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## Defying Death for the Heck of It

By ALEX KOZINSKI

While other flabby, middle-aged men were trying to jump-start their virility by acquiring trophy wives, Michael Bane was drawing up The List. No, not "visit Europe, lose five pounds, improve my putting." Scribbled on the back of a cocktail napkin after enough beer to dull the part of the brain that dispenses common sense, The List looks like this: 1) Windsurf Big Air; 2) Kamikaze Downhill; 3) Escape From Alcatraz; 4) Whitewater off a Waterfall; 5) Rock Climb; 6) Cave Dive; 7) Ice Climb; 8) Skydive; 9) Skate Marathon; 10) Dive Really Deep; 11) Badwater Death Valley Run; 12) Iditarod Bike Race; 13) Denali.

Even in an age of cross-training superathletes, this list borders on the suicidal. Scaling Denali (i.e., Alaska's Mount McKinley), "the roof of the world," claims the life of one out of every 100 climbers who try. Cave-diving, which involves exploring caverns beneath the sea, has been called the most dangerous sport in the world. The Badwater Run drags competitors from the lowest point in the continental U.S. to the highest, with temperatures ranging from 125 degrees at the start in Death Valley to freezing at the Mount Whitney finish. Other challenges from The List include a mile-and-a-half swim through shark-infested waters (part of the Alcatraz Triathlon), a plunge off a waterfall in a rubber kayak, and a race where the motto is "Cowards won't show, and the weak will die" (the Iditarod Bike Race). If you drew up such a list one boozy night, you might discreetly crumple it up after you read it in the sober light of day. Instead, the author threw himself into the enterprise full-bore. Makes you wonder about his brand of brew.

Oh sure, you're saying, Michael Bane

is probably the second coming of Johnny Weissmuller, with a body tuned to a perfect pitch by hours of daily exercise. Not close. At the beginning of this adventure—detailed entertainingly in "Over the Edge: A Regular Guy's Odyssey in Extreme Sports" (Macmillan, 246 pages, \$21.95)—our eccentric hero can't run more than a mile without collapsing and can't swim at all. He is afraid of heights and has none of the technical expertise on which his life will depend when scaling a frozen waterfall or diving at seven atmospheres. In short, he's more or less like you and me.

Some of Mr. Bane's achievements are the product of sheer courage, like the Mammoth Kamikaze Downhill. The most dangerous organized sporting event in



### Bookshelf

*"Over the Edge: A Regular Guy's Odyssey in Extreme Sports"*

By Michael Bane

America based on total number of injuries, this 3.5-mile bicycle race forces competitors straight down a mountain at speeds up to 60 miles an hour. Others test brute will, like the Alcatraz Triathlon and the Iditarod Bike Race, where cold, distance and terror conspire to break challengers mentally as well as physically.

As if trading in his Dockers for high-tech "clothing systems" isn't enough, Mr. Bane must also figure out what he calls "the details of staying alive." In the course of his adventures, he masters the use of an ice ax as well as a dive computer. He learns how to locate and rescue colleagues buried by avalanches, avoid nitrogen narcosis and deal with the ever-present risk of moose attack. A couple of items on The

List, though, require only the willingness to do something entirely counterintuitive (read: "totally nuts"). Rollerblade 85 miles in urban traffic? Windsurf in gale-force winds? Pass the remote and I'll watch it on ESPN.

"Over the Edge" does give you an increased appreciation of the human body's physical and mental capabilities. There is something undeniably bracing about seeing the limits of human endurance pushed out, a feeling that those doing the pushing call "the rush." Having leapt backward off a 150-foot tower with a rubberband tied to my ankles, I have tasted the rush and understand how addictive it can be. What I was hoping to find in this book was some insight into why some people can't satisfy their craving for excitement on weekends. How did Michael Bane become the George Plimpton from hell?

The answer is elusive. "There is no easy way into another world," someone once wrote, and this truth leaps from the pages of "Over the Edge." Forcing yourself into the extreme gives you a perspective inaccessible to those who haven't been there. Reading "Over the Edge" is a good way to enjoy Michael Bane's exploits. But to understand him, you've got to follow him there.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not suggesting you put down the nachos and turn your life over to a personal trainer. Some experiences are best enjoyed vicariously, particularly when you must sign a waiver of liability as a condition for participating. But if you are one of the hardy few who can't stand to let Michael Bane have all the thrills, just remember: When your lawyer comes looking for a deep pocket, I'll deny you heard about The List from me.

*Mr. Kozinski is a federal judge in California.*