FOCUS ON WINNERS: HELEN THAYER



Helen Thayer has spent more than 60 years tackling some of the toughest terrains on earth. At 71, her appetite for trekking, hiking, kayaking and cycling remains as keen as ever.

Wonder woman

There's a simple reason why intrepid explorer Helen Thayer takes a keen interest in textile innovation for outdoor clothing and equipment. It's that, when you set out to do something like walk 2,500 kilometres across the Gobi Desert, you have to be able to trust things to work. "If the gear fails, we fail," she says.

She describes herself as a "hardcore, boots-on-the-ground" sort of outdoor enthusiast and her resumé (see panel) bears testimony to this. Nevertheless, Helen Thayer has also been an international-class athlete and holds the distinction of having represented not one, but three countries (New Zealand, where she was born, the US, where she lives now and where her husband, Bill, is from, and Guatemala, where the couple lived for four years) in her chosen disciplines of track-and-field and luge. She became US national champion at luge and captained the Guatemalan track-and-field team at a Pan-American Games event.

When the time came for her to give up top-level competition, she turned her attention to trekking instead and has never looked back. Sometimes she takes her husband and their dog, Charlie, for company, but that's as far as she goes in terms of support on the road, or rive or polar ice cap. She is, however, glad of the backing of Invista durable fabrics brand Cordura, which has supported several of her expeditions and an online educational project she has developed called Adventure Classroom. For obvious reasons, the hard-



A former international athlete (for three different countries), Helen Thayer took up trekking at the end of her competitive career and has never looked back.

Helen Thayer

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Birthday treat. Helen Thayer celebrated her sixtieth birthday, alone, in Antarctica.

Helen Thayer

wearing quality of backpacks, tents, clothing and footwear bearing the Cordura brand appeals to her.

She explains: "We have to have stuff that lasts from start to finish because we have no base-camp, no support vehicles, no managers or anything. Once, in Alaska, our packs fell over a ravine and we didn't have quite enough rope to reach them. But we had T-shirts made from Cordura, so we tied the T-shirts onto the rope as an extension and they saved the day."

An added benefit is that the fabric has become more pliable in recent years, which can be important during a trek to the North or South Poles. In such cold weather, clothing can become so frozen it can be in danger of breaking. Extra pliability is a good quality for fabric to have. She's witnessed the fabric's transition from a material that would go into equipment becoming something she can wear next to the skin, or over a base-layer garment in the Arctic and Antarctic.

At the opposite end of the weather spectrum, another aspect of Cordura clothing that has impressed her is that the fabric's quick-drying properties helped keep the bugs at bay during a 2,000-kilometre kayaking expedition in the Amazon nine years ago. "It's so humid there, you have sweat dripping off you 24 hours a day," she recalls. "Nothing dries; there's no point even taking a towel. But we noticed that anything made from Cordura did dry, and fast enough to mean the bugs don't get in."

Perhaps she has found a fabric that is almost as flexible and tough as she is.

Awards and Recognition

1975 Helen Thayer became US national luge champion.

1997 The US state of Washington named her as a 'sports legend'.

1999 She was invited to a reception at the White House in March 1999 to honour pioneering women in sports.

2002 Helen Thayer was named one of the great explorers of the twentieth century by National Geographic magazine.

A taste for adventure

1988 Helen Thayer became the first woman to complete a solo walk to either pole. She walked alone to the magnetic North Pole, pulling her own sled without the help of dog teams or snowmobiles. She was 50 years old. She wrote a best-selling book, *Polar Dream*, about this journey. She was also first person to circumnavigate the magnetic North Pole area.

1990 A leader of the first Russian-US women's arctic expedition to Siberia and the Soviet Polar Islands.

1992 Helen and Bill Thayer became the first married couple to walk together to one of the poles.

1994 Helen and Bill (with their dog, Charlie) spent a year in Canada's Northwest Territories and Yukon, studying and photographing three families of wild wolves. The remarkable story is documented in Helen's book, *Three Among the Wolves*.

1995 Helen walked 2,400 kilometres through Death Valley, the Mojave and the US and Mexican Sonoran Deserts in a study of high- and low-altitude desert environments.

1996 She became the first woman to walk across the Sahara Desert following an ancient camel trade route of 6,400 kilometres.

1997 She walked alone for 750 kilometres in Antarctica, pulling her own 120-kilo sled, unresupplied. During the expedition she celebrated her 60th birthday alone on the polar ice cap with a frozen cup cake and one candle. She had no radio or voice contact with the outside world. She was the only living being in the area she travelled. She said: "It was like living on the moon."

1998 Bill and Helen trekked with the largest caribou herd in the world, half a million animals, from southern Alaska to the Alaska North Slope.

1999 Helen walked 2,000 kilometres through New Zealand studying the Maori culture.

2000 The Thayers became the first non-native Americans to kayak 2,000 kilometres along two rivers in a remote area of the Amazon rainforest.

2001 The couple became the first people to go on foot across the entire length of the Mongolian Gobi Desert west to east: Helen was 63 and Bill 74 at the time. They suffered temperatures of over 50°C, sand storms, life-threatening thirst and scorpions. Another book, *Walking the Gobi*, came out of this.

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