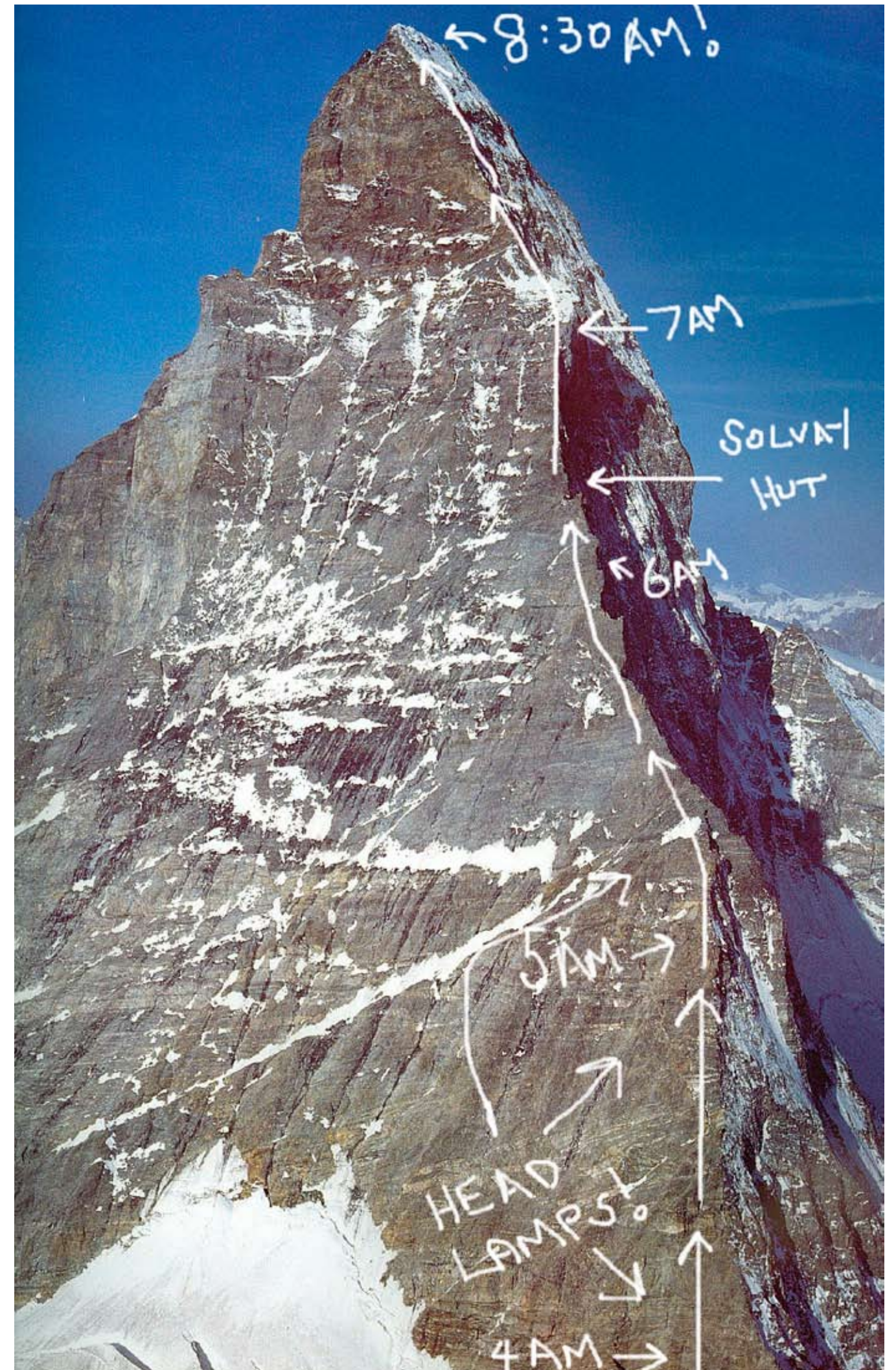
This vow was probably not the first of its kind in the history of Swiss Semester, yet no student or alum of the program had ever reached the summit; the danger and level of difficulty placed the Matterhorn outside the grasp of most. For climbers attempting an ascent via the Hornli Ridge (the most common route and the one accessed from Zermatt) the success rate

is 40%. Among the thousands who have attempted the Matterhorn, more than 450 have died—more than on Everest, McKinley, Rainier, or the Grand Teton.

Back at Nightingale, Daphne and Diana faced the frenzy of junior and senior year—full class loads, standardized tests and college applications. But on graduation day in June 2005, they were still thinking about the mountain and decided to climb the following summer.

Ashley signed on, as did the Schmons' father, Bob, who took the lead planning the trip. In addition to researching technical climbing boots and making travel arrangements, he contacted Christoph Petrig, the lead climbing guide from Swiss Semester, who would lead them up the mountain with his colleagues. While the Matterhorn is treacherous, the majority of injuries and deaths occur when climbers are unaccompanied by guides. These mountaineers commit their lives to navigating routes on the alpine peaks where there are no marked paths to the top. They also act as pace-leaders, shepherding climbers off the mountain before perilous afternoon storms descend.

