

Honey, can you pass me a shit bag?

Insignificant ascents and significant others

By Mike Ousley

I'd been warned. Dan told me that climbing a big wall with the life partner is, in ways, more stressful than with a "normal" partner. He knows because he had done it. I recall his description

of feeling helplessly apprehensive as Sue dispatched her leads up El Capitan, and how he'd much rather have been on the sharp end. Of course they finished Tangerine Trip, but the tick cost them a load of emotional stress for reasons I won't elaborate on.

Some months ago I'd read about a test piece big wall route first ascended by two married couples. The description of the social interplay between and within the couples seemed to obscure the route itself, and I imagined the situation was probably even tenser than the article conveyed. I discerned through the written account and from further reading that the intensity of the ascent irreparably impacted their respective and collective relationships.

Climbing with a sweetie, I surmised, increases the risk inherent in climbing. There's simply more at stake when multiple members of the same family are up there.

Those garish, true colors

Ascending a monstrous rock route in multi-day style with any partner is tantamount to highly accelerated inter-personal orientation. You could be close friends with a person for a lifetime and never see him defecate, smell his odor after a



THAT BIG STONE

No chunk of granite has gripped the imagination of climbers like El Capitan. Big wall veterans TM Herbert and Yvon Chouinard established the Muir Wall route in ground-breaking style: As a team of two, and without siege tactics. That was in 1965. Today there are over eighty routes up the formation's sheer face. Ascents take from hours to weeks, depending on ascent style and climber ability. The best time to climb El Capitan is during Spring and Fall when high temperatures on the cliff are normally moderate. It takes just a few hours to descend the formation via its East Ledges.

week without bathing, hear the decay of confidence in his voice as he announces intimidation, or feel the tension of the “silent bivouac” after mounted stress reaches flash point. By the summit pitch, niceties have long since been stripped,

and the raw spectrum of persona shows unchecked. If you *really* want to know a person, do a wall with him.

The classic, partnered climbing scenario demands teamwork and compromise—two things I’ve skirted for a major portion of my big wall career because I climbed solo. But I was ready for a new experience as I, in effect, told the marriage office clerk at the Old Santa Ana Courthouse in two simple words.

I, er, we do

Weasel Pup and I felt, from our exploratory beginning, that we should be together exclusively and permanently. It was the pheromone match, she told me, the undeniable biology of the mating process. Pheromones notwithstanding, she was a rockjock, snowboarder and purveyor of groveling in sublime,

natural settings. And she was stoked to charge the Captain, though her big wall experience was minimal. That we were compatible seemed an understatement to us, as we felt more like halves of the same person. We knew that, eventually, we’d rope up on the Big Stone—the only question was when.



No rush, just two thousand five hundred feet to the rim



GUILTY PARTIES

Mike Nassiry Ousley

Age: 41

Height: 5' 11"

Weight: 160

Climbing: Since hexcentric chocks were state-of-the-art

Decadence picks: Del Taco, smoothies, cereal, dissolving into ambience

Moria Nassiry Ousley

Age: 35

Height: 5' 3"

Weight: 110

Climbing: Since 1998

Shoe size: 9.5 US women's

Accolades (partial list): Reached the US via Pakistan and Australia, mastered a third language (English), multi-tasks gleefully, demonstrates kindness to all life forms

