

Yosemite Speed, Patagonian Summits

Exploring Chouinard's maxim four decades on

by Timothy O'Neill

The imploring yell, "Go, go, go!" echoes from above. My jeans pockets bulge with keys, coins and paraphernalia; I've been in the Valley for one week. We have been simulating the last part of this route, but now the rope is stuck, so I hurriedly untie. I give the rope one last serious tug ("Come on. . ."), and surprisingly it pops free. I coil the cord while I climb the last 150 feet of 5-easy. As I tag the summit tree and collapse to the ground, I look over at Dean Potter, who drops the rope from his hands—my anchor—and stops the clock with a smile. Two hours and four minutes, a new record for the South Face of Washington's Column.

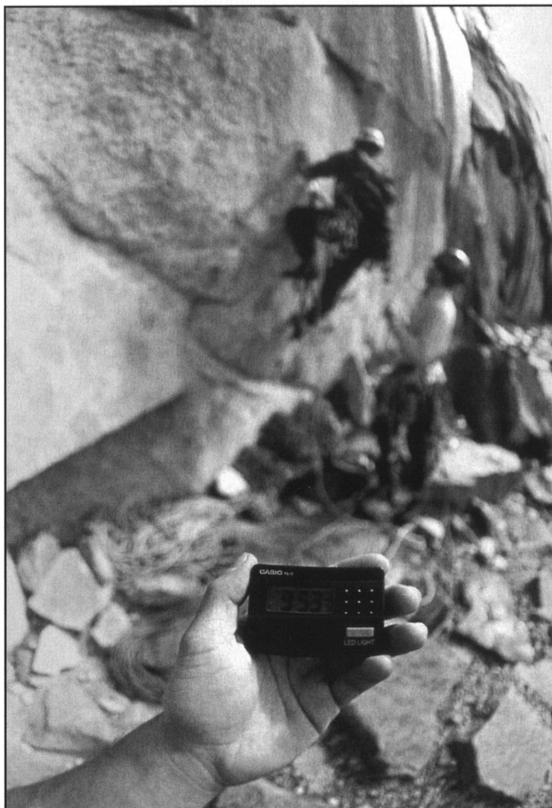
Though I have always climbed as if fire were nipping at my heels, this was my first experience using a watch to accurately record the time of an ascent. It was to become habitual in the coming months, and, like all good addictions, the first fix was free: Dean led the entire route.

As of late in Yosemite Valley, pure speed has been the subject of intense innovation, refinement and, to a lesser degree, competition. I landed in Camp 4 in early May, 1999, and already the ante in the speed game had been upped. Dean Potter and Miles Smart's ascent of *Tangerine Trip* (VI 5.10 A3) in a sub 12-hour time had knocked almost seven hours off the previous record. Cedar Wright and Chris McNamara were the next to smash an existing (18:05) speed record with their 10:57 ascent of the *Shield*. In the following months, dozens of routes would have their times slashed by teams that involved a revolving cast of characters employing a bag with a few new tricks.

Implementing new techniques to allow one to climb more efficiently and with less equipment is nothing new. Ever since Harding established the *Nose* only to have Robbins, Frost, Fitscher and Pratt complete the second ascent in 17.5 percent of the original time, we've been going faster. Our pursuit is driven by these goals, and the results can range from the discovery of the hidden knee bar in the crux sequence of the limestone sportfest to utilizing a lead system of three daisy chains that allows the soloist to forego the rope. But the recent speed ascents in the Valley utilize a number of techniques worth examining—and they also beg the question of what parts can be applied to objectives beyond Yosemite's borders.

The common strategy in the modern Valley speed ascents is to divide the route into leader blocks. A block can consist of several pitches or the entire route. The blocks are divided according to the relative strengths of each climber. For example, on their *Shield* ascent, Cedar "freeblasted" the first block (14 pitches) to Gray Ledges, then Chris led to Chicken Head Ledge (pitch 24), with Cedar leading to the summit. Generally, the leader is not able to retrieve gear placed during his block, and, with only one rope, the practice of hauling up spent pro is often times impossible. This requires that the leader back-clean long sections of aid and run it way out on the free climbing.

To achieve the fast times, both climbers must be constantly moving. Short fixing, introduced to the Valley by Aischan Rupp and Rolando Garibotti, has made this possible. The leader fires the pitch, gets to the anchor, immediately pulls up an amount of the rope sufficient to begin



Go! Chris McNamara and Miles Smart beginning a speed ascent of the Zodiac. COREY RICH

climbing, fixes it to at least two points on the anchor, shouts down, "Line fixed!" then launches into the next lead, often foregoing a self-belay unless climbing insecure aid. His yell sets the second into speed-jug mode.

The second's main objective is to get to the belay before his partner runs out of line and place him on belay. He needs to clean the pitches expediently and efficiently (leaving stuck gear behind is not an option when you only have a bare minimum to begin with) and also deal with lower-outs across traversing sections of rock where the leader can often only leave a few pieces of pro.

