

# Inherited heart condition doesn't stop Andrew Stevenson from climbing Europe's highest peak



Andrew Stevenson (right) of Halifax, NS, with his guide, Pascal Dufour on the summit of Mont Blanc, France, in 2010. Andrew climbed the peak after surviving three close brushes with death due to an inherited heart-rhythm disorder.

Andrew Stevenson was playing hockey in October 2003, when he was overcome by a strange sensation. As his heart fluttered out of control, he knew something was terribly wrong. A teammate rushed him to the Halifax Infirmary, where the doctors used defibrillator paddles to reset a heart rate that was racing at 260 beats per minute. The next day, cardiologists threaded a tiny catheter into his heart to cauterize electrical short circuits that were triggering the life-threatening arrhythmia known as ventricular tachycardia (VT).

“The only reason I survived is because my heart is used to a fast pace, due to all the physical training, and my arteries were free of plaque,” says Andrew, now 51. “Enough blood was able to get through to my brain, even though my heart wasn’t pumping effectively.”

Overjoyed to be alive, Andrew returned to his business, family and athletic pursuits. His heart, however, had other plans. Just four months later, it began to race again, also while he was playing hockey. After emergency treatment to save his life, his physicians implanted a pacemaker defibrillator. Andrew promised never to play hockey again.

Haunted by nightmares, Andrew withdrew into himself—until a friend convinced him to return to the land of the living and pursue his childhood dream of climbing the Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps. He gathered his courage and began training. Yet once again he was stopped in his tracks. His heart began to race while he was running up Citadel Hill in 2005. The shock from his defibrillator was so intense, it knocked him out.

This time, Dalhousie Medical School’s Dr. John Sapp used cardiac mapping technology—which he has been researching for more than a decade—to locate the primary short circuit deep inside the right ventricle of Andrew’s heart. He was then able to cauterize the short circuit to allow the smooth flow of energy through Andrew’s heart muscle.

“I’m convinced that cardiac electrophysiology is as much an art as a science,” says Andrew of John Sapp’s skill in finding and fixing the short circuit. “He is a genius. I owe my life to the Dalhousie Medical Research Foundation and the Heart & Stroke Foundation for the research support they’ve given to Dr. John Sapp.”

Tests revealed that the intensity of the Matterhorn quest might be more than Andrew’s heart could handle. Still, the desire to climb mountains burned within him. Once again, he built up his strength and, in 2006, he and his friend climbed two of Scotland’s peaks. This eventually led to scaling Italy’s Grand Paradiso and, just last year, Europe’s highest—Mont Blanc, located in the French Alps. He has not had another incident of VT.

Andrew knows now that he has inherited a gene that produces scars in his heart. But in spite of that, he intends to keep pursuing his dreams for himself and his family, inspiring heart-disease survivors to live their lives to the fullest, and supporting cardiovascular research. He is particularly interested in the work of Dalhousie Medical School’s Dr. Robert Rose, who seeks to genetically engineer the repair of arrhythmia-causing scars.