Dirt

Chums: Since 2000

Dating: Since July, 2001

Married: October, 2001

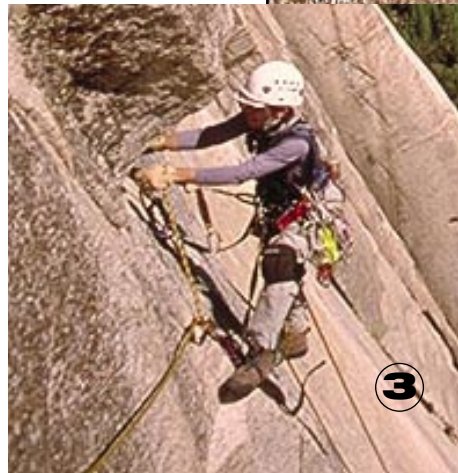
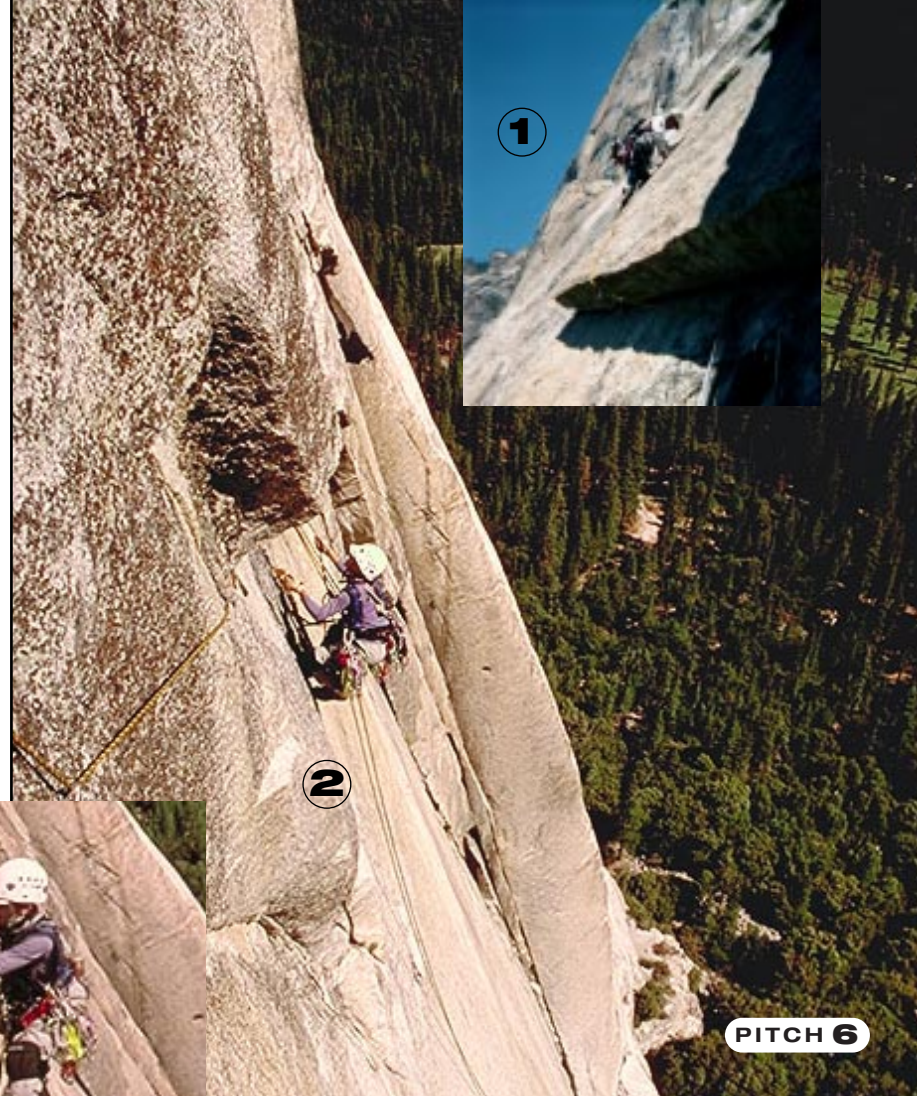


* A pitch is the section of rock between anchoring stations. The length of most El Cap pitches is 80–160 feet.

Family style

The Muir Wall was the perfect route selection. It qualifies as historic and classic, ascended in 1965 as the first new El Cap route completed by a two-person team using ground-up tactics in lieu of siege style. Long, circuitous, and not particularly difficult (in relative terms), this line up the southwest face was also reputed to draw light traffic compared to other routes. We envisioned complete solitude in the massive upper dihedrals I had gazed longingly at for so many years.

With my wife being a relative newcomer to the shenanigans necessary for success on El Cap, we decided I would lead the entire climb. Since, as a team, we were neither ultra-proficient nor swift, we piled on a few more days' rations to our mini-mountain accumulating at the base of the formation. We made the deliberate decision to move slowly. (This was virtually our honeymoon after all, and we thought it senseless to pursue minimizing its duration.) We nixed establishing a high point on the wall before launching for the summit, which



HOW THE ROPES GET UP THERE

- 1** The leader ascends trailing the *lead rope* behind him. This lead rope is clipped through links (*carabiners*) attached to the wall at various *protection* points. Theoretically, a leader fall will be held and minimized by a protection point below him.
- 2** The follower *cleans* the gear left in place by the leader. On most big wall climbs, the leader and follower ascend by different means. The leader used hands, feet, and hardware directly contacting the rock for upward progress. Once the leader reaches a suitable

anchoring location, the lead rope is tied in place (*fixed*) for the follower, who ascends it using clamp-like devices called *ascenders*. This technique puts the follower completely on his own, and frees the leader to haul provisions.

