

A Month of Climbing in/near Yosemite

I recently returned from nearly a month of *epic* climbing in/near Yosemite National Park.



When I flew to San Francisco on June 12 and drove to Yosemite, I was planning to stay only a week or so to climb The Nose of El Capitan, through which I [raised \\$75,000](#) for my favorite charity, KIPP charter schools. (This trip was a follow-up to five days of training with my guide, Paul Koubek, in February – see pics [here](#).)

But after successfully conquering The Nose, my schedule was was open, as was Paul's – and Susan gave me her blessing – so I stayed another two and a half weeks!

Paul and I climbed 19 of the 22 days I was out there. Here's a quick summary of routes we climbed:

<u>NAME</u>	<u>COMMITMENT</u>	<u>DIFFICULTY</u>	<u># OF PITCHES</u>
Snake Dike	Grade III	5.7R	7p
East Ledges of El Capitan	Grade II	5.6	4p
Sickle Run (first part of El Capitan)	Grade III	5.7	6p
El Capitan (Nose) (4 days, 3 nights)	Grade VI	5.9 C2	31p
Royal Arches	Grade III	5.7 A0	16p
Commitment	Grade II	5.9	3p
Munginella	Grade II	5.6	3p
E. Buttress, Middle Cathedral	Grade III	5.10a	10p
Hermaphrodite Flake / West Country	Grade II	5.7	4p
Cathedral Peak (SE Buttress)	Grade II	5.6	5p
Matthes Crest (S to N Full Traverse)	Grade IV	5.7	8p
Mt. Conness (W Ridge)	Grade III	5.6	12p
West Crack, Daff Dome	Grade II	5.9	6p
Bear Creek Spire (North Arete)	Grade III	5.8	10p
Temple Crag (Venusian Blind)	Grade IV	5.7	12p
Crystal Crag	Grade II	5.7	3p
Regular Route, Fairview Dome	Grade III	5.9	12p

In total, we did 152 pitches of climbing, up to a difficulty of 5.10a – an average of 7 pitches a day, including rest days, which Paul says is unprecedented for an amateur like me.

During my trip, I was posting regularly on Facebook. Here is what I wrote in each of my posts – click the link to see the pictures – and below is a collection of my favorite pics.

June 14:

I flew to SF on Friday morning, had lunch with my cousin Alex and his family, and drove to Yosemite, which had just opened the day before.

I'm staying at this beautiful house, right in the park, owned by friends of Samaritan's Purse:

https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/15238098?s=67&share_id=17555135&unique_share_id=2f6c35ef-70b6-4d43-a73a-57e0c28f568e. It kills me that I'm here by myself when it could easily sleep 8-10 people!

My guide and friend, Paul Koubek, and I are doing 2-3 days of warm-up/refresher before we tackle the Nose, likely Wed-Sat, so yesterday we did a classic hike/climb called Snake Dike. We did a beautiful hike up the Mist Trail, past Vernal and Nevada Falls – a very popular route that's usually jammed with tourists, but had maybe 25% of normal traffic yesterday since they're restricting access to the park to only half the number of cars as usual.

Then we cut off the main route and hiked on an unofficial "climber's trail" to the base of Snake Dike – which took us a total of nearly four hours.

The weather was windy and cloudy and it looked like storms in one direction, but Paul correctly assessed that they weren't coming toward us, so we put on our climbing gear and off we went! As you can see from the pictures below, it's not a vertical slope – but very steep and lots of rough rock to get hand and footholds. Not super difficult – a couple moves rated 5.7 – but I did it in my approach/hiking shoes so it was more of a challenge.

Overall, a good warm-up for me after doing no climbing since I was last here in Feb. (pics from that trip are at: www.tilsonfunds.com/Yosemite.pdf).

Two hours later, we were at the top of Half Dome, with incredible views of Yosemite Valley! Then, it was another four-hour, gorgeous hike back to our car...

In total, as you can see from the report from my watch, it was nearly 11 hours, 18.45 miles, and 5,256 feet of vertical – quite a day!

