

FAST LANE

Two of the world's fastest mountaineers are planning ground-breaking ascents of Everest. Sarah Stirling tries to catch up with Spanish mountain runner **Kilian Jornet** and Swiss speed climber **Ueli Steck** to ask: what drives them to live fast?

"I think this is the nice thing to go without camps, without Sherpas, without tents, without ropes, of course without oxygen..." Kilian Jornet is telling me about speeding up an 8,000-er on his first visit to the Himalaya this year.

"I like the efficient movement of speed soloing. You feel your body, your legs pushing, your arms pulling. You are 100% focussed. No future, no past. It's a very nice moment."
– Ueli Steck.



PHOTO: SEB MONTAZ



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At home: Kilian training in Val Veni, Aosta Valley.

"WHILE UELI RUNS A LOT FOR FITNESS, HE'S UNLIKELY TO CATCH KILIAN UP ON EASIER-ANGLED TERRAIN."



The Swiss Machine.



PHOTO: SEB MONTAZ

He waves a hand around dismissively, making the unnecessary items sound dull with his expressive Spanish accent, then beams: "Just with crampons, ice axes and things for eat and not be cold." The world's fastest mountain runner is clearly excited about what he could achieve in the world's highest mountains.

In the past, trail-running heroes were relatively unknown in the wider world; funding was limited to t-shirts and trainers. But in recent years the sport has exploded in popularity, and into the newly-available limelight has jogged Kilian Jornet, the sport's first stand-out sponsored hero. His mountain dreams are funded by Salomon, he's starred in a film about himself, had his memoir translated into several languages and become so famous that, like 'Madonna', he's now just 'Kilian'.

Small, dark and good looking, with a shy smile and casual attitude to shattering world records, this 25-year-old Spaniard makes an ideal poster boy. Yet the intriguing thing is his relaxed approach. Kilian sometimes waits for friends to catch up in races, so he can enjoy the mountains with them. He's not showing off, he just finds it easy. I ask if he won the first race he ever entered. "For running? No, no," Jornet says, head on one side, recalling that he was 17, "My friend fell and had a big break, he needed to take the helicopter so I waited with him, then I finished second. I think."

During winter, Kilian runs up and down mountains on lightweight skis instead of trainers, and there's a similar story

behind his first adult European Cup ski mountaineering race. In his new book, *Run or Die*, Kilian recounts excitedly spotting his idols, the sport's top players. He then tentatively catches them up – "What's happened?" I wondered. "Why are they waiting for me?" He went on to overtake them and win. "When I recognised the real competitive situation I was in, I didn't hesitate for a moment."

A few years later, Kilian quit university to follow his dreams, even though he wasn't sure how he'd make ends meet. "The first year living the life of sport wasn't working," he remembers, "I was a lot of months not paying." Then, aged just 20, he not only won the prestigious 168km Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc ultra-marathon, but shattered the course record by over an hour, made headlines and attracted major sponsorship. Five years on, he's won every trail race on a wish-list he drew up as a teen, ranging from 1km vertical sprints to 260km ultras, and is now seeking new mountain speed challenges.

How does Kilian do it?

Jordi, the Spaniard's trainer, says he's blessed with the "perfect genetic make-up" for mountain running. Kilian is boy-size – just 5'6" and 8 ½ stone – with the sun-burnished and stubbled face of a seasoned mountaineer. He doesn't like the sea ("I swim like a dog and can maybe stay taking the sun on a beach for one minute") or cities ("Maybe half a day. Chamonix [where he lives] is too big for me"). Mountains are his all-consuming passion. Kilian runs around 30 hours a week in them, 51 weeks a year, travels to a trail race nearly every weekend and can be elusive as a marmot.

He likes it that way: enjoys life on the hoof and prefers

Kilian Jornet: up and down Mont Blanc in less than five hours.

shadows to limelight. Track him down and get him talking about trails though, and his speech flows like a stream, painting a zen-like Eden of summits, sunsets, friendship and feasting on wild fruit: "I don't like to just push, push, push," he explains. "This evening I was running fast up Brevent with my friend, then I stood for half hour taking strawberries." He opens his hand, examining traces of the fruit with wonder, then smiles: "It's nice you don't need to carry things but just take what nature gives. Then you run faster to the climb, climb fast and run down."

