

Spine surgery saves climber's career

World-renown mountain climber **Peter Whittaker** is no stranger to risk and injury.

"I've spent 28 years as a mountain guide — skiing, trekking, climbing. I've been through four avalanches and sustained injuries — ruptured my spleen, my Achilles tendon, both my knees have been reconstructed, fractured ribs," Whittaker says. "I live a very active life."

But, one day last spring, the 46-year-old athlete who has climbed mountains all over the world, including Everest, Rainier, and Kilimanjaro, was playing on a "toy" in his backyard and fractured his spine.

"I fell about 25 or 30 feet from the end of a 300-foot zip line — a suspended cable with a pulley on it. We had put one together in the back yard for the kids. I was testing it. It was a backyard toy that gained too much velocity and got out of control. After the accident it became clear I was going to need some spine work. I wanted experts who could put me back together in the best possible way — a way that would allow me to continue my active lifestyle in the future."

Whittaker did his research — he talked to health professionals who were experts in their fields and asked where they would go to for care. **Dr. Ted Wagner**, UW professor of orthopaedics and sports medicine, and the UW Bone and Joint Center were mentioned most often.

"He presented with an unstable t-11 — a spine fracture of the 11th thoracic vertebra, which is mid-back, but he had normal spinal cord function," Wagner says. To repair the fracture and to retain flexibility, he took a bone from Whittaker's hip and soldered it into place.

"The anatomy of spine was restored using a titanium system of screws and rods. The surgery allowed him to get up the following day and to be discharged within four days," Wagner says. "We expect the spine to be entirely healed within four months, and he should be able to resume guiding and climbing."

Wagner says several technological breakthroughs have changed the precision and recovery rate for spine surgery, including improved magnification and lighting through fiber optics and the change in hardware from steel to high-grade titanium.

"We can anchor screws and hooks on vertebrae and create forces that are much stronger and



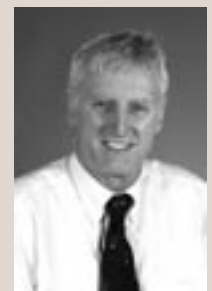
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lighter and allow for significant correction of the injury." Wagner says. "At the same time, disk spaces can be replaced with bone titanium or high-grade carbon cages between the spinal disks for structural strength and flexibility."

Six weeks after surgery, Whittaker has returned to managing his businesses, including Rainier Mountaineering, Inc. Will he climb again?

"Absolutely, my prognosis is pretty good. I should be 90 to 100 percent functional in a few months. I've been scheduling some winter climbs and skiing in Austria with my wife and my kids, as well as a luxury ski trip to the Dolomites in Italy."

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Dr. Ted Wagner