Today, we're heading over to El Cap and plan to climb a side route with fixed ropes and then up to the top – it's the route we'll hike/rappel down after we finish our climb of the Nose. We'll stash some water at the top so we don't have to carry as much.

June 16:

Yesterday and today were the last days of training for my four-day climb of The Nose of El Capitan, which begins early Wednesday morning (tomorrow is for rest and packing).

Yesterday, Paul and I "jugged" up four fixed ropes (meaning we used ascenders) on the East Ledges, on the right side of El Cap and then hiked up the rim to the top, to the place where The Nose tops out – it's the route we'll be descending on Saturday. It was a 10-mile hike with 3,400 feet of vertical – a piece of cake compared to Saturday's 18+ mile, 5,000+ vertical foot hike/climb to the top of Half Dome!

Today, we climbed up the first six pitches (each approximately 100 feet) of El Cap and stashed a heavy bag with seven gallons of water on Sickle Ledge (circled in the picture below, which shows the entire route and eight major features). Then we rappelled down three long ropes, which we left in place so that the first stage of our climb will be faster on Wednesday. Our goal is to make it through the Stove Legs and get to Dolt Tower or maybe even El Cap Tower to spend the first night.

June 17:

Greetings from Yosemite – truly one of the most awe-inspiring places on earth...

Today is the big day! In an hour, my guide and I are starting a four-day climb of The Nose of El Capitan to support the thousands of KIPPsters climbing the mountain to college.

He tells me that only a dozen amateurs like me successfully complete this epic climb every year, but I've now trained with him out here for eight days – five in February (see www.tilsonfunds.com/Yosemite.pdf) plus the last three (see my earlier Facebook posts) – so I'm feeling confident.

Might you be willing to support my climb for KIPP? Here is the donation page:

<http://www.kippnyc.org/whitneysclimb>. Even better, we've received a challenge grant so your donation will be matched this year, doubling your impact!

I've been on KIPP's board in NYC for two decades, and there's never been a more important time to support this incredible organization's amazing work sending thousands of low-income, minority students to and through college.

Thank you!

Whitney

June 18 (1):

Paul and I had a good day yesterday, climbing steadily up The Nose of El Capitan to the top of Dolt Tower, where we camped for the night. It got quite windy at times during the day, but otherwise the weather is perfect. My feet, waist (from sitting in the harness) and arms are sore, but nothing too bad. Lots of Advil during the day, and lots of Ambien at night and I'm good! Here are some pics...

June 18 (2):

Greetings from Camp 4, halfway up El Cap. Sore but all good and on schedule! Paul and I are sharing the port-a-ledge tonight because there are 2 other guys here...

June 19:

We passed the guys who were slowing us up yesterday so made great time today. The highlight was the Great Roof pitch (see first 2 pics below), which was a real challenge. There's enough room for Paul on the Camp 6 ledge, so I have the port-a-ledge to myself for our last night on El Cap - luxury! We only have five pitches left, so should summit by 1pm tomorrow. Then, we have a 2-3 hour hike down, with three fun rappells down the East Ledges!

June 20 (1):

We just summited The Nose! This was the view upward from my port-a-ledge this morning. 5 pitches and 7 hours later, we were at the top! Thank goodness we hired porters - will make going down much easier...

June 20 (2):

When we got down from climbing El Cap, we went for a swim in the freezing cold Merced River. Here's a video of me doing a back flip off the bridge, with El Cap in the background...

June 23:

I'm in the climbing mecca of the world, have an awesome guide whose schedule is wide open (as is mine), the forecast is perfect, and there's no coronavirus anywhere near here, so I've decided to stay out here for another week, maybe two... (especially since Susan and the girls don't seem to mind my absence, though I'm sure Rosie misses me terribly!) Paul and I are going to be prototypical "dirtbag climbers," living out of his van and climbing every day... My attitude is captured in pics 7-8...

After finishing El Cap on Saturday, I felt fine, so Paul's wife, Breezy, took me on a classic not-too-difficult free climb called Royal Arches yesterday (you can read about it here; see first 5 pics below).

