

Will Nik Wallenda's Faith in Christ Carry Him Over the Grand Canyon?

Dressed casually in a T-shirt, calf-length cargo pants and flip-flops, Nik Wallenda looks no different from many of the hundreds of spectators who have turned out in recent days to watch him practice for his next high-wire act.

There are no pretentious airs about him, and no spangled outfits.

"Hey, how ya doing, man?" he asked while stopping to shake the hand of a man trying to take his picture with an iPad and then pausing to high-five a few kids.

But what Wallenda is preparing for is anything but routine.

For two weeks in his hometown of Sarasota, Florida, the aerialist and holder of half a dozen world records has been practicing for what will be his biggest feat yet—a quarter-mile (400-metre) walk across the Grand Canyon on a steel cable with nothing but the Little Colorado River 1,500 feet below.

With no tethers or safety nets, the walk will be the highest tightrope attempt ever for the 34-year-old, at a height taller than the Empire State Building. It is scheduled to be shown live on June 23 on the Discovery Channel.

Last year, Wallenda, a seventh-generation member of the "Flying Wallendas" family of acrobats, became the only person to walk a wire over the brink of Niagara Falls.

Wallenda and his team are focused on creating the conditions he'll likely face at the Grand Canyon. The Florida heat, while humid as opposed to arid, cooperates, with temperatures rising through the 80s (27-32 C) by mid-morning.

But the winds that whip up and around the Grand Canyon walls pose another challenge. Wallenda recently faced heavy winds during a test run and practiced as Tropical Storm Andrea barreled onshore along the Gulf Coast.

To ramp up conditions without a storm, his team one day set up air boats in the water alongside the steel cable he uses to practice on, pushing winds in updrafts to 91 mph.

The canyon's winds won't bother him, he said.

"I'm not scared of them," he said while gliding along the cable, his flip-flops replaced by black moccasins specially made by his mother.

Real Dangers

As he walked and spoke, spectators watched from behind metal parade barricades. "I have to respect it, but I would never do what I do if I was scared," he said.

Wallenda regularly emphasizes mental concentration and positive thinking as the secrets to his success.

Since he started walking on a wire at age 2, he has been stung by a bee and had birds land on his balancing pole during performances.

He told reporters that he has no superstitions or rituals before his walks. He prays—his Christian faith plays a big part in his new book "Balance"—and hugs his wife and three children, telling them he'll see them in a few minutes.

With spectators' eyes glued on him, Wallenda and his balancing pole made one trip along the 1,200-foot (366-metre) cable and back, projecting the image of a body builder and a ballet dancer combined. Then he sat down—on the cable.

"Does anyone have any questions?" he asked the crowd, his legs dangling from his perch.

They did. How heavy is the balancing pole? Forty-three pounds (20 kg). Does he work out? Yes, at the gym. How long will it take him to cross the Grand Canyon? Twenty to thirty minutes.

Wallenda spoke openly about the reality of the dangers—including the ones that claimed his great-grandfather, Karl Wallenda, a great inspiration to him.

In 1978, the legendary sky walker fell to his death during a high-wire walk in Puerto Rico, a tragedy that Wallenda said studies showed was caused by a combination of bad rigging and his great-grandfather's age and recent injuries that left him too weak to hold on to the wire.

"There's a time to retire," he said.

But Wallenda is not there yet, as he readies to embark on what has been a dream for years.

It's a dream with a 1,500-foot drop below him, which will be "extremely mentally draining," he said.

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