- 3** Where a route traverses horizontally, it's usually more efficient for the follower to ascend using the gear left in place by the leader. The follower climbs successive pieces, to which he attaches himself with nylon slings. Each piece is cleaned by the follower after he unweights and moves past it. Sometimes a piece will be left in place for the follower to *lower out* from—like a mini-rappel. These fixed lower-out points often pre-exist, and are sometimes weathered and of dubious quality.



was a purely aesthetic decision—and the antithesis of a speedy summit push. Our questionable style led to us bring probably half-again more supplies than we would have otherwise, but we were convicted to a pleasure-cruise itinerary. The low angle

of the lower two-thirds of the cliff would render less-than-ideal hauling, but since I was to lead every pitch, I (not my petite wifey) would also do the grunt work.

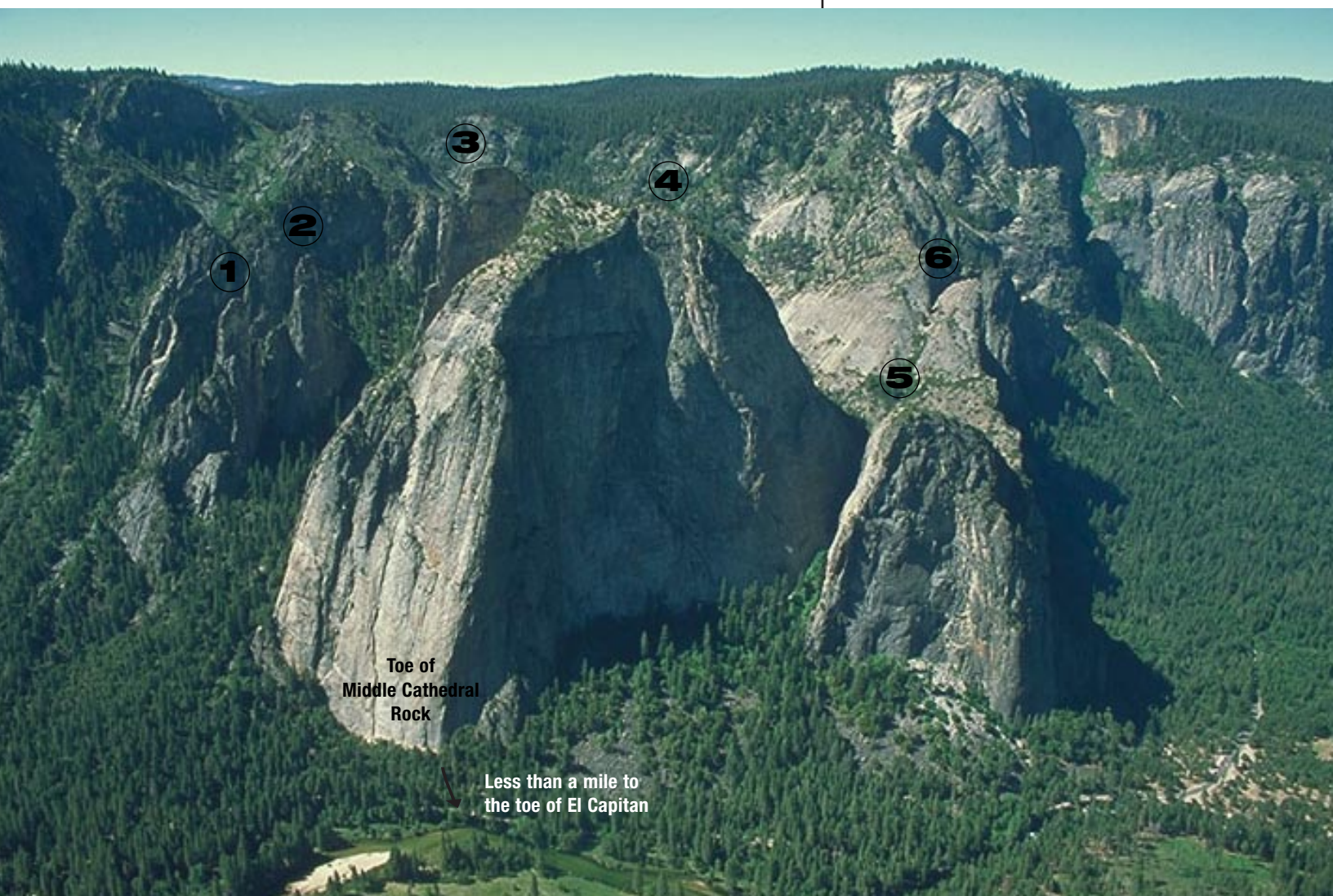
By the time our load carrying sessions were complete, we had amassed some 30-plus gallons of water (plus-minus one gallon per person per day, times plus-minus two pitches per day, times 33 pitches of climbing) and

LITTLE GIANTS

An amazing panorama bespectacles the El Cap climber. Across El Capitan Meadow cluster several formations worthy of the many climbing routes that ascend them.