Today, Paul and I did two shorter climbs, a very challenging one called Commitment (see pic 6 looking up from the base; it's rated 5.9, which is about my limit, especially climbing in approach shoes; my climbing shoes arrived an hour ago – don't ask...), followed by an easier one, rated 5.6, called Munginella.

Tomorrow we're tackling a classic climb called East Buttress of Middle Cathedral – see a picture of the route in the last pic below.

On Wednesday, we're going to drive to the cooler upper part of the park called Tuolumne Meadows and climb the West Crack of Daff Dome, followed by Cathedral Peak on Thursday and Fairview Dome on Friday. Then we'll drive down to Mt. Whitney on Saturday, hike to the base, and set up camp, from which we'll climb Mt. Whitney's East Buttress on Sunday and then nearby Mt. Russell on Monday.

After that, we have no plans – maybe a day of rest and then another week of camping and epic climbing – there is no shortage out here!

PS—All of these climbs will be free climbing, as opposed to aid climbing (what we did on El Cap, in which we pulled on ropes and gear to ascend the extremely difficult route that would otherwise be impossible for even Paul to climb).

These will also all be one-day climbs, so we won't be hauling "pigs" like we did up El Cap – huge, heavy bags with water, food, port-a-ledge, sleeping bag, etc. Instead we'll be carrying medium-sized backpacks, packed only with what we need for the day.

Free climbing is also not the same as free soloing, in which there are no ropes – one slip and you're dead – like what Alex Honnold did in Free Solo.

Rather, free climbing means one person (Breezy or Paul) leads the route with a rope, setting gear and clipping the rope in, with me belaying from the anchor below. If they fall, I catch them. Then, once they're at the next anchor 75-100 feet up, they clip into the wall (either on a fixed bolt or they create an anchor using cams and slings), pull up the excess rope and put me on belay. Then I climb up, with the rope tight at all times so if I fall (which is expected of the amateur – I lost my grip once in the past two days), it's only one or two feet – no worries.

It's a very safe system – as long as nobody screws up by, for example, unclipping from the wall before the rope is tight and on belay, so you gotta pay attention! There are also random external dangers like a rock falling on your head or a lightning strike, but those are rare (and you don't climb if the forecast is iffy).

June 24:

Today Paul and I left what locals call "the ditch" (Yosemite Valley), which is super hot this time of year, and drove 90 minutes to the higher elevation eastern part of the park, which is much cooler.

We went over the Tioga Pass Road – in pic 1, I am at a pull-out by the side of the road, with Tenaya Lake in the background. We climbed an easy 5.7 route up Stately Pleasure Dome, which is on the left side of the lake, directly above my head in the picture.

Pics 2-4 are of us at the top (note the beach behind/below me in the first one).

After we descended, we went to that beach for a cold, refreshing swim in the lake and hung out a bit (pic 5; Stately Pleasure Dome is above me to the right):

We then drove 15 minutes to Tuolumne Meadows and took a nice walk and went for a swim in the Tuolumne River (pic 6).

In the background of pic 7 is Cathedral Peak, which we're climbing tomorrow.

I saw my third bear of the trip by the side of the road on the drive (pic 8) and saw two deer in Tuolumne Meadows (pic 9).

June 26:

Here are pictures from today's climb of Cathedral Peak, where we were joined by Paul's wife, Breezy Jackson, and their friend, Scott Fruhan...

Tomorrow, Paul, Scott, and I are doing the Matthes Crest Traverse.

June 28 (1):

There was a 5.8 earthquake south of here on Wednesday that caused a rock slide on the road to Mt. Whitney, which is still closed, so we are delayed going down there – and may not go at all. No big deal – it's just giving us more time in the gorgeous Tuolumne Meadows area of Yosemite.

After Breezy, Paul, their friend Scott and I hiked to and climbed Cathedral Peak on Thursday (pics in my last email), an 8-mile, 8-hour adventure, we ramped it up the last two days.

