

# THE AMERICAN ALPINE JOURNAL

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## FRIENDS OF THE AMERICAN ALPINE JOURNAL

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Western peers, their ideas, which developed in isolation and which are at times radically different from those of Western minds, began to circulate as well. In this volume we offer an insight into a facet of Soviet climbing carried over into the post-perestroika era. Vladimir Shataev, President of the Russian Mountaineering Federation, describes C.I.S. climbing competitions, a cornerstone of pre-Gorbachev climbing that continues to this day.

The climbers of the former Soviet Union are not the only ones making an impression on world climbing in the mid-1990s. Alpinists from the relatively miniscule country of Slovenia (population two million) record their achievements in this volume with stories of climbs on Ama Dablam, Api, Nampa and Bobaye, and Chacaraju. Unfortunately, their stunning successes—perhaps the most significant of the decade—have arrived hand-in-hand with high losses. Since the beginning of 1995, six of their finest alpinists have died in the mountains: Slave Sveticic, killed while attempting a solo ascent of Gasherbrum IV; Stane Belak-Srauf and Jasna Bratanic, killed in an avalanche in the Julian Alps; Vanja Furlan (whose article on the first ascent of Ama Dablam's northwest face, perhaps the most impressive climb of the year, begins this volume), killed on a moderate route on the north face of Velika Mojstrovka in his home mountains; Bojan Pockar and Zigi Petric, who died while acclimatizing for an attempt on the unclimbed east face of Jannu East. Slovenian alpinists are gunning for the world's great climbing objectives, and their accomplishments are coming at a high cost. Unlike the Everest saga, which did nothing to push the physical or mental evolution of climbing, the Slovenian climbing achievements are firmly rooted in the heart of significant climbing.

For many years of its history, the *Journal* was able to have as its goal complete coverage of the world's climbing. In 1995, with the passing of H. Adams Carter, we were forced to re-evaluate those goals, and we announced that we would endeavor to cover the *significant* climbing of the year, since complete coverage, whether of climbs in the Himalaya, the Andes, or even the United States, was no longer logistically possible. This decision met with some exchanges questioning the wisdom of our act. Eric Simonson, an American guide, wrote:

. . . I was very disappointed to see, when I got my new 1996 *AAJ*, that my account from our 1995 Cho Oyo climb was omitted. . . . I had not indicated anything in my 1995 Cho Oyo account to suggest that this was a commercial trip. . . . Prior to our 1995 climb, there had been a total of nine Americans who had summited Cho Oyu. We put 13 more Americans (and two Sherpas) on top of this mountain in 1995. . . . The accomplishment of the American summitters on this trip is worthy for inclusion in the *AMERICAN* [emphasis the author's] *Alpine Journal*. . . . Their ascents are no less significant just because I organized the climb and made a little money. . . . I think your editorial policy is totally elitist and indefensible. . . . (It) is not grounded in the reality of Himalayan climbing in the 1990s.

We respond that coverage of a particular ascent does not depend on its nature as a private or commercial trip. Our goal is to report, accurately, a year of climbing, with kudos to the depth, breadth and beauty that have always been mainstays of climbing's pioneering and exploratory spirit. Significance is the threshold for inclusion; guided or commercial expeditions will be included if they meet this criterion. We cannot cover guided ascents of Cho Oyu by its regular route in the 1990s for the same reason that we long ago ceased coverage of ascents of the West Buttress on Denali (in 1952 a lead article in these pages): there are simply too many people climbing these routes to include them all. Similarly, the 1996 successes of Carlos Carsolio and Kryzstof Wielicki

on the last of their 8000ers, while incredible accomplishments, are no longer milestones the way they were when first done by Reinhold Messner and Jerzy Kukuczka, and subsequent ascents of the 14 will be progressively less significant to climbing in its historical sense. As climbing evolves, the coups of today become the benchmarks of tomorrow and the classic routes of the day after that. We will continue to report the first and, to a degree, the second, but the latter is beyond our scope.

