

# The Path of The Master—Tuolumne

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TUOLUMNE IS A spiritual place. The blue skies, pine-scented air, and mountain splendor create a temple for all who visit. Many are the climbers who've been inspired on the golden granite domes that dot the region. Their prayers are recorded in white puffs of chalk, glinting bolts adrift in a sea of knobs, and the unique traditions of those who make their annual pilgrimage. The level of inspiration varies among the faithful. Some are content to climb the well-traveled and familiar paths of stone. A few devotees seek less traveled and more difficult journeys. The risks are greater, but so too are the rewards. On rare occasions a true master emerges, so inspired and creative as to transcend earthly considerations, establishing a brilliant new standard. To follow the path of the master demands a fanatic dedication, power, and inspiration.

One such master is John Bachar. His extraordinary free-climbing talent, coupled with an awesome physique, polished by the mental discipline of years of experience, place him at a level few attain. At the forefront of standards of pure difficulty achieved bouldering, he has applied the boulderer's ethic of difficulty to longer routes, creating many rarely or never repeated test pieces. Revelling in the boulderer's freedom from equipment, Bachar has compiled an unmatched record of difficult free-solos. Taking a soloist's attitude toward protection and the boulderer's standards of difficulty, this master has created a fusion, setting new standards for the future of free-climbing .

In 1981, Bachar's vision led to the creation of two new routes on Medlicott Dome exemplifying this fusion. "You Asked For It" tackles a difficult direct line up a steep face for several pitches with minimal protection. The "Bachar-Yerian" upped the ante by running it out up a multi-pitch vertical wall at a harder standard. Both lines were clearly of the highest quality, but nobody was lining up to try them. Rumors of the serious nature of the runouts gave them an instant reputation of unrepeatability. This reputation was enhanced in 1982 when a European party attempted the second ascent of the "Bachar-Yerian". The attempt ended in the vicinity of the third bolt on the second pitch when a crystal knob broke. This precipitated a completely airborne 60-foot fall with the leader



PLATE 37

Photo by Alan Nelson

**Rob Orovetz on fourth pitch (5.10)  
of You Asked For It.**

bouncing off the belayer before coming to rest below the belay. No one else tried either route that season.

The 1983 season got off to a slow start as the remnants of a heavy winter left their mark upon the High Sierra. Limited by work and academics to a few short weekends, I nursed a dream of trying the pair of routes. Clearly there were many hardman points to be gained in bagging the second ascents. This, however, was secondary to the personal satisfaction and inner rewards to be found in attempting the climbs. Cynical skeptic that I am, I wanted to find out just how justified the reputations of horrendousness were, since all I'd heard were second-hand reports from climbers who hadn't tried the routes.

Finding a partner for such a project posed certain hazards. The number of qualified climbers who would take a serious interest in an attempt on both routes was limited. Absolute secrecy was necessary to avoid the pressures of an audience, which would make the all-too-likely failure a major embarrassment. I had the great fortune, however, to be working with Rob Oravetz, a prime candidate for such an endeavor. Rob is a quiet, mild-mannered fellow who turns into a fierce tiger on the rock. He's compiled a commendable record of extreme free-climbs while avoiding the petty ego-trips of the typical hardman. He was hesitant when I first outlined the plan, but later agreed the least we could do was try. We'd start with "You Asked For It" and consider the "Bachar-Yerian" in light of how we climbed.

It was a cool, windy Sunday morning as we traced the approach trail through the snow and pines. The road map for the route was not encouraging, bearing an ominous warning on the second pitch: "30 feet ledge-out possible, 5.10." Rob answered the unspoken question of how we'd swing leads: "Well Al, you look set on leading the death pitch, so I'll do the approach." One last look at the map, a wavy arrow marked 5.9, and he was on his way. Must have been funky 5.9, since he moved slowly back and forth across the wall, taking much longer than I'd expected. Funkiness was confirmed as I followed up to a large flat ledge. If the rest of the route was as devious as the first pitch, we were in trouble.

The rest of the route, fortunately, was more straightforward: climb straight up. Unfortunately, the angle of the wall off the ledge was vertical, very gradually easing back a long way above. Much squinting located the first bolt 15 feet up on the boulder-problem wall. Rob fiddled with the belay while I psyched out. The prospect of an air-shot onto the broad boulder-strewn ledge did not appeal to me, but the lure of the stone was slightly greater. One false start let me know what I was in for: two-finger edges, small sloping knobs, no rests, and lots of 5.10.