On Friday, Paul, Scott and I did a 12+ hour, 12.6-mile hike/climb of Matthes Crest (first 12 pics) and yesterday Breezy, Paul, their friend Shawn and I did a nearly 12-hour, 15.8-mile hike/climb of the tallest peak in this area, 12,589-foot Mount Conness (next six pics).

June 28 (2):

Today Paul and I took it easy, doing a 2½-hour climb called the West Crack of Daff Dome (I show the route in red in the first picture). The approach was only 20 minutes – quite a difference from yesterday's four-hour, 9.5-mile approach to Mount Conness!

Two of the seven pitches were rated 5.9, which pushed me to my limit (on the second one, I pulled on gear – cheater!). There was a howling ~40 mph wind most of the climb – but the view of Tuolumne Meadow (in the center of the last pic) and Fairview Dome (to the right – probably climbing it on Saturday) at the top was worth it! Tomorrow we're leaving Yosemite and driving south, aiming to do three huge 12+ hour, high-altitude (14,000-foot) climbs: Bear Creek Spire on Tuesday, the East Buttress of Mt. Whitney on Thursday, and the Fishhook Arete of Mt. Russell on Friday.

July 1:

Paul and I drove south in the Eastern Sierra Mountains on Monday and climbed Bear Creek Spire yesterday – a long, awesome day: 18 miles total over 14½ hours (six of climbing).

Today we took a rest day in Bishop, doing laundry, shopping, and catching up on e-mail (I can't remember the last time I was off the internet for 48 hours). I even got my first haircut in months!

Tomorrow, we're tackling our biggest hike/climb yet, the Temple Crag, then drive to Whitney Portal on Friday and hike in to camp at Iceberg Lake, where we'll climb the East Buttress of Mt. Whitney on Saturday (the highest peak in the continental U.S. at 14,505 feet) and the nearly-as-high Fishhook Arete of Mt. Russell on Sunday (both ~12-hour days, from the same campsite). Then we'll make our way back to Yosemite and then San Francisco on Monday and Tuesday (climbing both days of course!), before flying home from SFO on the redeye on Tuesday night... Phew!

July 3:

Paul and I weren't able to get a permit to climb Mt. Whitney and Mt. Russell, so I'm ending my trip two days early and flying home on Monday morning. We did a huge hike (8 hours)/climb (6 hours) of Temple Crag yesterday -- pics below... Today we're climbing Crystal Crag on our way back to Yosemite, and tomorrow Fairview Dome in Tuolumne Meadows in the park.

July 6 (1):

Paul and I weren't able to get a permit to climb Mt. Whitney and Mt. Russell – I plan to come back and tackle them in September – so I ended my trip two days early and am on a flight home right now.

We ended our 22 days together (only three rest days, which is three too many in my book!) by climbing Crystal Crag on Friday (pic No. 1 – that's Mammoth Mountain ski area behind me) and Fairview Dome back in Yosemite on Saturday (pic No. 1 – the fourth of the "Fifty Classic Climbs of North America" that I did this trip)...

Here's a quick summary of routes we climbed:

NAME:	COMMITMENT	DIFFICULTY	# OF PITCHES:
Snake Dike	Grade III	5.7R	7p
East Ledges of El Capitan	Grade II	5.6	4p
Sickle Run (first part of El Capitan)	Grade III	5.7	6p

El Capitan (Nose) (4 days, 3 nights)	Grade VI	5.9 C2	31p
Royal Arches	Grade III	5.7 A0	16p
Commitment	Grade II	5.9	3p
Munginella	Grade II	5.6	3p
E. Buttress, Middle Cathedral	Grade III	5.10a	10p
Hermaphrodite Flake / West Country	Grade II	5.7	4p
Cathedral Peak (SE Buttress)	Grade II	5.6	5p
Matthes Crest (S to N Full Traverse)	Grade IV	5.7	8p
Mt. Conness (W Ridge)	Grade III	5.6	12p
West Crack, Daff Dome	Grade II	5.9	6p
Bear Creek Spire (North Arete)	Grade III	5.8	10p
Temple Crag (Venusian Blind)	Grade IV	5.7	12p
Crystal Crag	Grade II	5.7	3p
Regular Route, Fairview Dome	Grade III	5.9	12p

- 152 pitches of climbing in 22 days, up to a difficulty of 5.10a (an average of 7 pitches a day, including rest days).

