

Solo on the Diamond

WILLIAM FORREST

SOLO ascents have been an accepted part of European mountaineering for some time. The solo climbs of Herman Buhl and Walter Bonatti are a small but significant part of modern climbing literature. But until Royal Robbins soloed El Capitan's Muir Wall, it appeared that the prevailing attitude among American mountaineers was that it was a foolhardy and dangerous activity — always to be frowned upon. Robbins' solo effort rocked the boat. Physically, mentally, and technically prepared for his climb, he succeeded and quite justly gained praise and approval from even the staunchest anti-soloists. Robbins' success lent perspective. His epic ascent fostered a new solo concept — "Man is free to develop his full potential." Apparently, this concept is the keystone of the 1970 Rocky Mountain National Park climbing regulations which, for the first time, legalized solo climbing.

Secretly, I have enjoyed solo climbing for some time. I usually prefer climbing with a partner, but sometimes I have an irresistible desire to "find" myself through the solo experience. Being alone in the mountain crucible can lend a vital, yet rational dimension to the sport. When soloing, the keen sensations experienced while climbing with a partner are intensified. Using a hold, testing a piton, choosing the route — critical moves and decisions — become super-exciting and extremely meaningful. There is an absolute premium on successful execution. And successful execution is largely a matter of preparation. Solo climbing demands the upmost in preparation.

I started to prepare for the Diamond solo as soon as I heard that it had been legalized. I was curious to see if I could do it, and wouldn't be satisfied until I had tried. The idea of soloing one of America's finest high-altitude walls via a new route would certainly guarantee some high adventure.

As I hiked up the Longs Peak trail toward Chasm View on the morning of July 23, I felt prepared. For weeks I had gotten myself into and out of every solo climbing situation that I could think of. My mind, body, technique and equipment were together — I felt ready to take care of myself on the wall, and planned to have some fun. But lugging my

eighty-pound pack up to Chasm View wasn't fun — at times it seemed absurd. Under the imposing wall, I thought of myself up there — alone with my big bag — and the whole scheme appeared ridiculous. That was the plan — to do it as my own thing — clean — no outside help. Because the plan was so beautifully simple, it became less ridiculous, more worth doing. I hustled my bag and body to the bivouac cave on Broadway by late afternoon.

On Friday, I climbed four pitches up the *Yellow Wall* route and set up a hammock bivouac. The day's climbing had been good for me. I knew that I was going to go ahead with the climb; I liked it. It kept me busy all the time — leading, descending, cleaning, and hauling. I worried some about the weather, it seemed too warm that night, and I was concerned about the new route ahead, but I was tired and fell asleep quickly.

Long before dawn, I was awakened by a terrible roar as an avalanche of rock cascaded down the north chimney. Sparks shot through the darkness and the mountain seemed to groan and lurch, but my anchors held and the bottom didn't rip out of my hammock. I couldn't get back to sleep, and I hung in the chilly breeze waiting for the beautiful sunshine.

Saturday was one of the most memorable days of my life. It started with salami and then a very exposed free traverse. It was cold and windy, but I climbed the traverse with surprising confidence and then nailed up to a very exposed belay at the base of my new route. Thirty feet of easy nailing brought me to an evil crack — too wide to jam, too narrow to chimney. I cursed, prayed, chickened out, and finally got with it and struggled. I didn't dare lose my composure, but it was awfully awkward. I fought and flailed. That crack took my best, but once up it, I was glad it was there; it added zest to the route. Above the crux, the crack narrowed and offered fun nailing and nutting to table ledge, which I reached just before dark.

That night I was full of confidence; not even a bad storm could keep me from getting up the remaining pitches. I kept telling myself to be cautious, to keep making the right moves. The lights of the big cities on the Great Plains glittered and winked far below me as I sat on my little ledge. I was so close to turning an idea into a reality that I almost got choked up and sentimental as I made a meal of peanuts and oranges in the dark.

On Sunday morning, I climbed three pitches to the top of the Diamond. There were a few bad pins and I had to make a small pendulum to get to an exit crack, but everything went smoothly despite occasional snow flurries. As I was working up the last few vertical feet, I heard a voice. It was my climbing partner, Don Briggs. I broke my solemn rhythm

and lunged for holds and then the hands of that wonderful friend who hugged me mightily. Gary Garbert, my long time desert climbing partner soon joined us. Happily united, we scrambled up the talus to the top of Longs Peak.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Longs Peak, Colorado.

ASCENT: First solo ascent of the Diamond Face of Longs Peak by a new route: The Forrest Finish follows first four leads of the *Yellow Wall* and then follows a single crack system directly to the summit of the Diamond. NCCS V, F8, A3.