Kilian grew up in the mountains – his parents run a hut 2,000m up in the Catalan Pyrenees – and seems to draw his boundless energy from them. "When he was a young," his mother recalled, "We knew we had a child we would have to tire out." He walked for seven hours when he was 18 months old. His mother was tired, Kilian: no. Still exploring the limits of what his body can do in the mountains, Jornet recently began a new four-year project: racing up and down some of the world's highest peaks and setting speed records.

For example, most mountaineers take two days to scale Mont Blanc, carrying ropes, rucksacks and Gore-Tex. In July, Kilian took 4hr57 to sprint up and down the 4,810m peak in shorts. That's not all. His running partner fell in a crevasse on the descent. Kilian stopped to help him climb out, check he was OK, discuss continuing, then still smashed the previous record. Yet all this is just a warm up.

In 2015, Kilian will take on Everest, at speed,

without supplementary oxygen or ropes. He thinks his 2,000m-high childhood has given him an advantage in terrain up to 3,000m, but at extreme high altitude it's a level playing field. In the Himalaya he found he could ascend at 3-400m per hour in 7-8,000m high terrain, but tells me, "They say after 8,200m it starts to be really, really hard. I think the last 600m on Everest will really hurt."

This Everest plan may sound familiar. Like Kilian, renowned speed alpinist Ueli Steck began as a talented all-rounder in his sport – climbing – then focussed on shattering mountain speed records.

Ueli has also raised his sights to the Himalaya. Recently he's been training for a ground-breaking ascent of Everest without using oxygen or ropes. Steck has long been the most famous and accomplished man pushing speed records in the mountains to new levels. Does he now have competition from a trail runner who's only been to Nepal once, but seems to find everything too easy?

You probably all know about Steck's Everest project. His first attempt made major worldwide headlines earlier this year, for all the wrong reasons. "STARTIN' SUMMIT? I'LL HIMALAYA YER OUT" the Sun's front page blared, tactfully. Sherpas claimed that Ueli, Simone Moro and Jon Griffith knocked ice down on them while climbing. Then they formed a mob and unleashed what seemed like decades of tension towards Western climbers upon the trio. Ueli was

Kilian managed Courmayeur-Chamonix via the Innominate Ridge in 8:42.

"COMPARED TO OLYMPIC ATHLETES WHO ENHANCE TRAINING WITH SCIENCE, EVEN TOP ALPINE CLIMBERS WERE TOTALLY IN THE DARK AGES."

▶ "I JUST FELL IN LOVE WITH THE IDEA TO CLIMB EIGER NORTH FACE IN THE MORNING AND GO ROCK CLIMBING IN THE AFTERNOON."

▶ Kilian running in Chamonix.



PHOTO: SEB MONTAZ.

trapped in a mess tent on Everest for hours while Sherpas with rocks in their hands threatened to kill him, then they all escaped down the mountain. Jon Griffith wrote afterwards: "Ueli is reticent and has a chronic migraine. Occasionally I see that bright spark in his eye when we talk about future plans but I know this will haunt him for the rest of his life."

I want to ask Ueli about Everest and if he'll go back, but you have to build up to these things. Instead I ask what he loves about speed solo-climbing. It seems safer. The answer is efficiency: "I just fell in love with the idea to climb Eiger North Face in the morning and go rock climbing in the afternoon."

In person the 'Swiss Machine' is friendly with piercing, straight-talking blue eyes and the confidence of someone whose actions speak louder than words. Steck suggested we meet on a train journey he had to make. It's how he slots journalists into his busy schedule.

I was intrigued to compare Ueli with Kilian. Was there a common gene, diet or training secret to moving faster than was previously imagined possible in the mountains?