Yesterday I drove back to SF and visited my cousin Alex and his family for lunch (pic 3), my college buddy Sam Klepper and his family in the afternoon (pic 4), and my old friend Chris Brawer and his family for dinner (no pic – silly me).

PS—San Francisco's airport at 8am today was a ghost town, and my JetBlue flight was maybe 35% full – see last three pics below.

July 6 (2):

Storms around NYC led to an unplanned, one-hour stop in Buffalo on my flight from SFO to JFK, but I finally got home at 8pm, where my five ladies rushed to smother me in hugs and kisses, having missed me so much after 3½ weeks away!

Yeah, right... (At least Rosie did...)

Susan and the girls told me to go take a shower and put on fresh clothes – good coronavirus protocol!

My climbing adventure/marathon was amazing, but it's great to be home!!!

PS—Note my new favorite t-shirt – my Father's Day gift I just received...

Below are my favorite pictures and some nitty gritty about big wall climbing.

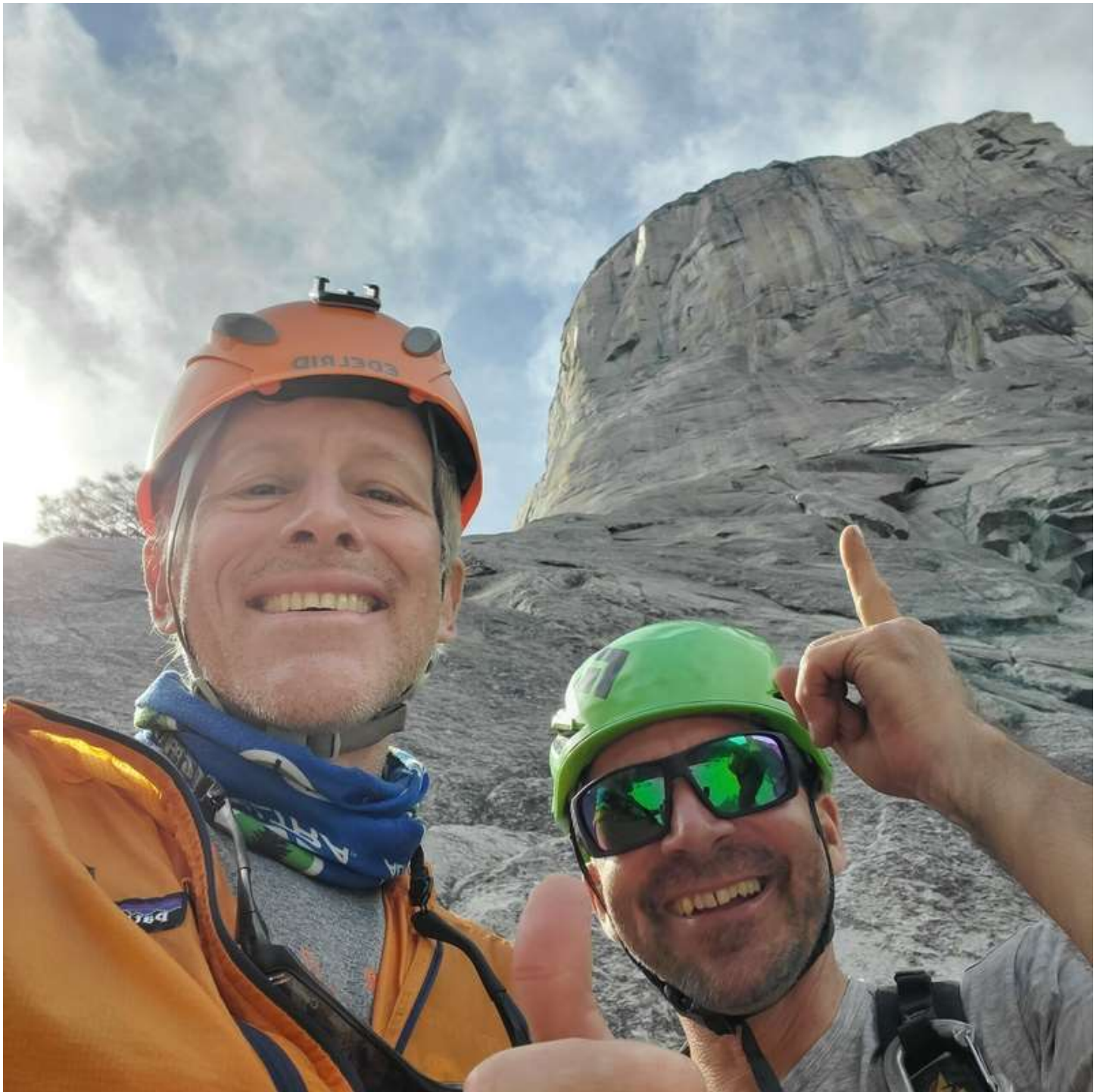
Best regards,

Whitney

















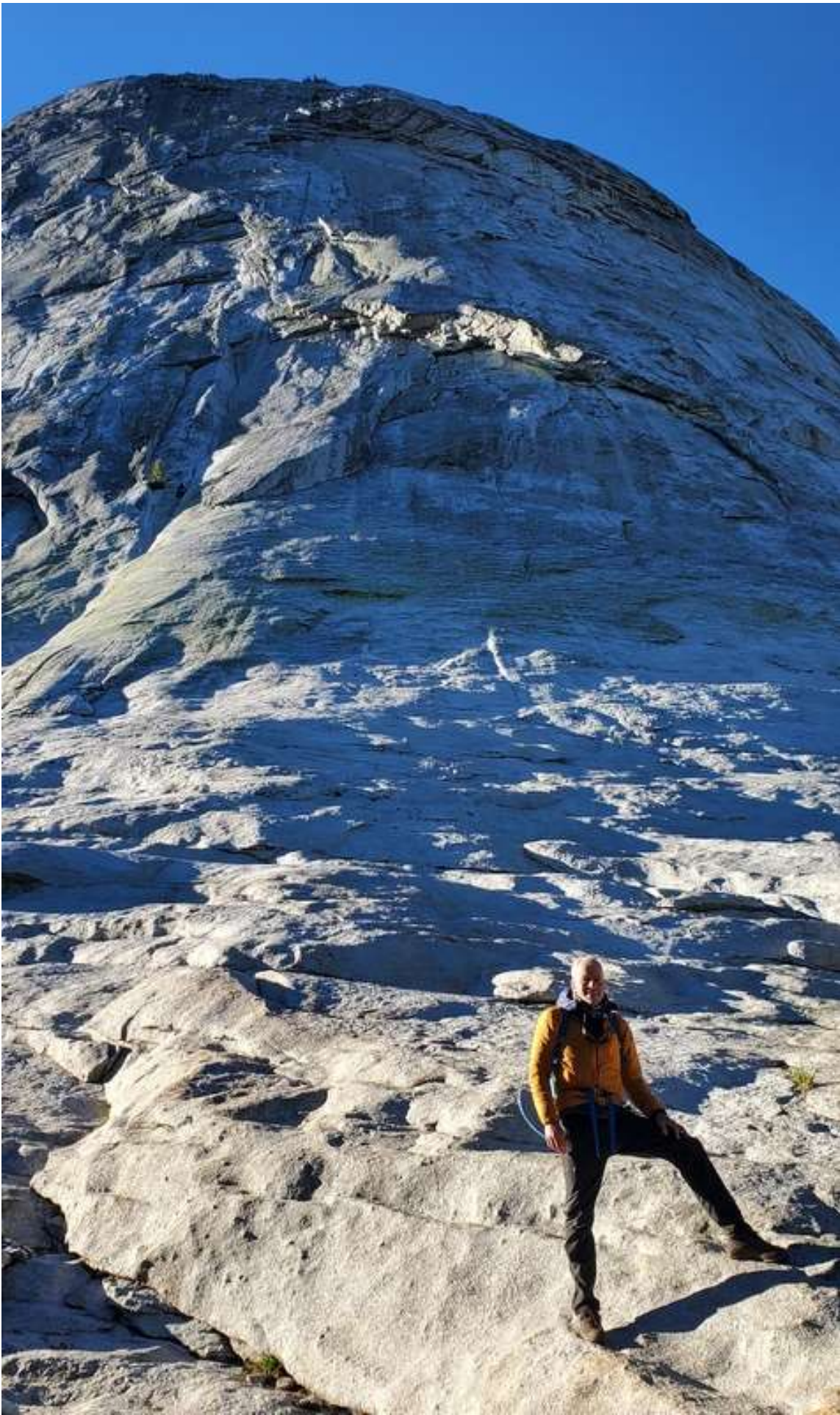














AID CLIMBING VS. FREE CLIMBING VS. FREE SOLOING

Paul and I did two pitches of free climbing on Thursday, then a day of training for aid climbing on Friday, then two days of aid climbing on the South Face of Washington Column over the weekend, and finally two pitches of free climbing followed by four pitches of aid climbing yesterday.

