

TCHES

MOUNTAINEERING

Who, Moi?

A year after Alison Hargreave's tragic death on K2, Chantal Mauduit stakes claim as the sport's newest star



"I ADMIRE HER, BUT YOU see, we are very different," says French alpinist Chantal Mauduit, speaking in broken English. "For one thing, I am still climbing."

Mauduit, who hails from the mountain burg of Chambéry, is talking about Alison Hargreaves, the controversial British climber who died last August while descending from the summit of K2. Mauduit herself is rising star in a sport that currently is lacking in high-profile women. And recently the 32-year-old has been sprayed with questions: *and Is she the finest female alpinist in the world?*

To which Mauduit responds, "What does it matter? Such titles are not important to me. I only climb because it's beautiful up there."

The experts, naturally, are divided on whether she's the second coming of Hargreaves. Her résumé—which includes four peaks over 8,000 meters, to Hargreaves's two—offers proof of her dominance. Nevertheless, critics point to two dramatic rescues as evidence that she may lack the strength needed at extreme altitude (in one, suffering from exhaustion and snowblindness, she was helped off K2 by partners; in the other, she was escorted down Everest).

Indeed, in many ways Mauduit couldn't be more different from Hargreaves. "Alison was extremely intense and independent," says Himalayan veteran Thor Kaser, a very aggressive person on and off the mountain. Chantal, meanwhile, tends to hide her drive—she has this very childlike personality." For those adolescent manners, Mauduit carries a stuffed toy goose on her expeditions. "There's love in the mountains," she says, referring to her romantic view of the sport and the widening cast of admirers she attracts on every climb.

To date, the only major mountain to have de-

feated her is Everest. Three times she's attempted it, only to be turned back each time. Nonetheless, Mauduit can cement her place in mountaineering lore if she completes the Himalayan double-feature that, if all goes well, will wrap up this month. Phase one entails topping out on 27,323-foot Lhotse with American partner Dan Mazur via the never-before-climbed north face. Then it's a helicopter jaunt to 26,760-foot Manaslu, where she'll join up with another American, Ed Viesturs, and hopefully summit by the 15th of this month, when the monsoon season typically begins. (At press time she was still bivouacked high on Lhotse.)

The plan does seem almost Hargreavesian in its audacity, but it's also the kind of bouncing-around-the-Himalayas dream that has enthralled Mauduit since she was a teenager. She started climbing at age 13—"I was always running around the mountains where I lived," she says—and was immediately drawn toward bigger, more difficult things. One by one, she knocked off the classics of the Alps: the Grandes Jorasses, La Meije, and the Droites, among others. Then she fixed her sights on the Himalayas, summiting K2 in 1992. In 1993 she returned, but didn't have enough money to pay for the "26,724-foot K2's neighbor, Dhaulagiri, because she was obsessed anyway, and armed with only a few days' supplies she illegally summited both Xupangma and 26,750-foot Cho Oyu.

Thanks largely to her success on K2, Mauduit's biggest obstacle—lack of funds—has been taken care of by sector Sport Watches, which is footing much of the bill for her current expedition. But a pressing question lingers: Will she ever be as famous in her native land as Jerry Lewis? I hope not," she says. "I do not like all the attention."

Then again, she says, noting that she's graced the cover of 15 different French magazines since climbing K2, "what can I do? The French will be French." — LOLLY MERRELL