But the world's fastest mountain climber and its fastest mountain runner turned out to be polar opposites. Like Kilian, Ueli walks his talk, literally. While Kilian is very natural and passionate in the way he talks and runs, Ueli is extremely efficient and direct, like his climbing. In some ways Kilian is stereotypically Spanish, and likewise Ueli typically 'Swiss'. Both seem very comfortable with who they are. I guess, a sign that they are living life the way that's right for them. Both say finding their true path in life is what they're most proud of.

For Kilian this involves eating whatever he wants, including quantities of chocolate, perhaps dipped in Nutella. Ueli, meanwhile, employs a dietician amongst his team of state-of-the-art training advisors, which also includes a mental coach and fitness trainer. Jornet waves a dismissive hand at the idea of heart-rate monitors – he just knows how his body feels. He doesn't care to remember where he placed in many races. Steck always trains and climbs with a heart rate monitor, because each session is targeted to a precise goal, logged and analysed.

The reasons the two like lightweight kit is, again, natural outlook versus scientific. "More than moving fast, I like moving light," Kilian explained. "When you move light you need to move fast to not be cold. I like to be just

with shorts, why do you need more?" Ueli has a different view: he's a self-confessed "tech freak", and if an accident ever stopped him climbing, might get into lightweight kit development instead.

I wanted to get Kilian and Ueli together for a beer but, well, you try co-ordinating one man who's constantly running in the mountains or travelling to places like Norway and the Dolomites to race with another who's constantly climbing, training or travelling to places like Berlin and New York to speak at events. It's a good job they're both super-fast to fit it all in.

So, you'll have to imagine them sipping pints and comparing notes on moving fast in the mountains: Kilian describing his technique as "a flowing dance between my body and the terrain, trying to communicate through my steps what nature is communicating to me" and Ueli responding that he likes to "control, climb smooth and get things done in a proper style."

I'm just thinking, that's the big difference – while Kilian succeeds by moving in harmony with the mountains, Ueli fights to overcome them with ruthless efficiency – when Ueli draws me back to the present moment, his story: "I like the efficient movement of speed soloing. You feel your body, your legs pushing, your arms pulling. You are 100% focussed. No future, no past. It's a very nice moment," he ponders. I picture Ueli, his ice axe and crampons like natural extensions of his limbs as he speeds up walls of ice. Wondering how he got there, I ask about his first climbing experience.

As with Kilian, there were early signs Ueli would be a prodigy in his sport.

He never top-roped. His very first climb as a child was on the sharp end, and he grew up fascinated by the Eiger, which he could see from home. After gaining a place on the Swiss Junior Climbing Team, he quickly got bored. When the teenage Ueli climbed his first alpine peak, the Scheideggwetterhorn, he thought: "Now this is a real mountain." Then his Eiger obsession really took off.

Steck spent a year training for his first ascent of the 3,970m peak. While out running with a full rucksack, he'd pause to scale telegraph poles with ice axes. Over the following years he worked through every worthwhile route up the Eiger and added a new route – The Young Spiders – up the North Face. He also ticked off increasingly hard alpine classics and rock routes up to 8a, often solo, and put up new test pieces in Nepal and Alaska. Sponsorship deals offered more time to train, and he refocused on the Eiger. Solo. At speed.

Ueli trained harder than ever to crush the Eiger North Face speed record. In 2004 he climbed it in ten hours, and it took three years to whittle that down to the new record of 3hr47. Afterwards, curiosity led him to the Swiss Federal Institute of Sports to find out how fit he was. They told him: not very! Compared to Olympic athletes, who train very scientifically, even top alpine climbers were in the dark ages.

After a year working with a team of Swiss Olympic training experts, Ueli returned to the Eiger, stripped nearly an hour from his own record and had found his niche. "Mountaineering is still not very developed from an athletic prospective," Ueli tells me. "This is what I am interested in." His training was, and remains, complex. Periods he works on strength or base endurance. Mental training sessions. 10-12 training sessions a week, up to 1,000 hours a year.