Aid climbing means both he and I were pulling on gear and/or the rope to ascend. Some climbers only do “free climbing,” which means getting to the top solely under your own power (but using ropes for safety in the event of a fall; this is NOT free soloing, where one slip is fatal).

Some purists look down on aid climbing because they think it’s sort of cheating to move upward using artificial means, but Paul dismissed this, saying: “*Aid climbing allows mortals to climb with the gods.*” So true... The route we climbed over the weekend on Washington Column has been free climbed by only one person *ever*; the Nose has been freed by only six people. Thus, aid climbing is the only way thousands of people like me can experience big wall climbing.

And it’s not like you’re taking a chairlift to the top – it’s CRAZY hard. We ran into a young climber on Washington Column who told us he’d done a lot of free climbing, but had never done aid climbing before – and confessed to us that after getting his butt kicked on the big wall of the South Face, he’d never look down on aid climbing again...

FEAR OF HEIGHTS/EXPOSURE

You can’t climb big walls (or pretty much anything) if you have a fear of heights (or “exposure”). I’m lucky: I have none of it. When I’m up there, I’m so focused on what I’m doing (what Navy SEALs call your “three-foot window”) that I don’t even look down or think of the consequences of a mistake. (In case you’re wondering, I have a \$10 million life insurance policy.)

I totally get it that 99% of people will (sensibly) react to being 1,000 feet above the ground, hanging only on a thin rope, with emotions ranging from discomfort to utter terror.

But the people I don’t understand are the folks who are climbing well, get a day or two up on the wall, and then get scared by the exposure and rappel down. Here’s why: once you’re more than ~60 feet up, any uncontrolled fall is fatal. So it makes little sense to be comfortable at the top of the first pitch, 150 feet up, yet become afraid of the height when you’re further up (though in fairness, if you need to get off the wall because, say, a storm comes in, you get sick, etc., it’s much better to be at the top of the first pitch, not the 20th!).

Once I’m past the first pitch, I PREFER to be higher up because the views are better!

CLEANING GEAR

Over the course of a day of climbing, Paul will set – and I will clean – over 100 pieces of gear (an average of roughly a dozen per pitch). Every piece to be cleaned is its own unique challenge. Sometimes it’s easy and takes no more than five seconds: I just grab the cam, squeeze it to close its “jaws” to release it, then detach the carabiner from the rope and clip the whole thing to my harness.