- 1** Lower Cathedral Spire
- 2** Higher Cathedral Spire
- 3** Higher Cathedral Rock
- 4** Middle Cathedral Rock
- 5** Lower Cathedral Rock
- 6** Leaning Tower

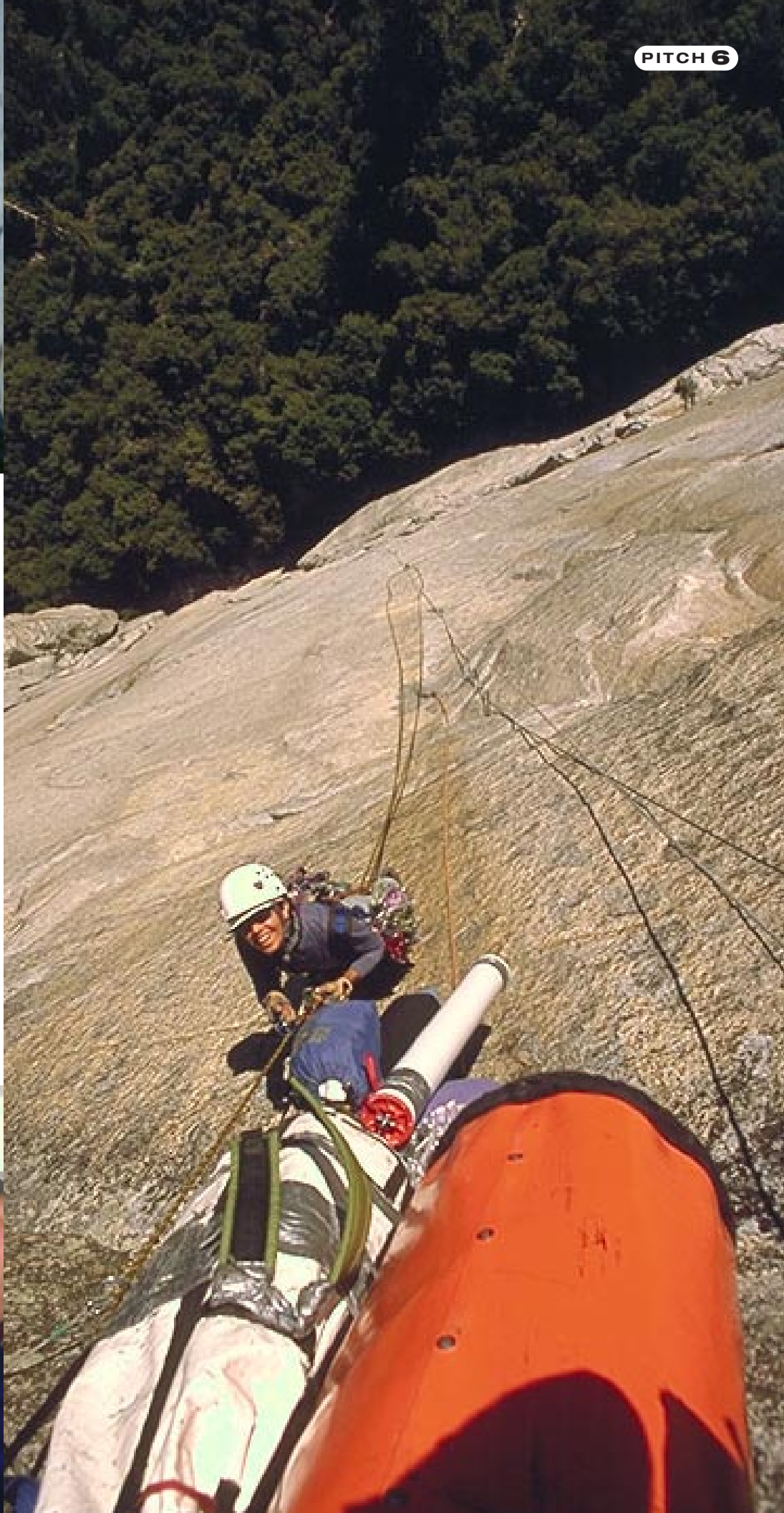
At about point-seven miles, the narrowest span of the Valley's floor lies between the toe of Middle Cathedral Rock and the toe of El Capitan.