The strain was showing as I powered through the moves to the first bolt (placed from a hook) and did the one-handed clip-in. I breathed a sigh of relief as the imminent possibility of decking out on the ledge diminished, but then Rob commented: "Looking pretty shaky, Al." All too true—I was gripped out of my mind since the real crux was getting to the second bolt, out of sight some nebulous distance above. No place to hang out, I ignored my feelings and kept climbing. Thirty feet above the ledge the second bolt came into sight ten feet

PLATE 38

*Photo by Alan Nelson*

**Third Pitch (5.10) of *You Asked For It*, Tuolomne.**



higher. With this vision came the realization I was back in ground-fall range. No turning back—I couldn't down-climb vertical 5.10 knobs. Falling was out of the question—if I survived the free-fall to the ledge, I'd be severely mangled. Time for some balls-out, go-for-it, no-falls soloing. Get rad, man!

Clipping into the second bolt was like passing through the gates of Heaven. Freed of the mind-numbing tensions of impending doom, the runout to the belay was quite enjoyable. Hanging out in a butt-bag without a care in the world, I soaked up the sunshine and radiant glory of the spectacular scenery all around while Rob toiled below. The next pitch didn't worry me—it was Rob's turn for center stage and the sharp end.

Rob paused at the belay just long enough to check the road map. The single bolt for the pitch glistened in the sun 40 feet up. Sweaty palms fed out the rope as my nervous eyes gazed at the soles of Rob's shoes poised directly overhead on the 80° wall. Several ice-ages later he reached the bolt and I let my vision wander. Watching Rob gave me a sore neck, so I stared at the belay bolts and drifted off into a belayer's reverie. This was suddenly interrupted as Rob cried out, and before I could look up something (it felt like a brick) bounced off my head. Rob patiently absorbed my bitter complaints about dropping rocks on the belayer, then quietly informed me that I was lucky I didn't have to catch an eighty-footer too. Seems as though he'd been using a fist-sized knob, the largest on the wall, as a lodestone. Unfortunately, when pulled up, it detached, precipitating emergency fall-avoidance procedures (desperately grabbing questionable crystals) that barely averted disaster. The rest of the pitch was without incident. Following, I marveled at Rob's lead. All the knobs seem to have come from a sleazy bar of the topless variety. One bolt protected a full pitch of 5.10 moves (nothing over 5.10b, nothing under 5.10a) on insecure slope-topped friction knobs. Yow! Bachar's a master, but he's also a maniac.

The next pitch was more of the same. According to Rob, I was up there more than an hour, but for me it was timeless. Make some moves, find the next set of questionable knobs, make some more moves, stand around on screaming toes, chalk-up. Protection was sparse: one bolt 40 feet up, a marginally self-supporting stopper in a horizontal flare, and a #3 Friend sticking straight out of a bizarre hole. For me it didn't exist at all as I hesitated for ten minutes on a move five feet below the belay ledge. Finally I committed to a knob bearing all the classic stigma of unreliability and it was over. One easy pitch of another route led to the summit. Since our approach shoes were at the base we didn't bother with it and rappelled off. Criticism over this from a jealous, ego-struck hardman in the parking lot couldn't diminish the euphoria of success from our second ascent. Laughing, we said, "Go do it—it's a great route!"

The euphoria didn't last. Success on "You Asked For It" essentially committed us to trying the "Bachar-Yerian." I didn't really feel like experiencing that level of terror again, but what's the point of setting a goal for yourself if you don't stick to it? I'm sure Rob shared my reservations, but we managed to convince each other to give it a go. We hadn't examined the route close-up,

which kept us from being too intimidated in advance. Still, the view from a distance left us much to think about during the work week. An artificial optimism from the morning brew of Peet's coffee was the only thing that kept us going as we did the approach.

The weather couldn't have been better that Saturday morning. My girlfriend came along to take pictures and provide moral support so conditions were as ideal as one could hope for. Standing below the route, though, I wondered just what we were trying to do. Sixty feet of an 80° face led to a vertical headwall that kept going on and on for at least 200 dizzying feet before kicking back out of sight. From below, the wall appeared featureless, but close inspection showed it to be covered with peanut-sized knobs. Very little inspired me to climb as I tied into the sharp end for the first pitch. The only thing that got me going was the knowledge that the pitch had been led by someone other than the master.

A flake on the right looked like the easiest way up to the headwall, but Rob thought the knobby wall to the left would go, providing a more aesthetic and direct start. This was indeed the case, with beautiful 5.9 knobs, but the only protection was a questionable knob tie-off. Nonetheless, it was a good warm-up for the real climbing, which started at the headwall. A bolt at the start of the steep stuff, and another ten feet higher protected the clearly inspired climbing. Just how inspired I discovered when I tried to climb onto the headwall.