The intense pace of these climbs, while allowing for remarkable times, also magnifies the inherent danger that exists in climbing. There is less room for error. In June, I committed a nearly fatal mistake.

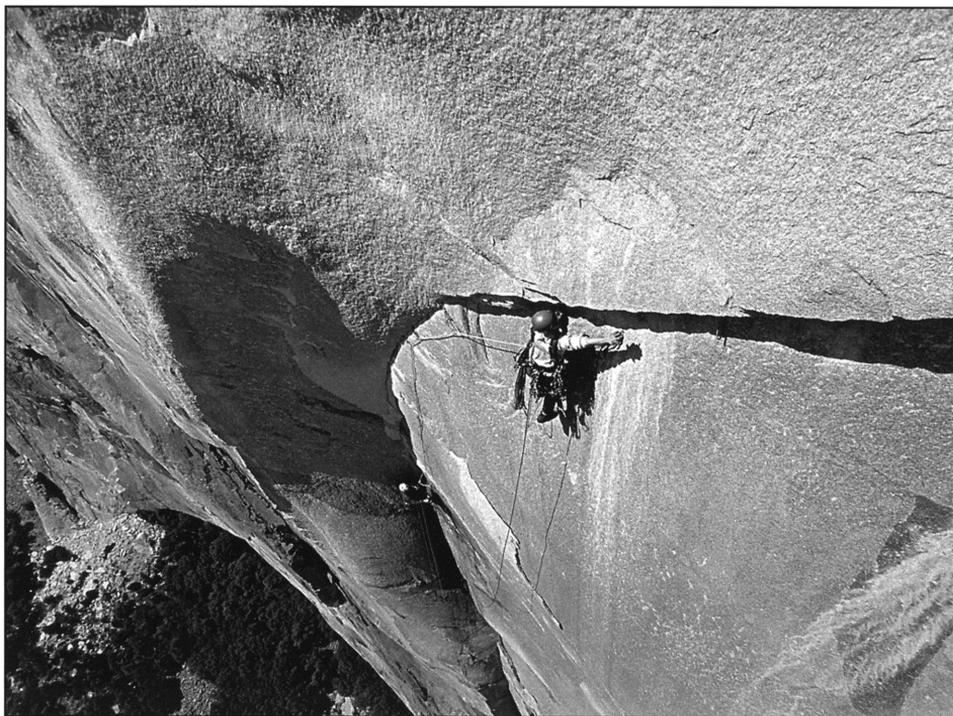
Dean Potter was busy getting handies in the Stovelegs during a speed ascent of the *Nose* on El Cap. Having fixed the line to the anchor, he yelled down, "Line fixed!" I

began my lower-out off the top of Sickle Ledge, but failed to notice that I had not attached my ascenders. I realized something was wrong, but instead of checking, I released the rope from my hands and sprang more than five feet to the dihedral that led to the Stovelegs, bracing myself for a slight jolt. That was a gross underestimation.

I immediately began back-pedaling down an 85-degree slab until my body drifted away from the wall. As I started to free fall, I began egg-beating my arms and legs, desperately straining to remain upright. I was conscious of the fact that I was dropping to the end of the rope, more than 100 feet below, though I did not know why. I was weightless and waiting, wondering if the rope was going to arrest my fall.

As the rope finally began its maple-syrup stretch, I violently pendulumed across the face, hitting it several times before coming to a stop. Fortunately, I was relatively uninjured. This was my second speed climb, and my first (and hopefully last) speed descent. I slowed down and began paying close attention to every detail.

Speed climbing solo represents another realm of suffering and exposure, but recently, it, too, has evolved. Traditionally, the soloist relied on self-belays for an ascent, but the introduction to the Valley of the three-daisy-chain system has given climbers another option. The inspiration for this system is attributed to Bob the Aid Man, an eccentric climber who kept a rattlesnake for a pet, bringing it everywhere in a paper bag. In 1985, Bob



Pitch 11, hour 5, *The Big Mac* takes on the *Witch's Tit* (a.k.a. the *Nipple*, A2+) on the *Zodiac*.
COREY RICH

employed a two-daisy-chain system on the steep and committing West Face of the Leaning Tower, simply going piece to piece.