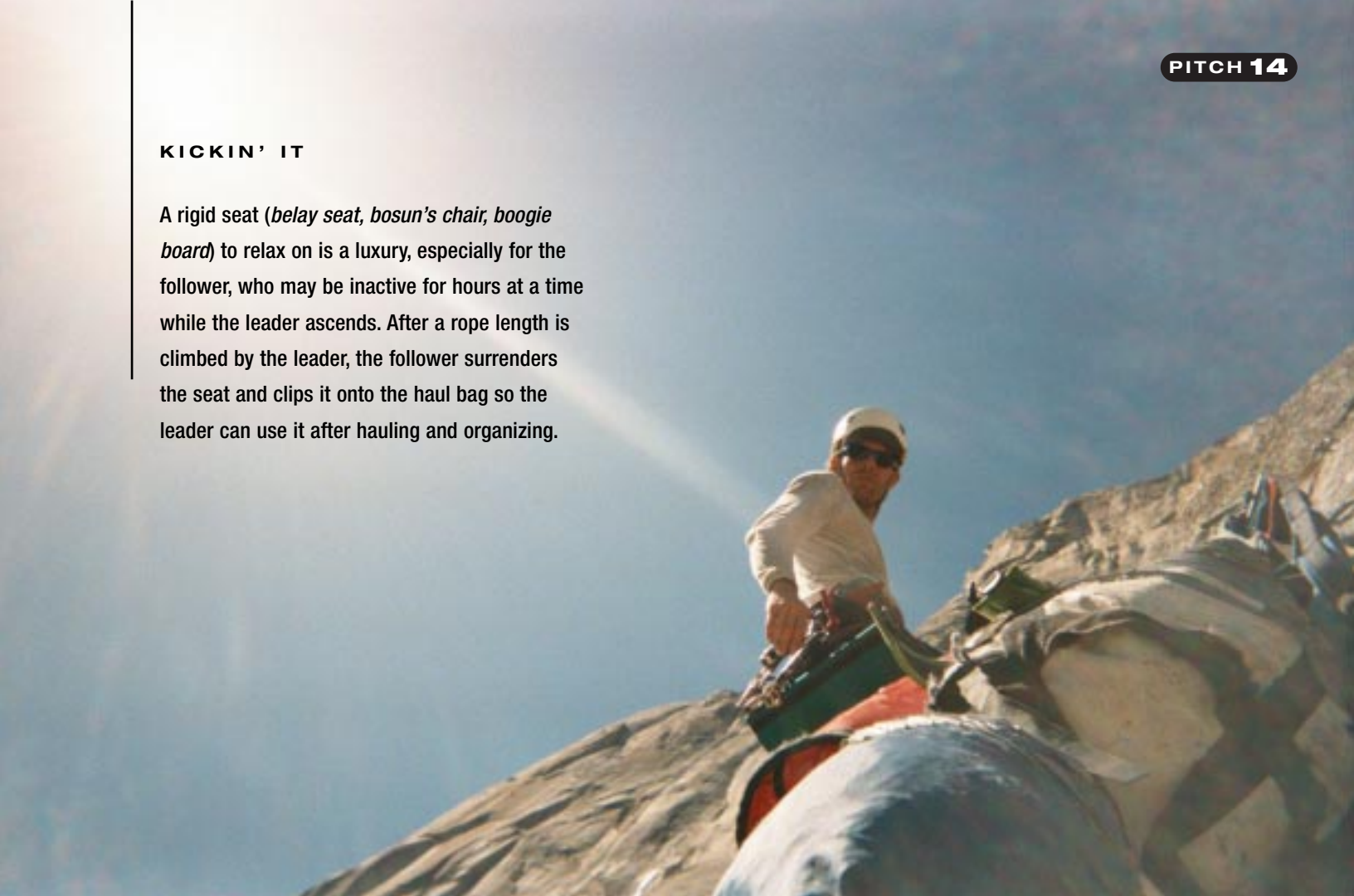
WEATHER OR NOT

In June south-facing El Cap can be a vertical desert. Or snow can fall. On this ascent, temperatures remained moderate for 17 straight days. We wore mid-weight long sleeve synthetic tops during activity in the sun and kept lightweight wind-blocking garments at close hand for less active, shadier and windier conditions. Shorts with long synthetic underwear or lightweight synth pants completed our daytime *haute couture*.



KICKIN' IT

A rigid seat (*belay seat, bosun's chair, boogie board*) to relax on is a luxury, especially for the follower, who may be inactive for hours at a time while the leader ascends. After a rope length is climbed by the leader, the follower surrenders the seat and clips it onto the haul bag so the leader can use it after hauling and organizing.



enough food to sustain us for, probably, a month. Three jumbo haul bags swallowed most of our stuff; a couple of the bags trailed bulky items durable enough to survive the 2000-foot scrape to the steep, upper third of the wall.