(I make a personal note: mountain runners had better hope Kilian doesn't decide to train like an Olympic athlete.) Steck then gave up soloing hard rock routes. If he

NEED FOR SPEED

Most people need a week's holiday to circuit Mont Blanc or bag Kilimanjaro, and most good climbers take one to two days to climb the Eiger North Face. Not if you live fast.



PHOTO: JON GRIFFITH.

KILIAN JORNET

02:52

Cervinia Church Square to the Matterhorn summit (4,478m) and back "When I was reaching Cervinia, I was very surprised; I really thought it would be extremely difficult to be able to beat the record."

04:57

Chamonix Town Centre to Mont Blanc summit (4,810m) and back Kilian and running partner Matheo Jacquemoud reached the summit in 3:33, but Matheo fell in a crevasse on the descent. Kilian said, "Once Matheo was safely out of the crevasse, I decided to continue on alone."

07:14

Base camp to Kilimanjaro summit (5,895m) and back "After 5,000m it's tough! Starting at the camp at Arrow Glacier it gets really difficult! I just wish for the descent, I just let go and fly!"

08:42

Courmayeur-Chamonix via the Innominata Ridge, (42km, 3,810m of ascent, D+) "I realised, in surprise, my record time. My goal was to do it in under ten hours but thanks to the good conditions I came across, I was able to descend faster than I had expected."

38:32

Tahoe Rim Trail speed record (266km) Despite getting lost, Kilian easily beat the previous record of 45:58. "We went a good 2.5 miles off track, and I was absolutely horrified," said pacer Sean Meissner. "But he didn't even blink. He just grabbed me by the shoulders, laughed and said, 'More kilometres, more fun, Sean!'"

01:56

Matterhorn North Face solo (Schmid route (ED, 1,100m) "I'd thought about speed solo climbing the three great Alpine north faces for years and had prepared myself specifically. The Schmid route was the easiest of the three. But again, I didn't know the line. I took with me a 50m dyneema 5mm rope, two icescrews, three carabiners, a belay plate, a litre to drink, an energy bar and some gels."

02:21

Grandes Jorasses North Face, Colton-McIntyre route (ED1, 1,200m) "I'd never climbed the Colton-Macintyre before. For me this ascent represented a next step, a new challenge. I was interested in entering unknown terrain and seeing if I could still climb quickly."

02:47

Eiger North Face solo, Heckmair route (ED2, 1,800m). Ueli set the record of 3:54 on this route in 2007, then returned in 2008 to better his time. "The record meant nothing to me - I knew that was not my real best. I had just been faster than the others."

10:30

Shishapangma South Face (8,027m), solo Ueli soloed his first 8,000m peak in 2009: Gasherbrum II (8034m). In 2011, he upped his game to speed solo the next one. "If you climb a route without fixed ropes or without any gear on it then it's real."

16:09

Intégrale de Peuterey, the longest ridge traverse in the Alps (TD/ED1 1,000m ascent, 4,500m climb) "The ridge itself was anything but simple. It contained a lot of rock climbing and a difficult route. I'd never been on the south side of Mont Blanc. The route is not easy to find, but it is quite climbable without ropes." Afterwards Ueli thought about calling someone to pick him up, but decided to walk for an hour back to his tent as it was a nice evening.

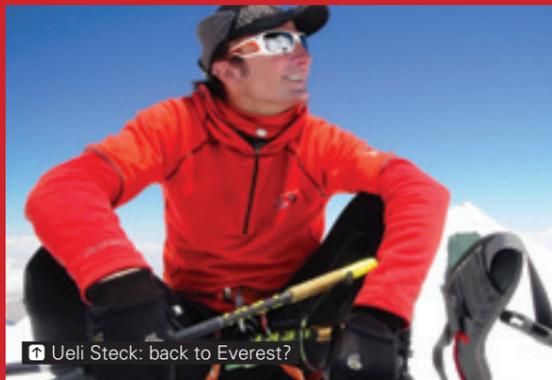
UELI STECK

▶ On 19 January 2013, Ueli Steck caught the first lift up from the Grands Montets, after a long drive from Bern. He headed over towards the North Face of the Droites and soloed the classic Ginat route in 2.08. Not being acclimatised, this was just for "fun".



