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**NEW ORLEANS SAINTS**

# From the NFL to Everest: Former WR Mark Pattison on verge of rare mountaineering feat

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For the better part of the past month, Mark Pattison has lived in a tent at 17,598 feet. He's spent his days climbing sheets of ice and trekking uphill through the snow. He's slept on rock or ice, in below-zero temperatures. It's uncomfortable and exhausting, and probably one of the coolest experiences of his life.

After all, the retired NFL wide receiver has been working toward this moment, this goal, for nearly nine years. And now, he's finally on the cusp of achieving it.

In the coming days, Pattison hopes to make it to the Asian summits of both Mount Everest, the world's highest peak, and nearby Lhotse, the fourth-highest, in a span of less than 24 hours. By summiting Everest, he would become one of the few mountaineers to reach the "seven summits" — the highest peak on every continent.

"My confidence has been building tremendously, trying to check off the boxes of the unknown, of what's ahead," Pattison told USA TODAY Sports in a call Monday from Namche Bazaar, a small village in Nepal where he and his team flew to rest before their planned summit attempt.

"My brain, the way I'm wired, I'm very much the optimist. And so I don't see a scenario where I don't see myself on top of both Everest and Lhotse."

According to NPR, only about 500 people had ever reached the "seven summits" as of 2019. Pattison, 59, is believed to be on the cusp of becoming just the second former NFL player to do so; Former defensive lineman Craig Hanneman achieved the feat in 2019.

Climbing Mount Everest, of course, is a gargantuan task on its own. An estimated 6,000 people have reached the summit since 1953, according to Reuters. At least 311 have died.

"It throws everything at you — from avalanches to crevasses to ice walls that you have to climb, to altitude," Pattison said. "You've just got to be on your game, and you've got to know what you're doing, in order to have a successful outcome."

Pattison's attempt comes more than 30 years after he retired from the NFL, following a brief, middling career. The University of Washington product spent parts of five seasons in the league and played for three teams: The New Orleans Saints, Los Angeles Rams and then-Los Angeles Raiders. He caught 12 passes for 152 yards over the course of his career.

The idea to climb every continent's highest peak came two decades later as an antidote to what Pattison described as "a difficult patch in my life." He said he was going through a divorce at the time. He felt stuck. Mountain-climbing gave him a goal to focus on.

"For the first couple years, I think it was more about healing," said Pattison, who lives in Idaho and now works as an executive for Maven, which operates Sports Illustrated.

"It was more about kind of rediscovering myself and my independence and all those things. I think that's what the mountains did for me — really gave me that clarity, gave me that path."

Pattison started with Mount Kilimanjaro in eastern Africa in 2013. Then it was Mount Elbrus (Europe), Mount Kosciuzko (Australia) and Aconcagua (South America). Denali (North America) required two attempts, he said, because of dangerous cold during his first try. He then summited Vinson Massif (Antarctica) in 2019.

Pattison said his initial plan was to go for Everest — elevation 29,032 feet — the following year, in 2020. But the COVID-19 pandemic brought international travel (and all Everest expeditions) to a halt. So Pattison kept training and shifted his plan to 2021.

He flew into Nepal on April 1, quarantined, tested negative for COVID-19 and then began the trek to base camp, arriving there April 11.

Pattison's expedition group, which is being led by veteran American guide Garrett Madison, is one of many that have returned to the mountain despite the ongoing pandemic — including a recent surge of cases in Nepal. The New York Times reported last week that several climbers have been flown out of base camp in helicopters after reporting COVID-19 symptoms and later tested positive for the disease.

"We've only heard rumors of people (contracting COVID-19). And it really hasn't been a big deal," Pattison said when asked about COVID-19.

He added that he and most of his group — which includes 11 climbers, three guides and a number of Sherpa guides — has been vaccinated.

In recent weeks, Pattison said his climbing team has been incrementally working its way up the mountain, trekking as high as 23,500 feet earlier this month. He has been posting about the experience frequently on social media and said he is also shooting GoPro video footage for use in an NFL documentary.

The trek has a philanthropic component, too, as Pattison is aiming to raise money for epilepsy awareness and research. He said his 22-year-old daughter, Emilia, was diagnosed with epilepsy when she was a child.

Now, as his years-long goal is finally within reach, Pattison and his climbing group can only monitor the forecast and wait for an ideal window in which to make their final ascent. While he can focus on hydration and keeping his body well-rested, he knows much of the climb to the top could come down to the weather.

"I'm going back to those corny college football and professional football cliches," Pattison said. "One step at a time. One game at a time. Don't look (too far) ahead."

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