Simonson's letter, however, begs another serious point, for the theme of commercialization in climbing can be elaborated to ask what influence money is having on climbing in general in 1996. In the last 20 years the realization that climbing was going from a fringe pursuit to a mainstream sport rose to prominence. Today, when most high-caliber climbers have ties to the climbing industry, the realization is that climbing in its upper echelons is a professional, not amateur, occupation. In a trend that parallels mergers in the larger sphere of American business, two American climbing companies, The North Face and Black Diamond, have recently acquired smaller climbing companies. The North Face funds a climbing team; its members form one of the highest concentrations of climbing talent in the country. Two of its members, John Middendorf and Kitty Calhoun, sit on the Board of Directors of The American Alpine Club; Middendorf is a member of the Advisory Board of this *Journal*. Another Advisory Board member, Michael Kennedy, notes that as Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of *Climbing* magazine, his business is climbing, and is swayed as all businesses are by the power of money. What influence does this have on climbing, the decisions climbers make, and the way they are reported in the climbing press?

The proliferation of commercialism paves the way for vested interests that perhaps accurately reflect the rest of America in the '90s. Climbing today is not only mainstream, it is business, and with that comes the rising tendency for climbing decisions—objectives as well as tactical decisions made on a climb—to be business decisions as well. The up-side to that is that now climbers—like skiers and sailors before them—can make a living from what they love to do. The down-side can be seen in increased crowds at the crags, the proliferation of new regulations aimed at climbers, and, today and forever more, the “circus” at Everest Base Camp.

Perhaps the most hotly debated topic in 1996 and the early part of 1997 was the matter of summits. Three climbs in particular focused the debate on this continent. Mt. Kennedy, Shipton Spire, and *Beauty is a Rare Thing* on the northwest face of the west buttress of Denali are all climbs without summits, but each is a unique accomplishment, and each must be weighed on its own merits. Shipton Spire, an incredible granite monolith rising out of a Pakistan glacier, begs a simple question: Is a new route on an unclimbed formation that gets to within a matter of feet of the physical top a first ascent? *A Pair of Jacks* on Mt. Kennedy expands the discussion: Is a route that climbs through the technical difficulties of an unclimbed feature to join with an established line a new route or an attempt? Steve House's brilliant climb, *Beauty is a Rare Thing*, was made with no intention of continuing to the summit. It was an incredible accomplishment; but where is the delineation point between a new route and an attempt?

Adding pepper to the stew was this year's ascent of Cerro Torre by Spaniards Simon Elias and Josu Merino, who climbed the Ferrari route on the west face, and—significantly—continued to the top of the summit mushroom, which they declared to be the hardest, most dangerous part of the climb. Theirs was the first complete ascent of Cerro Torre since the beginning of the decade; most parties have been content in recent years to stop climbing at the top of the headwall. (Last year, in fact, the “first British ascent” of Cerro Torre was reported in the pages of this journal. As with a growing number of Patagonian “ascents,” the climbers stopped at the top of the rock pitches but beneath the summit mushroom.) Does the Spaniard's ascent have any affect on previous climbs that did not reach the physical top? And what of Shipton Spire, which as we go to

press has a strong American team headed over to attempt it? If they get higher than this year's team, will they be able to claim the first ascent?

The discussion can be expanded to the Himalaya. Broad Peak and Shishapangma both have fore-summits a few meters lower than their true summits, which are problematically far enough away that some choose not to continue on and climb them. It is becoming common to see these climbs reported as "ascents" of the mountains. Should these be accepted as true ascents? Or should mountaineering continue to cherish the summit as the goal of its endeavors, a metaphor for all to which we aspire?

In the midst of the debate, honesty in reporting one's accomplishments remains climbing's unassailable cornerstone, and abuse thereof is held in rightful contempt by the community. For the purposes of the *Journal*, we will continue to consider a first ascent one that reaches the physical top of a formation and new routes those that either reach the summit or connect with a previously established line. These are our guidelines; as Michael Kennedy points out, publications such as the *Journal* record events, while history, and those who contribute to it, come to their own conclusions in time. We invite you to read this volume, weigh what you find against your own experiences, and decide for yourself your thoughts on the matters laid out in its pages. And we encourage you to keep striving for the excellence within yourself that climbing can bring.

Onward!

CHRISTIAN BECKWITH, *Editor*