Kilian races to Matterhorn summit and back in a staggering 2:52. The previous record was 3:14.

“THE WORLD’S FASTEST MOUNTAIN CLIMBER AND ITS FASTEST MOUNTAIN RUNNER TURNED OUT TO BE POLAR OPPOSITES”



Ueli Steck: back to Everest?

FIND OUT MORE

www.uelisteck.ch

More about Ueli's Himalaya project:
www.himalayaspeed.com
www.kilianjornet.cat

More about Kilian's Summits of My Life project:
www.summitsofmylife.com



continued, he calculated, he'd eventually kill himself. Instead, he decided to redefine what was possible at speed on what he calls “average technical terrain.” From 2008-9 Steck also broke solo speed records on the Grandes Jorasses (2hr20) and Matterhorn (1hr56), completing a neat trilogy of notorious Alpine North faces. Next, he raised his sights to redefining what's possible in the Himalaya.

In a way, this is where Ueli's story meets Kilian's. While Ueli first pushed his technical climbing limit to 8a solos, then progressed to setting speed records on less technical mountaineering terrain, Kilian went the other way. First he pushed his speed limit winning trail races, then upped his game to setting speed records on more technical mountaineering terrain.

It was probably inevitable these two sponsored heroes, both looking for bigger speed challenges in mountaineering terrain, would both end up on Everest. Of course, both want to do something different and avoid the fixed ropes of Everest's Normal Route, where speed records are traditionally set. And both think using oxygen is cheating.

However, they aren't going to race up the same route in a gameshow-style challenge. Kilian plans to set a speed record via one of Everest's easy-angled snow couloirs – probably the Norton or Hornbein Couloir depending on conditions; Ueli's plan is an ambitious, technical new route to the summit. Neither idea has been tried before.

I'm intrigued to know what Ueli thinks of Kilian's project. “Cool idea!” he says, “This is right, the Normal Route is just pulling on ropes, but technical wise, the couloirs are very easy – snow slopes, nothing more. I think it is very cool to be able to climb mountains so fast and so easily like Kilian.” However, he wants to make

the distinction between his game and Kilian's clear: “we still have to make the difference – technical routes is the challenge these days, not long easy climbs.”

Personally, I think they are both pushing different aspects of moving fast and light in the mountains to new levels. Kilian climbs average grades – like 6c sport, 6a solos, some 90° ice and M6 terrain – explaining: “I really don't train too much in rock climbing so is difficult to improve the level.” On the other hand, while Ueli runs a lot for fitness (eighth in the recent 51km Eiger Ultra Trail suggests he's quite fast), he's unlikely to catch Kilian up on easier-angled terrain.

Who's to say how much further Kilian will blur the boundary between climbing and running in the future, though. He's only 25, tells me Ueli is a huge inspiration for him and says he thinks Ueli's Everest project “is the way to approach big summits in the future.” But there's also a chance Kilian will quietly slip into the shadows like a marmot. He loves racing but fame is, for him, an unfortunate by-product of winning.

And what about Ueli? I bite the bullet and ask: will he go back to Everest and climb the route he planned? Steck thinks for a moment, before replying: “You have to be honest – you cannot always climb harder and higher. I feel already I am not that driven any more compared to ten years ago. I can really enjoy just being out there. I really love to be in the mountains with my wife. We have a great time together.”

I ask what Ueli most likes about himself. “I really can fight and I like that,” he responds. And dislike? “My way how I can focus on something.” Whichever way you look at it, it's surely not in his obsessive nature to let the biggest challenge he's ever set himself go. So, will he go back to Everest?

He smiles. “You never know...”

What's next for Kilian Jornet?



BMC member Sarah Stirling is a freelance outdoor writer based in Chamonix, France. A keen runner, she has spent much of the last two months chasing Ueli and Kilian to meet up for Summit. Maybe next time! Find out more at www.sarahstirling.com.

AMG