

# El Capitan's Nose Climbed Free

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**B**Y THE TIME THE CROATIAN TEAM had passed us, I noticed shadows of the trees stretching long across the meadow of the Valley floor below. I decided to stop trying to optimize further the crux moves under the roof. I had limited daylight and energy left and I was hoping that pure motivation would be enough to carry me through on my final attempt to lead this pitch.

While laybacking up the lower section of the crack, I concentrated on conserving my energy by climbing as fluidly and in as relaxed a manner as possible. I felt surprisingly strong through the first series of difficult moves, but as I began to execute one of the last ones, my timing and body position were slightly off. As I tried to thrust my finger tips into a small undercling slot, my foot popped off and I suddenly found myself dangling 2000 feet above the ground.

I was climbing with a British climber named Simon Nadin, whom I had met while competing on the World Cup competition circuit in Europe. At that time, back in 1989, Simon had just entered his first competition, but he ended up finishing the year as the first World Cup Champion in the history of the sport. At our first meeting, I felt an immediate sense of camaraderie with Simon. I have ever since respected his humble, understated personality and spirit toward climbing. Like me, Simon had started his climbing back in the days of "traditional style," when learning to evaluate risk and placing natural protection in cracks were essential elements of a rock climber's experience.

When Simon and I happened to cross paths at Cave Rock, we discovered our mutual desire to try free climbing the Nose route on El Capitan. Within an hour of our chance meeting, Simon had postponed his return flight to Britain. Three days later, we found ourselves at the base of El Capitan, ready to begin our adventure.

There I was on the third day of our journey, dangling 2000 feet above the ground underneath the Great Roof. This was the famous pitch that no one had yet been able to free climb. Many had tried to do so, starting with Ray Jardine, who initiated the effort to free climb the Nose fifteen years before. After several unsuccessful tries to free climb past the Great Roof, Ray eventually abandoned his attempt. Since then, many other climbers had set out to make the first free ascent of this legendary route, but none had succeeded.

After climbing from 5:30 A.M. until midnight the previous day, I had gained a greater respect for the amount of time and energy the route demanded. The



COLOR PLATE 6

*Photo by John McDonald*

**Lynn Hill on Pitch 30 of the NOSE  
on EL CAPITAN.**



COLOR PLATE 7

*Photo by John McDonald*

**Lynn Hill leading the Great Roof on  
the NOSE of EL CAPITAN.**

force of gravity seemed to multiply the higher we climbed. I began to feel the accumulation of fatigue after many pitches of free climbing with the extra weight of two ropes and a heavy rack of gear and the additional task of hauling our cumbersome equipment bag. That next morning, Simon and I woke up on Camp Four feeling tired, with swollen hands and the Great Roof looming just above our heads.

Simon went up first to try to climb this Great Roof pitch free but he quickly determined it would be too difficult for him to do on that day. Next, I gave it a try with a bit more optimism, knowing that small fingers would probably be an advantage. Indeed, it was, but after having gone up twice to work out the moves and one failed effort on the lead, I wasn't sure if I had enough remaining strength, energy or concentration to do it that day. Either I would make it on the next try or we would be obliged to continue up the route and forfeit the "all free" effort. As on the days of competition just before going out to perform, I felt a sense of immediacy for this one last effort. Free climbing this historical route had great meaning for me and I was prepared to commit myself entirely to realize the dream. Somehow, I felt this was my destiny and I convinced myself that fate would play in my favor.

While resting at the belay before my final effort, I had plenty of time to consider the situation. I imagined what it must have been like for Warren Harding while pioneering the first ascent in 1958. I also reflected on my own experiences on this route when I first climbed it in 1979 and then again, the summer before when Hans Florine and I climbed it in a one-day marathon. Here I was in 1993, about to play out my chances of trying to free climb this legendary Great Roof. With this inspiration, I was ready to give it my absolutely best effort.