Slower traffic keep righteous

It should be noted that a large portion of the big wall climbing community would consider our style of ascent either questionable or stupid. Why would we needlessly spend two-plus weeks on this moderate route? Why would we not fix a high point in advance, thus save untold hauling effort? Why would we deliberately shun the stand-by mountaineering adage “speed is safety”? What gall this pedestrian team would have to



PITCH 28

BODY ARMOR

Sturdy boots, knee pads and work gloves are typical attire for all but the most graceful or masochistic wall climber. These specialized boots sport a steel shank that enables reasonably comfortable all-day standing in slings. The poorly constructed toe rands, however, disintegrated in only several days' climbing.

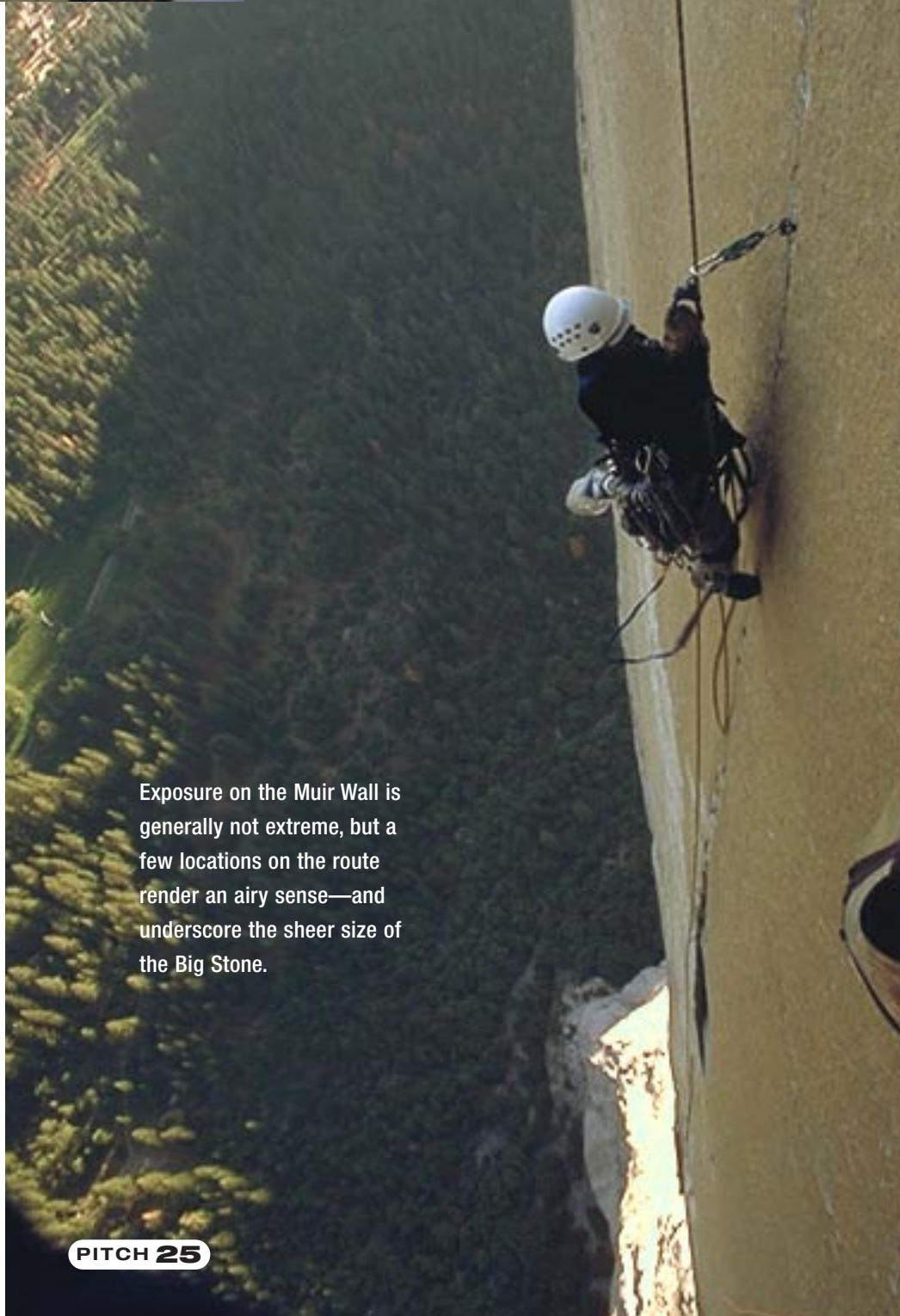




potentially inhibit the ascent progress of famous, elite athletes gunning for the Muir Wall in much “better” style.