But I have to be SUPER careful not to drop it, which is easy to do because I’m wearing leather gloves, because: 1) it’s expensive; 2) a big cam, falling far enough, could kill someone below; and 3) you might need that particular one for a placement later in the climb.

Sometimes it’s really difficult to remove the gear because: 1) the cam (or worse yet, a “nut,” which is just an oddly shaped piece of metal that’s not spring-loaded) can get jammed; and 2) if the rope is anything but

completely vertical (meaning it's angled through the carabiner, as it is slightly in the picture above), then all of my weight on the rope is pulling hard on the cam, making it difficult if not impossible to release.

If this happens (which is often – maybe half the time), I have to figure out a way to get my weight off the rope, if only for an instant. The easiest way is to find a place on the rock to stand on – even a tiny nub for one foot is enough. Barring that, sometimes I give a little hop, but that rarely works because there's so much tension in the rope (you'd laugh watching me). Or I detach my top ascender and then reattached it above the gear. Or maybe I attach myself to the next piece of gear if it's not too far away, switch my weight to that, and then “back-clean” the lower cam. I faced just about every gear-cleaning challenge over the last five days!

JUGGING

Moving up the rope using ascenders (called “jugging” or “jumaring”) is the most basic skill one needs to master for aid climbing. Each ascender slides in only direction, up the rope, with teeth so when I pull on it, it bites into the rope and I can stand/pull myself up. In addition, each of my feet is in a stirrup with a strap up to each ascender.

So, as I stand in the left stirrup, putting all my weight on that side, I can then, with my right arm, move that ascender up the rope (with my right foot along with it). Then, I stand up on my right leg and put all my weight on that side and pull the left ascender up until it's right beneath the other one. Lather, rinse, repeat and, before you know it, you're at the top of the pitch (stopping to clean gear as you go).

When I first learned jugging during a two-day training session 14 months ago in the Gunks with a guide Paul referred me to, I was a mess. My arms and legs were going everywhere, the rope wouldn't go through the ascenders, and I was drenched in sweat and completely exhausted after only five feet. I leaned back in my harness and thought to myself, “There's no way I'm going to be able to do 3,000 feet of this!” It does indeed require a lot of balance, strength and stamina, but after an hour of practice I started to get the hang of it, and now I really fly... It's sort of like doing the Versaclimber in the gym.

RAPPELLING

Rappelling simply means lowering yourself down on the rope, using a belay device. It's super fun almost running down a rock face in one minute that might have taken you the better part of an hour to ascend – but it's also potentially very dangerous. If you attach your belay device to the wrong rope or only clip your carabiner to one of the two ropes, when you lean back to rappel down, you will plunge to your death. Or you can sail off the end of your rope, as Brad Gobright, one of the best climbers in the world did a few months ago... So the lesson Paul drilled into my head was: don't get sloppy during the fun part at the end of the day, when you may already be thinking about getting back on tierra firma, slapping high fives with your partner, and looking forward to a big dinner!

Here's Paul far below me after rappelling down:



And here I am following him:



LOWER OUT

A necessary skill for big wall climbing is a “lower out,” which you do when you need to move horizontally across the rock because, say, the crack you’ve been climbing ends and you need to switch to a better crack nearby. You can see this in the picture above where I circled Breezy and her partner, Shawn, who’s in the lead: he is far to the right, having just completed a lower out.

When the lead climber is doing a lower out, the second climber simply belays him/her. But it's trickier for the second climber. You can see me doing it in this picture:



The problem I have is that there was no place for Paul to place gear for 5-10 feet across the rock, so if I just unclip from the piece I'm attached to (circled; it's a fixed bolt with a ring, not a removable piece of gear), I would take a nasty fall/swing across the rock (you can see the rope going off to the left in the picture above). Therefore, I needed to lower myself out.

To do to, I took the rope attached to my harness, pitched it in half and put the "eye" through the fixed ring in the wall, and then held the loop, slowly letting the rope through my hands as I moved carefully across the rock. Once I was safely in a vertical position below the next piece of gear, I let go of the rope and pulled it through the ring (hoping it didn't get stuck!).