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Project Possible and the Final Mountain: Remembering Nirmal Purja

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When Nirmal “Nims” Purja announced that he intended to climb all 14 of the world's mountains above 8,000 metres in a single season, the plan sounded almost deliberately unreasonable.

The existing record had been measured in years. Purja proposed to reduce it to months.

In 2019 he did exactly that, completing the 14 peaks in six months and six days. The achievement turned the Nepal-born former British special forces soldier into one of the most recognisable

mountaineers in the world.

Seven years later, on 30 July 2026, Purja was killed in an avalanche on Broad Peak in Pakistan while leading an international expedition. He was 43.

His death ended a career defined by speed, confidence and a persistent refusal to accept the limits other people placed around Himalayan climbing.

From the plains to the mountains

Purja was born in Nepal in 1983 and did not grow up inside the traditional high-altitude climbing communities that produced many of the country's best-known mountaineers. His route to the Himalaya ran first through the military.

He joined the Brigade of Gurkhas and later the UK Special Boat Service, an elite special-forces unit. The training placed endurance, risk assessment and teamwork at the centre of his professional life long before he became famous for climbing.

Purja came comparatively late to serious mountaineering. That late start became part of his public mythology. He was not a child prodigy raised on expeditions. He was an adult who discovered a field and then attempted to compress decades of ambition into a few years.

The logic of Project Possible

Project Possible was built around a simple headline: 14 mountains, seven months.

The simplicity disguised an enormous logistical operation.

The 8,000-metre peaks are spread across Nepal, China and Pakistan. Weather windows do not align neatly. Permits, flights, helicopters, route conditions and acclimatisation all have to work together. A single delay can collapse an entire schedule.

Purja approached the challenge partly as an athlete and partly as an organiser. He moved fast between mountains, used helicopters to reduce travel time and climbed with supplemental oxygen on many of the ascents.

Traditionalists debated the style. Purja focused on the result.

On 29 October 2019, after summiting Shishapangma, he completed the project in six months and six days.

The photograph that travelled around the world

One image from Project Possible became almost as famous as the record itself.

High on Everest, Purja photographed a long line of climbers waiting near the summit ridge. The image became a visual

shorthand for overcrowding on the world's highest mountain.

It also illustrated something about Purja's relationship with modern media.

He understood that contemporary mountaineering was no longer only about what happened on the mountain. Stories moved through photographs, social media, sponsorship and film.

Adventure had become part athletic performance, part narrative.

Purja was unusually comfortable with that reality.

Putting Nepali climbers in the centre

Perhaps the most important part of his public project was the way he talked about Nepali climbers.

For generations, international mountaineering stories frequently placed foreign expedition leaders in the foreground while Sherpa and other Nepali climbers appeared as anonymous support.

Purja rejected that hierarchy.

His teams were full of Nepali climbers whose technical skill and high-altitude experience were essential to the records he pursued. He spoke repeatedly about giving them names, visibility and leadership roles.

That argument reached another peak in January 2021, when a team of ten Nepali climbers completed the first winter ascent of K2. Purja was part of the team, which stopped below the summit so the climbers could walk onto the top together.

The moment carried a symbolism larger than one record. K2, one of the last great winter problems in Himalayan mountaineering, had been solved by a Nepali team.

From climber to global personality

The Netflix documentary *14 Peaks: Nothing Is Impossible* introduced Purja's story to an audience far beyond climbing.

His phrases about possibility, resilience and refusing limits became motivational language. His personality—confident, direct and intensely self-believing—was central to the appeal.

He also built expedition businesses and became a highly visible figure in commercial high-altitude climbing.

That visibility brought scrutiny as well as admiration. Purja's methods, appetite for risk and commercial approach were debated within the climbing community. His career was never a quiet one.

But even critics generally accepted that the scale of his 2019 achievement had changed what climbers believed could be done in a single season.

The final project

By 2026, Purja was pursuing another extreme objective: repeatedly climbing the world's 14 highest mountains, including ascents without supplemental oxygen.

Broad Peak, in Pakistan's Karakoram, became the setting for his final expedition.

On 30 July, an avalanche struck the climbing team high on the mountain. Purja and nine other climbers were killed.

The news spread rapidly through Nepal and the international climbing world. Recovery teams later brought bodies down from the mountain in an operation that itself required exceptional high-altitude skill.

A complicated legacy

Mountaineering has always argued about style.

Does speed matter more than purity? Does supplemental oxygen change the meaning of a record? Does commercial guiding open mountains to more people or place too many people in dangerous terrain?

Purja stood directly inside those debates.

His approach was modern, logistical and media-aware. He treated the mountains as places where elite physical performance could

be combined with planning, technology and a strong personal brand.

That did not make older questions disappear. It made them louder.

What changed because of Nims

Records eventually fall. The more lasting change is often psychological.

Before Project Possible, the idea of climbing all 14 eight-thousanders in a single season belonged to the edge of imagination. After Purja did it, the discussion changed from whether it was possible to how it had been possible.

He also helped shift the centre of high-altitude storytelling toward Nepali climbers themselves.

That shift was already underway through the achievements of many Sherpa and other Nepali mountaineers. Purja accelerated it by using the language and machinery of global celebrity.

The mountain remains

There is a cruel symmetry in the way his story ended.

Purja became famous for making impossible schedules look manageable. But mountains are never fully manageable.

Training reduces risk. Experience reduces risk. Better equipment and forecasting reduce risk. None of them remove it.

Broad Peak delivered the final reminder.

Nirmal Purja's career was built around the conviction that human limits could be pushed further than conventional wisdom allowed. His death does not erase that message, but it places it beside another truth that every mountaineer eventually confronts: ambition exists inside an environment that cannot be commanded.

He leaves behind records, images, teams, businesses and a generation of climbers who grew up seeing Nepali athletes presented not as background figures in someone else's expedition, but as the main characters.

That may be the most durable summit of all.

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