It should be noted that we don’t give credence to trends in wall climbing or how anyone thinks we should climb. We want to be left to our pitiful devices. The freedom to mess up—even fatally—is profound liberation that’s increasingly rare in our drum-tight society. Beyond a decent topo with pitch lengths and general hardware data, you can save your oppressive “beta” and “helpful” suggestions for some hopeless clod who can’t solve problems. The function of unsolicited “beta” in most cases is to inflate the ego of the beta blower. Again, save it. We want the chance to fuck it up on our own.

Yes, managing three plugged pigs is considerable work on slabby ground. But as long as they don’t weigh over 140 pounds each and there’s a second climber to bust the suckers loose when they get stuck—bring ’em on. Eight-millimeter haul ropes proved a great way to keep the overall payload and effort in check. Modern hauling



Exposure on the Muir Wall is generally not extreme, but a few locations on the route render an airy sense—and underscore the sheer size of the Big Stone.

pulleys are a great value as well. Creative rigging and persistent use of münter mule knots were instrumental in keeping our belays efficient and near tidy. But to the lesser-trained eye—and to us at times—it seemed we bordered loss of control.

So, there we plodded our way up a maze of left-trending overlaps en route to Heart Ledge, the first location we'd be able to stand on something horizontal besides our portaledge. As we methodically crawled up successive pitches, the vision of my Golden Era heroes picking their way through the virgin swells of granite refused to vacate my mind. I groped for solace in the fact that we had three times the food and water they did, about a thousand SLCDs, and pin scars and bolts to demarcate the route. Ours was a family affair—no place for necky antics. We were ascending in dangerously safe style.

The two cordial chaps who passed us on Mammoth Terrace while ascending the Triple Direct (a route that includes several pitches of the Muir Wall) could only lament in perplexity the labyrinthine rigging of our belay. “I think I’ve got it, Jason...c’mon up...this is *the* biggest cluster fuck I’ve ever seen...” Their passing allowed us another excuse to sit on our butts for a full morning, and once past, the youthful travelers were beyond sight in a short day.

Together, alone. Again. At last.

Yea, what about those Yankees?

Wall climbing with a platonic bro requires effort that remains elusive until you’ve done it with little lovechunks. Physical contact with the non-intimate climbing partner either takes energy to, or is impossible to avert. At times you’ll be forced to virtually climb your partner to get by him, usually having to straddle compromising portions of the smelly ogre’s anatomy. In an epic situation, sure—I can put it out of mind and snuggle up with ol’ homeboy to mitigate some misery. *Frikkin-a, did you catch that triple play against the Dodgers?*



VERTICAL GRINDS

Our favorites:

- Canned pasta including but not limited to every variety of Chef Boyardee
- Canned beans—frijoles, black, baked
- Canned fruit
- Tasty Bite Indian entree pouches
- Canned tuna and chicken breast
- Bagels with cream cheese
- Cheddar and mozzarella string cheese
- Dried fruit
- Granola
- Cookies
- Triscuits (not for nibblers)
- Bars—breakfast, candy, energy

Wall climbing has a unique way of making this challenging array of products magically delicious.



And the double portaledge... Those “shark fins” are flat integral to maintaining machismo. With the babe, personal space is no longer an issue. Slumping together foot-to-foot in the sagging portaledge bed has a friendly feeling, and ultimately leaves more room for items close at hand. Turning from side to side during sleep is an activity that can be precisely coordinated to maximize the spooning configuration. If you have an XS mate, you can simply heft her where desired like a sack of sleepy potatoes.

The “Sweetie Pie”, manufactured by Functional Design, is a boon for the bivouac-bound couple. This ingenious product is essentially a wedge-shaped section of a sleeping bag with zippers on its left and right edges. It zips into almost any regular sleeping bag to create a double-wide—perfect for the snuggling couple. It saves the weight and bulk of nearly an entire sleeping bag. Unless your mate is a night thrasher, the Sweetie Pie is as *de rigueur* as the double portaledge.

Living it way up

Our division of labor created the ideal situation for this woulda-been soloist and his patient other. I got to lead everything, and spare Little Muffin the labor of hauling. I didn't have to rappel every pitch and deal with the

GLORIOUS VISION

A perfectly split corner on impeccable Sierra granite; not one piece of fixed gear in its 100 visible feet. On other routes established in the 1960s, an unbelievable feature like this would likely show scarring from years of hammered gear use and be littered with hardware left in place by previous ascent teams. The prospect of an unexpected treat like this crack on pitch 24 has afflicted many a climber with wanderlust and lost wages.