The women and Mr. Schmon embarked on a rigorous training program in January 2006, seven months prior to the anticipated climbing date, running, cycling, and stair-climbing for an hour or more nearly five days a week (in comparison, an average marathon training program begins four months out from the event). They emphasized endurance because the summit must be achieved in a five-hour window with only two rest stops. While all three women had played recreational sports growing up, none were star athletes. Maintaining the discipline and intensity was trying, especially as they were at three different colleges and could only share the burden of



training over the phone. However, this also made for good mental preparation, as each woman would have to rely on her own resolve to propel her up the mountain.

It is July 2006. The Schmon family and Diana Mellon arrive in Zermatt in the best shape of their lives. With a week to get their climbing feet under them and acclimate to the altitude, they'll attempt the Matterhorn—Diana and Daphne making good on the promise they made nearly four years prior.

The Riffelhorn is first among a list of short ascents, which will expose the climbers to terrain encountered during the main event. Unfortunately, the climb does not go as smoothly as anticipated, especially for Daphne, who is brought to tears of despair during a difficult section of fixed-rope climbing. At the summit the climbers sit soberly chewing their sandwiches as Christoph delivers a reality check: their fitness level is not where it should be and he can't promise they will be ready for their attempt of the main peak.

For the first time, the young women acknowledge the possibility that after traveling all this way, they may not even be allowed to attempt the climb. Riding the train back to Zermatt, they gaze in silence at the Alpine scenery all around—beautiful but now also appearing to taunt them. "We knew what we were up against," recalls Daphne. "The guides told us, 'if you train every day, really hard, you have a chance of making it.' But we didn't know if we could improve that much in only seven days."

As expected, the following week is taxing, sometimes even grueling. The Black Ridge tests the climbers' agility on rocks at high altitude, while the Breithorn Traverse measures their ability to navigate snowy conditions using crampons and ice axes. With the guides offering more tough love than moral support, Ashley explains, "It was up to us to encourage each other. But if we hadn't been as scared as we were, then we wouldn't have trained as hard as we did."

As the big day approaches, the hard work begins to pay off. According to Daphne, "We saw that if we could conquer each element, it was just a matter of putting all those skills together for the final climb." After each training climb they ask Christoph, "Do you think we're going to be able to do it?" He finally gives his blessing the day before they are scheduled to leave for the base lodge.

Unfortunately, Diana is suffering from illness and severe fatigue. Realizing she won't have the strength to ascend with the group, she delays her climb two days.

On the afternoon before the climb, Ashley, Daphne, and Bob each rent a harness, headlamp, and helmet. After tying on their climbing boots, they hike out to the base lodge where they will spend the night. Of the fifty to sixty climbers planning to summit the next morning, the sisters are the only two women other than an Olympic cross-country skier. The male climbers and guides are surprised to learn that the women are climbing.

After all the planning, training, and thinking, the moment has all but arrived. Daphne compares it to waiting backstage on opening night, "listening to the rumble of the crowd and shaking in anticipation." Mercifully, her mind is blank—the prospect of another night's "ping-pong game of negative and positive thoughts" is unbearable. As she falls asleep, her only thought is: "I just want to be on the mountain. I just want to start."

At three a.m. the lights go on at the lodge. The climbers—without time even to brush their teeth—gather their gear and venture out into the pitch-black morning. One after another,



Diana Mellon '05 reaches the summit of the Matterhorn on July 22, 2006.

they fumble along a steep path until out of nowhere, a vertical rock face appears. A plaque announces the base of the Matterhorn and honors those who have lost their lives climbing it.

Equally intimidating is the fixed rope section that kicks off the climb—some of the most difficult terrain encountered. For most of the ascent, a ten-foot rope attaches each climber to her own guide. The guide navigates a section while the climber waits below with the rope secured to a rock. Once the guide finds secure footing, the climber follows, scrambling on all fours somewhere between hiking and crawling. In the darkness of the first half of the ascent, the climber sees only what her headlamp reveals—mostly rocks and the boots of her guide—and there is little verbal communication.

The Schmons begin climbing together but gradually drift apart as they move at their own pace. While the support they provided one another during the training climbs was crucial, now they are on their own. At this point the mindset of the climber, not her physical ability or skill, dictates her success. As the guides explain, "your mind is blocking your body from what it is capable of doing." Each woman must draw on the same willpower that inspired their initial decision to climb, motivated them through seven months of solo training, and sustained them throughout the week prior.

Ashley describes the challenge of the monotony, "I didn't realize how mentally difficult it would be to maintain my motivation and concentration. You can't think about the drop, the route, your fitness, or anything back home." The only thing that keeps Daphne from telling her guide to stop is that she is breathing too hard to speak.



