

THE VAULT

The Sky's The Limit Amputee Todd Huston Has Reached The Highest Points In All 50 States

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**BY KEN
MCALPINE**

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In the cold half-light the snowflakes dropped, soft and only partly formed, while Arctic winds plucked at and slapped the dome tent. Inside, condensed breath that had frozen on the nylon ceiling during the night loosened and fell onto four sleeping bags and the climbers inside them.

One of the climbers, Todd Huston, was awake, and reels were running through his head: a fellow climber disappearing into a crevasse right on the airstrip. Another climber, just back from a failed attempt on the summit, dully describing the glove he saw locked in the ice, the owner's hand still tucked inside, the glove's design 20 years old. A rescue team discovering two Koreans who had been surprised by a storm, one of the men dangling upside down from his rope, the other sitting on a rock and holding a radio next to his head, both men frozen.

Later that morning, in the blue-white glare of early day at 17,200 feet, Huston was readying himself for what he hoped would be a push to the 20,320-foot summit of Mount McKinley in Alaska's Denali National Park. Earlier, expedition leader Mike Vining had told Huston, "This will be the hardest day of your life." Vining, 44, is a no-nonsense sergeant major in the Army with forearms so developed he is nicknamed Popeye. He was not impressed with Huston. "He had no prior mountaineering experience," Vining would say months later, recalling the climb. "He had no winter camping experience. He had no idea what he was doing. That seemed an unusual background for a serious climb."

No surprise, then, that Huston was obsessed with death, specifically his own. He thought about dying often as he and his team inched their way up Mount McKinley last summer, launching a madcap, record-breaking 67-day spree in which Huston climbed to