HOW WE SLEEP UP THERE

Soundly. A day of wall climbing is a great insomnia cure. Of course the climber's harness stays on all night, and he remains connected to the anchor by a loose section of rope. Rolling out of the rigid portaledge would be more difficult than rolling out of a hammock; gravity tends to keep the occupant(s) in the center of the bed. Yes, sleepwalking would be a dangerous tendency up there—as dozens of people have reminded me.

HOW WE DON'T BATHE UP THERE

Pre-moistened towelettes are the definitive hygiene solution. Bathing does happen on the walls, but only by a select group of highly adapted mutants—or a party that climbed much faster than expected.



PITCH 26

pitons I over-drove in fear. Weasel got to relax in the belay seat most of the day while I milked the leads. I got a cheerful person to converse with. She got a grouchy drill sergeant to gently remind her how to keep her technique in top form.

We climbed no more than ten hours per day—in June, when the light graces the Sierra for 17 hours a day. We typically set up the portaledge by 6pm, and didn't shove off the next morning until nine or ten. We sat, flaccid and motionless for hours in the silent wake of that gigantic stone, blissfully conjoined. We partied with the swallows, the bats, peregrine falcons, frogs, crows, hummingbirds, bees, and we thanked them for having us. We gorged on hideous canned pasta, Trader Joe's products and the most expensive PowerAde in California, courtesy of the Village Store (damn the oso that punctured half our water bottles...). We gawked at the evolving topography around us—massive, bizarre feature upon feature framing our vertical horizon, neighboring formations eventually submitting to our superior position. We ingested the intoxicating elixir of simple existence—life cleansed of earthly frivolity, duty and of other human life. We answered only to the sun, the wind

AND OF COURSE, HOW WE POO UP THERE

In earlier times, climbers “went” into paper bags which were chucked off the cliff and retrieved later. Increased wall traffic—and environmental awareness—has now mandated pack-everything-out protocol. The generally-accepted standard today is to insert the used paper bags into a storage device constructed from plastic plumbing pipe.





PITCH 23

angel with one of those stuffed pigs we stashed on the summit (nor would I endure any avoidable toil that day). We hiked the expensive stuff down to the raps then stumbled our way past Manure Pile Buttress, having planned to retrieve the remaining payload via Tamarack Campground when we were damn ready.

We completed the 18-mile round trip from Tamarack in an unhurried day. After our extended vertical experience, the act of doing something—anything—without a harness on, beyond the grip of drop-that-and-it's-gone thinking, was a vacation indeed. Never mind the giant haul bag on my back; the abrasions it lovingly administers to my lower back, the carnage it threatens on my meniscal cartilage,

the sheer mass and weight that would just as soon expedite my return to our good earth.

Back at the truck, there was suddenly and oddly nothing left for us to do. Our ascent was complete. Seventeen days on the wall, on a route that has been climbed in nineteen-plus hours. I'd be surprised to know the Muir Wall has been climbed in a greater length of time from the ground up than we took. For all our hacking and slacking, I have to believe we set some kind of record up there—personal bests (or worsts) aside.

Wall Drug again

Back in Orange County, a low flying FedEx jet coursed through the air space perpendicular to our path on the southbound I-5. Something about that jet triggered an overwhelming sense of disbelief in me. It seemed that every mechanical



PITCH 22



device in this human-crafted universe functioned nearly perfectly against ominous odds. Hopeless complexity loomed everywhere. Dearkins and I agreed on this distinct weirdness and its defiance of accurate description. Chalk it up to a healthy dose of Wall Drug.

Now, the people in their airtight land ships surrounding us seemed on an agenda of ludicrous worth. They appeared to completely lack autonomy, as if programmed for the pursuit of whiter teeth, a clean, fresh scent and the ultimate driving machine. I knew these cyborgs hadn't a thought about atmospheric pressure systems or the relative location of the star that warms Earth and enables them to live.

Behind this confounding display of strangeness lay a backdrop of calm. Obscured as the backdrop becomes, it always displays its prismatic sanctuary to the patient

observer. And for the renegade—the castaway from all of our silly amassment—lies an endless dimension of the *real* reality.

The vertical playground awaits the couple up for inter-personal intensity, for better or worse. As someone mused after our ascent, “so, you’re still together?” ●



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THANKS TO

Adventure 16, OC crew

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Yates Gear

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