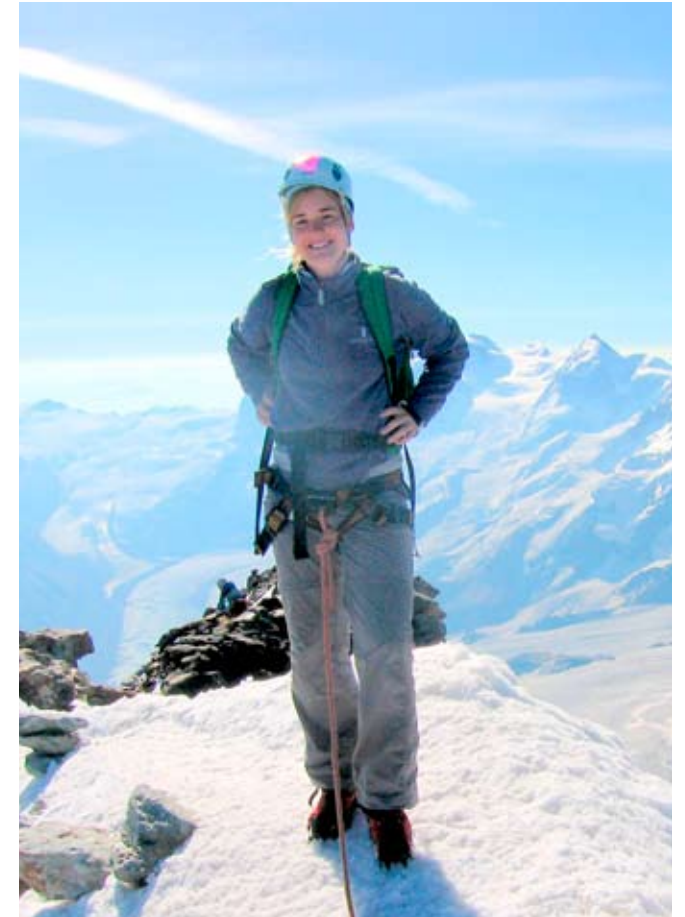
Daphne Schmon '05 with her father, Bob, on the summit on July 20, 2006.

During her own climb, Diana enters a strangely calm, visceral state. "I just kept putting one foot in front of the other as if there was another force helping me," she recalls. "I was on a high, not thinking about anything, but floating above it all like it was a dream."

Halfway up the mountain, a warming hut rewards climbers with a view of the sunrise, but they can't linger. There are landmarks they must reach by pre-appointed times and if they fall behind, guides have no qualms about turning back.

After four hours, having each made their targets, the climbers arrive at the final stretch of the climb, which includes a challenging fixed-rope ascent similar to the one that gave Daphne trouble on the first day with the guides. This is not only where the snow and ice begin, but also where faster climbers are already descending, creating a chaotic scene. It isn't easy, with the crampons of the other climbers in their faces and their fingers going numb, but the Schmons and Diana pass this final test. Now they can see other climbers reaching the summit and they know they are going to make it.

It is magnificently clear at around eight-thirty a.m. on both July 20 and 22, 2006, the days the Schmons and Diana Mellon, respectively, summit the spire of the Matterhorn. The climbers have just half an hour to enjoy the view. They can see the Italian side of the mountain and the climbers ascending and descending below them. Amid the 360-degree horizon of the Alps are the peaks they scaled in preparation for this moment. Few words are exchanged. Daphne and Bob put on their sunglasses to hide their tears and perch on the ribbon of rock, feeling almost weightless. Diana is overcome by the surreal sensation of being at the highest point for miles. "With



Ashley Schmon '04 on the summit.

the brown of the mountain and the bright blue glacial lakes, it looks like a 3-D model of the world." In these moments, the physical and emotional experience is so consuming, there is little chance for intellect to interfere.

By two p.m. the climbers are back in Zermatt and the morning's adventure is a blur—almost as if it never happened. It's not until the women return home and tell their story that the magnitude of their feat becomes clearer. They think about the climb every day for months afterward, unsure whether they are addicted or never want to climb again. "I'd never felt that proud or relieved or physically exhausted," explains Daphne.

Diana and Daphne are disappointed that they were unable to stand on the summit together but also concede that the climb is intensely personal—"just you and the mountain." At the same time, all three women share a similar sentiment: "An accomplishment is measured by the level of personal difficulty. Pushing yourself to exceed your perceived limits, you discover what you are truly capable of." Most of us have heard this in some form before, but coming from these women, it bears repeating.

*The guide who led the Schmons and Diana up the Matterhorn has offered to be the point person for anyone wishing to learn more about climbing the mountain. Christoph Petrig is available to answer your questions about the climb and—if you're serious about the challenge—helping you plan your own expedition to the peak. He may be reached at [hotel@cityzermatt.ch](mailto:hotel@cityzermatt.ch).*