

"School of Hard Knots: How adventurous teens are getting an unusual education."

In 2010 Jordan Romero followed in the footsteps of famed mountaineer Edmund Hillary, climbing five and a half miles into the sky to step onto the summit of Mount Everest in Nepal. Many men have made that formidable trek to plant their flag on the highest peak on earth, but this trip was different. Romero conquered Everest at age 13.

Over the past few years the world has watched Romero and several other teen sportsmen chase ambitious, sometimes record-setting, goals. The journeys they've embarked upon would be thrilling and more than a little frightening for even adults at the top of their game. Earlier this year, 16-year-old Laura Dekker of Holland pulled into port after sailing around the world – alone. Her sail comes on the heels of two similar solo voyages by other young women, both under the age of 18. Just a year ago Amelia Hempleman-Adams, also 16, set the record for the youngest person to ski to the South Pole.

These Millennials belong to a generation often characterized as entitled and unmotivated. Clearly, this particular group has shrugged off that mantle, leaving no doubt about their hutzpah and work ethic. In fact, they embody the best qualities of the "Echo Boomers" - optimism, self-confidence and the ability to approach things from a fresh perspective. And they might have something to teach us about education.

No doubt these long quests over hill and dale make it more difficult to study algebra, The Canterbury Tales, and the art of the Renaissance. So it comes as no surprise that members of the public and press have been critical about the potential disruption of these young men and women's formal classwork. But here's the thing: Regardless of what degrees they may or may not pursue, each of these so-called kids is on their way to being the prize catch in a sea of college graduates struggling to stand out in the job market.

Not that they'll necessarily be looking for a job. Jessica Watson, who completed her solo sail in 2010, has parlayed that adventure into a small empire. Her website, on which she chronicled her trials and victories in real time, is also a virtual storefront for her memoir (now a best seller in her native Australia), her DVD, and even Jessica Watson merchandise. She had to round up sponsors, make sales pitches and – oh yeah – become an expert sailor, before her boat ever left port. She's performing all the functions of a small business owner and it looks like her entrepreneurial chops are something to be reckoned with.

Laura Dekker knew she would have to master navigation, emergency protocols and a slew of electronic devices in order to complete her trip. The unexpected lesson was learning to navigate the Dutch legal system. Dutch authorities stymied the

launch of Dekker's voyage for over a year due to her age, and created a rigorous list of assignments for her to complete. Undeterred, she jumped through every hoop they lined up for her. In fact, the legal fracas that would have derailed most adults only seemed to spur Dekker towards her goal. After completing a number of additional court-ordered trainings and slugging through more than one hearing, she finally won the rights to raise her sails.

The annually published lists of Top Ten Skills Employers Look For don't change much from year to year. Qualities like "strong work ethic", "adaptability", "initiative", "problem-solving" are always high on the list. How would those employers view a resume whose "experience" section begins: Age 15 -Climbed all of Earth's highest mountains? Travelling the world in hostile environments requires these teens to manage thousands of details during months of careful planning. Careful planning they know can be upset in an instant if Mother Nature wakes up on the wrong side of the bed. They must possess the ability to make life and death decisions in an instant; keep a calm head and steady hand in the most stressful situations imaginable. So as for future career options? Well, after staring down a 30-foot wave or an icy rock a mile high, pitching a new international client should be a cake walk.

While completing one first aid survival class and handling paperwork prior to departure Dekker lamented, "What a job! Many of these items have nothing to do with my trip at all!" As a result, aside from all the abstract character building, she's now able to suture a wound, find her way around an engine, and liaise with the international media. Thanks to his trips, climber Jordan Romero has a fairly sophisticated grasp on human physiology. He has to - it keeps him alive. He's studied how his blood functions at altitude and uses state of the art equipment to monitor his oxygen saturation levels. Understanding how fitness and nutrition affect his ability to perform on the mountain have turned him into an advocate against junk food. Science? Yes indeed. Safe to say, all the aforementioned teens probably have a pretty solid grasp on geography and cartography as well.

As one would imagine, supportive parents play starring roles in these tales. Parents that have been barraged with as much condemnation as praise, with critics crying child endangerment or suggesting that the families are media-hungry opportunists bent on pressuring their kids into the record books. However, anyone who's ever tried to force a headstrong teenager into something they don't want to do might take issue with that idea. Supportive parents or no, the only way Romero could make it to the top of that snowy, hostile mountain was with a locomotive-force will and burning desire to get there.

These are not athletes. They weren't born with a natural ability that landed them a \$10 million professional contract. Instead, their successes required planning, study, compromise, negotiation, business savvy and guts. After the media spotlight fades for these young people, they'll be left holding a lockbox full of tools that they can wield to build an endless array of bright futures. All these teens are still pursuing

their formal schooling, but Romero describes their education more completely by saying, "The world is my university."