



Steve "Unique" McPeak is a professional high wire



artist, a unicyclist and, by his own proclamation, the best in the business. Granted, the "business" isn't very large. Relatively few people have adrenalin cravings so strong that they'll walk up the tram cables of Sugarloaf Mountain in Brazil, but Unique is unique in the business for living up to his outrageous name. He has also strolled across Hoover Dam, a Kiss concert and his father's shopping center. "One of my ultimate goals is to walk a cable across a volcano. See, I'm trying to create a lifestyle around the name McPeak (his real name), so naturally I'm fascinated by mountains.

If Unique weren't making so much money risking his life, he could do terrific Marlboro ads. He has the sandy, weathered, cool-eyed look of a loner. He grew up on a farm in Kentucky and was prone to hanging out in the haylofts. "Everybody else down there was fighting and hassling over this, that and the other thing. Nobody ever looked up. I watched the world go by . . . it was real peaceful and nice up there. I developed a liking for that."

He saw his first unicyclist in college. "It just boggled my mind. I couldn't imagine it." And working at a logging camp that summer, he learned to walk the cables. "Once you start riding unicycles, you always try to figure out new things to do. I just put the two ideas together."

UNIQUE MCPEAK



Walk on the Wild Side: "Unique" strolls up train cables on Brazil's Sugarloaf Mountain. (For a full color poster of Unique's Brazilian walk send \$5 to Environmental Communications, 64 Windward Ave., Venice, CA 90291).
Photo: Franklin Berger inset photo: Phil Fawcsmith

McPeak rode a unicycle across Hoover Dam . . . 750 feet up and 1800 feet across. It took twenty minutes. "It seemed forever." Technically, physically and mentally, how does he do it? "It's all with your eyes. Your balance is only good according to what you have a reference point to. So when you're looking at the cables, it's like a camera. I only see what I want to see. Everything else just doesn't exist."

Yosemite Falls is the highest wire he's ever walked and the most difficult. There was a disturbing optical illusion of a 2625 foot drop on one side and jagged rocks only 250 feet down on the other. A thirty mile per hour wind continually blew up water from the falls. "When I came off of that one, boy, I was high as a kite. The adrenalin was flowing through my blood so much, I just had incredible strength."

Since the late great Karl Wallenda took a tumble, the ropes have been clear for McPeak. He doesn't think that he has any real competition at this point and attributes the Wallenda fall to "bad rigging." McPeak is understandably meticulous about his own rigging. "The secret is in the preparation. I design it, build it, execute it, and take all the credit."

When he's not breaking world records for Guinness (he's been in The Book every year for the past decade), McPeak builds and designs sets for the MGM hotel-casino in Reno. Their well-known, big budget waterfall and earthquake effects were prepared by McPeak. But the work isn't insurance or something to continue in his twilight years. Unique plans to keep on cycling and walking the wire to the age of eighty . . . providing he doesn't fall. He takes such obvious pride in the fact that he's never broken any bones that I asked him about Evel Knievel. "I think he's crazy. At least, I've got something to touch. He's made a lot of money and it's made him very famous, but the only world record that Evel Knievel holds is for how many bones he's broken . . . 468 bones. And he's our hero! Tell me if that isn't crazy."

McPeak admits that his running rapport with death is a spiritual experience for him. "But I don't rely on prayers before I go up. That's admitting to weakness and I've got to have complete confidence in my abilities. Getting on my knees to pray would be like saying I'm not competent for the job, that I've got to rely on another source of energy. Instead, I meditate on how the rigging will respond, different things that could go wrong . . . I think things through a long time beforehand."

A psychology major in college, the thirty-three year old McPeak realizes that he has to know his mind and control his responses. This man, who is in the process of perfecting a 100 foot tall unicycle, a fantasy machine that looks more like a TV antenna than anything mobile, cringes over the elements of fate and chance. "My greatest fear is dying in a car accident. I've learned how to cope with the high wire. You don't get uptight when you drive because you've learned to cope with that situation. But I haven't. That's the greatest danger in my life."

Normally, McPeak doesn't tell people his occupation. It tends to cause awkward silences at cocktail parties. "They just have no way to relate to it." He focused on my expression of terrified fascination and tried to explain, "Fear is like an inner voice that tells you that you're not in the place you normally should be. It's like an instinct. Usually, a person'll run into it, back off and go a different route. I confront fear with control. I understand why this feeling is inside of me...it's just a matter of knowing whether your fear is valid or not."