Once again, I made my way up the lower crack, feeling relaxed and smooth. I continued with a bit less authority on the first series of difficult moves as I felt my strength waning. These observations did not penetrate my will to persevere. I made it past the move where I had fallen on my previous attempt and just as I was making it past the last hard move, my foot popped off a marginal smear hold. Miraculously, my head touched the roof just at the right moment to steady me and I propelled myself on. I extended my arm as far as I could and dove my fingers precisely into the small undercling finger lock. After a few more moves, I found myself standing beside one of the Croatians at the belay. Both of us were equally surprised.

Although happy to have free climbed the Great Roof, I knew there was one more pitch above Camp Six that had yet to be free climbed. I was intimidated by its reputation of being "reachy" and perhaps it was not feasible for a small person. Simon was obviously disappointed that he hadn't been able to free climb the Great Roof, but there was a good chance that the situation would be reversed above Camp Six.

Before getting there, we still had to free climb the notorious Glowering Spot above Camp Five. The next morning, we quickly organized our gear and shared

our last bit of food: half an energy bar and one date each. We planned to start before our Croatian friends, so that we would arrive with the maximum amount of time for the pitch above Camp Six.

The Glowering Spot was a horrendous warm-up for the day. Simon did an excellent job leading this tenuous, thin seam, using occasional stemming possibilities in the nearby dihedral to stop and to place small wired stoppers. I was grateful that Simon had led this pitch since it was all I could do to concentrate on free climbing it with one of the Croatians at my heels.

We finally arrived at Camp Six, tired but hopeful. I went up first to check out the crux moves, but quickly I became discouraged. Indeed, it was a reachy boulder problem with little in the way of intermediate holds to accommodate my small body size. Simon went up next and after a few tries, he too determined the moves to be relatively extreme and improbable under his current tired condition.

I decided to check out the original aid line up a shallow, flaring dihedral to the right. There didn't seem to be many possibilities of free climbing over to this shallow dihedral, nor did there appear to be much in the way of a crack or any other significant holds inside the corner itself. I did manage to traverse over to the dihedral, but getting around the smooth, rounded arête and into the corner itself seemed extremely hard. The only feature I could imagine using was a small finger-tip jam that was currently occupied by an old broken-off piton. Since I didn't have a hammer and piton to remove the old pin, there was little hope of being able to free climb past this initial section. I also tried to make a few moves in the flaring dihedral higher up, but I could barely find a way to brace myself in this corner, much less make any progress upward. Both Simon and I were jaded by fatigue and hunger and our spirits withered away with each additional effort. We had only a few hours of daylight left. Since we wanted to make it to the top and descend via the East Ledges before dark, we continued climbing to the summit. Although we had made a valiant effort to free climb this route in the best style possible, our objective had been foiled by a mere ten-foot expanse of rock.

There was no question that we had done our best to free climb every move on the route. Yet, as I drove out of Yosemite on my way to a family reunion in Idaho, I began to wonder if it would actually be feasible to free climb up this dihedral above Camp Six. After all, it did have enough of a feature that might make it possible to find some kind of opposition body contortions to allow progress up this shallow corner. Perhaps it would be worth going back up and giving it another try.

I thought of the conversation I had had the day before with one of my sponsors. When I called the U.S. distributor for Boreal and recounted my experiences on the route, he was happy to hear that I had managed to free climb the Great Roof. He felt it would be an ideal subject for an upcoming advertisement. He suggested that I should go back up for some photos of the

COLOR PLATE 8

*Photo by Ed Cooper*

**EL CAPITAN, Yosemite Valley,  
California.**



Great Roof. The idea of going back up just for photos didn't seem reasonable, but to go back up and explore free climbing the pitch above Camp Six did spark interest.

I called Brooke Sandahl, who was keen on free climbing the Nose. He had already spent time and energy in attempts the year before. Brooke and his partner had found a free, but circuitous, variant up the last pitch, which crossed back and forth on either side of the original bolt ladder. Brooke had also bolted the face variant to the left of the dihedral above Camp Six.

The timing was perfect. Brooke had the free time and was more than motivated to give the Nose another try. We would hike to the top of El Capitan, rappel down to the Great Roof for the photo shoot and spend a few extra days checking out the free climbing possibilities on the pitch above Camp Six.

