



First Afghan Woman Summits Mt Noshaq, highest mountain in Afghanistan

A 24 year-old Afghan woman who three years ago couldn't even do a sit-up has become the first female climber from her country to summit Afghanistan's tallest mountain. Mt Noshaq is located in northern Badakhshan province and, standing at 24,580 feet, is the second tallest in the Hindu Kush range.

Hanifa Yousoufi made it to the top on 10 August. Yousoufi climbed the mountain as part of a team led by the nonprofit organization Ascend: Leadership Through Athletics. She has been training with Ascend to attempt Noshaq since 2016.

Only three other Afghans, all men, have scaled Mt Noshaq, the second highest mountain in the Hindu Kush.

Yousoufi was accompanied to base camp by her teammates, and two guides assisted her push to the top. Norway's Vibeke Sefland summited alongside her.

Ascend has been running its program in Afghanistan since 2015. Ascend team members train hard to not only climb mountains, but to change the society they live in. They strive to reach new heights and inspire others by going where no Afghan women have gone before.

"I did this for every single girl," Yousoufi said. "The girls of Afghanistan are strong and will continue to be strong."

Afghanistan's security environment and the cultural and logistical challenges made this project uniquely challenging. What the girls are doing is groundbreaking and somewhat dangerous because of Afghan society's strictly prescribed conservative norms for women.

Marina LeGree, Ascend's founder, said while ongoing conflict poses challenges, "the girls' courage and dedication make it a privilege to keep moving forward." LeGree says the expedition was nearly scuttled when fighting in the next district shut down the airstrip, and maintaining secrecy until the team members returned home was paramount. But the Afghan team members say they are thrilled with their success.

The Afghan team does much more than just climb mountains. Ascend's program is holistic and each team member commits to many months of intensive physical training but also classroom work, learning what it means to be leaders and role models and to work as a team. In monthly training sessions, the team has developed confidence by articulating their own stories and supporting one another. They hope to inspire other Afghans with their work.

"I feel like after facing that mountain, I can face any challenge." *Neki, team member.*

If interested in covering this historic achievement, please contact Marina LeGree at marina@ascendathletics.org.