The next half-hour was spent trying to reach a fingertip edge six inches out of reach. Part of the problem seemed to be the undercut nature of the headwall, keeping my feet from helping much. Unable to do a fingertip one-arm pull-up, I kept trying anyway. Somehow I managed to grow until I finally curled my fingers over the hold. Too bad I was too stretched out to do anything with it. Back down to a rest on knobs, then another go. Got it! Pulled like hell, got the feet up on sloping peanuts, fingers screaming in agony as foot-peanut popped, but kept cranking. A two-finger knob incut allowed a clip-in on the second bolt, but the wall was overhanging slightly so there was no stopping. Twenty-five feet up and left to a flake, but it's 5.11 fingertips all the way. Rest? Ha! Fall off and hang, that's a rest, but that would've been cheating. Forgo it? Go for it! It all came grinding to a halt two moves shy of the flake. A cross through to a finger-tipper—no go. Tried again—got it!—couldn't crank on it—back down and try something else. Butterfingers—'twas me—couldn't seem to figure it out before fading out. Calm voice: "Rob, it's been nice and it's been real but I think I'm coming off. Watch me, I'm down-climbing." Down a move, couldn't do more, wouldn't let go, desperately pumped. Grabbed a bogus knob (blame the fall on a broken hold, right?) but it held and it clicked and I stretched for the flake. Sank the fingers, leaned back and shook. Flake creaked and gravel fell out—bomber! Blindly plugged a Friend and clipped it, then fiddled with a stopper. Leaned in to place the stopper, looked at the Friend, laughed hysterically at tipped-out cams. Check out the next moves, put in more stoppers. Four pieces in the flake, time to go. Desperate moves on blown arms, but it was only ten feet to the belay. Took forever to tie in and collapse in the butt bag. This route went?!

Rob had plenty of time to contemplate the second pitch while I struggled on the first. He followed smoothly, throwing a 'mo to catch the edge that stymied me at the start of the headwall. In fact, he made it look easy until almost to the flake where he suddenly popped. Uncharacteristic epithets filled the clean mountain air as his composure slipped. Lowering to the bolt, he swung over to it and cranked back up to the flake. A snide comment: "Like your easy-clean stoppers. Just pull down!" Moments later he joined me at the belay. Taking a break, we evaluated the second pitch. One bolt close up and right, another thirty feet up and left with a biner hanging on it, any more lost in the knobs in the distance overhead. The wall remained unrelentingly vertical as far as the eye could see. The trailing rope hung free. Two dimps later, Rob was ready to go. The belay was a Munter hitch straight off the anchors.

"Pilot to Copilot: Ready for takeoff."

"Rodger dodger, enjoy your flight."

Quick, precise moves and he clipped the first bolt. Ten feet of the old human-fly trick led to a bulging section. Rob climbed masterfully, testing the knobs, three points glued to the wall, reaching with the fourth. Stopped at the bulge, he tried left, he tried right, then straight up. Three times he kicked a knob, then moved onto it. It waited 'til weighted, then blew and he flew. Viler epithets than before polluted the air as Rob dangled ten feet below me. From a distance came a thin falsetto voice: "Cru-ux Mooooooves!" He rejoined me at the belay to do in another dimp.

Courage regained, resolve stiffened, Rob set forth once more on the master's path. Twenty-five feet up he moved left directly over the belay. I swung left to get out of the fall-line. He moved further left and I quickly swung to the right. Then he moved back right up across the bulge and there was no escape. Another knob popped, my heart stopped, but still he stuck. Bulge passed, it was back left to the bolt. Rob reached to clip-in pure style then cursed and grabbed the piece. The previous contenders had left a lock-gate biner with a sticky locked gate clipped into the bolt. Problem solved and clipped in we both breathed more easily. Rob continued the struggle. Ten more feet, a pause, then a retreat to the bolt for an attempted rest. Back up, back down, back up, back down. Then it was: "Sorry Al, I don't think I can do this. Lower me."

I gave it the token shot, but it was plain this climb was out of my league. Made it to the high point and quickly saw why Rob retreated. The holds were there, but the rests weren't. With arms blown from the climbing to that point, the likelihood of flaming out before the next bolt (out of sight somewhere above) approached certainty. It was hard to maintain commitment in the face of bad knobs and a potential 60-foot air fall. We bailed before we got hurt.

The path of the master waits patiently, the way of the future transposed into the present. Its brilliance may be appreciated by many from below, but that's just a pale reflection of the experience of following the path. The hazards are many, but when one reaches the end, one has transcended the mundane to become a master of one's destiny.