Brooke and I met the following week, hiked the nine miles to the summit of El Capitan, set up camp and began exploring different free climbing possibilities on the pitch. The first task was to remove the old piton in the dihedral, essentially a piece of trash. Certainly this, the numerous piton scars on other sections, and the fact that there are chipped holds on the Jardine Traverse detract from the purity of the route as a "free climb." But these elements were all part of what marked the history of human passage and our evolving definition of success.

In the early days, the goal was simply to climb to the summit, using whatever means were available. Next, it was a question of style and equipment, then the speed of ascent and now it was my own quest to free climb the route: to climb every move free by adapting personal dimensions to the natural form of the rock. Perhaps the next challenge will be to do it all free in one day, then to do every pitch on-sight, next to do every pitch on-sight in a day and so on . . . The common denominator of all these challenges is that of a constant search for new ways evoking a sense of meaning and personal discovery.

As I became engrossed in exploring unusual techniques and body positions on this pitch, I was increasingly appreciative of its extraordinary nature. Climbing it free would involve an ingenuity and technical finesse that I rarely, if ever, encountered on any other route. After numerous tries over a three-day period, I discovered a bizarre sequence of moves involving delicate smears, stems, back-stepping, cross-stepping, laybacking, arm bars, pinching, palming, etc. Ironically, what initially appeared a pitch that would be desperate for a small person turned out to be a unique expanse of rock that almost seemed custom-designed for someone of my body dimensions and background in climbing.

Meanwhile, Brooke focused his efforts on his own face variant to the left since he figured that the dihedral would be a hopeless investment of his time and energy. Despite intense heat, I was eventually able to climb this pitch with only one fall and felt confident that it would be possible to free climb it under cooler conditions. Brooke and I decided to hike down to the Valley floor to attempt the route from the ground.



PLATE 12

*Photo by Ed Cooper*

**The NOSE on EL CAPITAN divides  
the shade from the light.**

This time, we were well prepared with food, water and equipment and we had a much better strategy for budgeting time and energy. Once again, I found myself dangling at the belay 2000 feet above the ground under the Great Roof. But this time, I managed to lead it on my first try. At the end of the day, I led the Glowering Spot while I was well warmed up, thereby eliminating the burden of having to climb it the first thing in the morning, as I did with Simon.

The morning of our final mid-September day, I woke at Camp Five, staring straight up the giant dihedral to the pitch above Camp Six. I had dreamt that I had free climbed this pitch and felt a strong sense of excitement about what was to unfold. Sure enough, just as in my dream, everything flowed together perfectly. The weather was cool and I felt well concentrated as I linked together every move on my first try.

Brooke gave his own variant a couple of tries, but since he didn't feel close to linking it and the weather started to look ominous, we decided to continue on to the top. The last pitch before the summit was one of the most exciting pitches I have ever done. With nearly 3000 feet of exposure and some spectacular 5.12c face climbing over a couple of overhanging bulges, this was an ideal way to conclude such a monumental climb.

The final realization of this ascent was not only the culmination of my eighteen years of climbing, but it was also symbolic of the kind of values that give meaning and richness to my climbing experiences. Throughout my life, one of the underlying qualities that has inspired me to pursue my vision of what is possible has to do with trusting in what I truly love and believe in. Cultivating such feelings of passion and conviction is what has enabled me to tap the source of my being and access the immense power of the human spirit.

After arriving at the summit of El Capitan, Brooke and I celebrated the evening camping next to our friend, "Mr. Captain," a several-hundred-year-old juniper tree. The evening sky was illuminated by an awesome display of stars while the moon traced its course through the immense skyscape. One after another, we added naturally sculpted pieces of wood into the dancing flames of our campfire. We huddled around its warmth, exchanging stories, laughing and reliving the most powerful moments of our climb. After having evolved along with the development of free climbing through the era of sport climbing and after having spent the better part of the previous eight years competing in various international climbing competitions throughout the world, this journey represented a refreshing return to my origins and spirit as a rock climber.