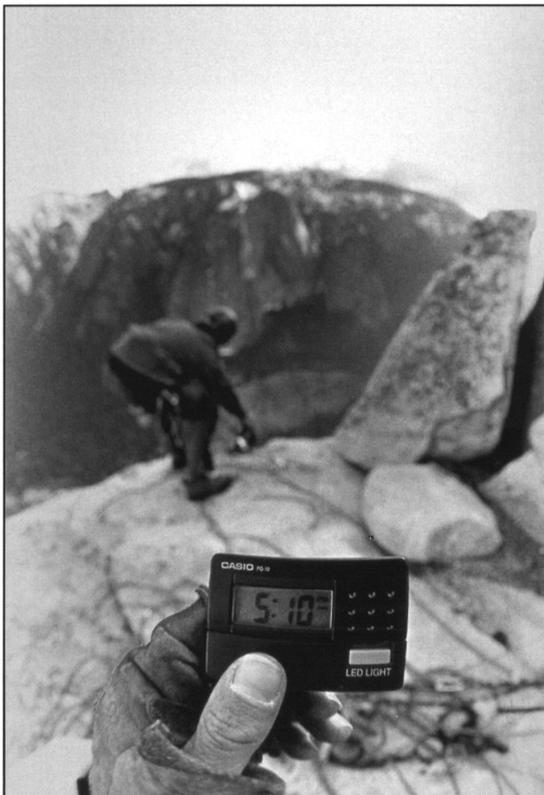
With the three-daisy-chain system, the solo climber steps up to the intended objective with a full rack and places his first piece of gear. He clips his daisy to it, then places another piece higher and clips that as well. When he has placed his third piece of gear and clipped it with his third daisy, he reaches down to the first piece, unclips that daisy chain, retrieves the pro, then progresses upward in the same manner. The technique ensures that he is anchored to the wall by at least two pieces at all times, and it allows him to seamlessly link pitches without the need to rappel, clean and jug the previous pitch. Although he must employ greater caution and rely on gear placement and intuition more than when rope soloing, he is able to conserve energy and time.

In 1999, Russell Mitrovitch's 12-hour, ropeless (save for ten feet) ascent of the *Zodiac* demonstrated the benefits of the three-daisy-chain system on the bigger walls. Since then, Dean Potter pushed it a little harder when he utilized a predominantly free solo and refined three-daisy-chain approach to become the first person to solo two grade VIs in a 24-hour period in July. He began by scorching up the *Nose* in 12:59 (record), ate some hotcakes with Chongo Chuck and José Pereyra at the Lodge Cafe, then cruised up to Half Dome and sent the Regular Route for a 23-plus-hour total. Two days later, Hans Florine awoke at the base of Half Dome and climbed the formations in reverse order. He blazed the Regular Route in 3:25 (record) and then the *Nose* with a total eclipsed time of 21:03.

Most parties do not really understand what's happening when they encounter speed climbers on a route. One moment they see a party at the base, and ten minutes and a puff of smoke later, some panting psycho is asking their name and apologizing for any inconvenience. The usual wall etiquette if you're moving much slower than an approaching party is to allow them to pass, when feasible. During a speed ascent, the pass usually occurs in mid-pitch. Communication between the two parties is essential and simple, and the process generally takes several minutes to pass the length of the rope. The slower leader temporarily suspends himself from his last piece of pro to facilitate the switch. I always thank the party and offer to buy them a beer when they get down. When we came upon Jon Blair as he was soloing *Eagle's Way* on El Cap's east face, we brought him a King Cobra to ease the pain of our passing.

It is an arguable point whether passing parties slows or quickens your ascent. You sometimes experience the need to wait for a leader who must get to a stance before you can continue, but you may also have an entire pitch, like the Great Roof, fixed for your aiders. Regardless, I find it to be one of the more enjoyable and random elements of a speed ascent. It's awesome to see a party get infused with energy and execute ten minutes of speeditude before remembering the weight of their two haul bags.

The results of all the above-mentioned techniques, when coupled with the participating players, can get pretty dizzying. In August, Dean and I peddled a tandem bike to Mirror Lake with the intention of linking three Valley formations. We ripped up the Regular Route on Half Dome, simulung to Big Sandy, short fixing through the ZigZags, then simulung to the summit in 2:08, having climbed the route in two blocks. (Soon thereafter, Hans Florine and Jim Hearson shaved this record by 15 minutes, the first time a grade VI was climbed within the two-hour barrier.) We punched it down the Death Slabs, passing Miles Smart, who was on his way to solo the Direct Northwest Face (VI 5.10 A3) on the Dome. (He aviated an onsite time of 11:25.) We powered the bike to the Deli, where we onsighted some cola and Viking-sized cinnamon rolls. After tandeming to the Sentinel, we put in a 2:30 bike-to-bike free solo of the Steck-Salathé. More sugar onsighting at the Lodge store, a cruise down to El Cap Meadow and a night ascent of the *Nose*—7,000-plus vertical and 70-plus pitches, all in less than 21 hours.



Stop—and a new record. Topping out on the Zodiac some seven hours after beginning. COREY RICH



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The intensity, excitement and improved techniques fostered in last season's speed ascents force us to consider Yvon Chouinard's 1963 prediction of Yosemite as the training grounds for the alpinists of the future. The Valley provides months of perfect weather, miles of unsurpassed granite and the opportunity to initiate and master the craft of big wall climbing. Every climber out there knows El Cap and has either climbed it or one day plans to. Honing your skills here allows you confidence in your abilities elsewhere. The formula for success continues its evolution as more of us journey to the world's remote big wall and alpine arenas. And with the evolution of the formula, the style of ascent takes on as much significance as the objective.

In early January, Nathan Martin and I traveled to the Argentine Patagonia. I had met Nathan several years earlier and was aware of the strength and tenacity he had applied to his almost single-handed development of Telluride's first sport crag. We were on our way to climb El Cap when I asked him if he had a partner for his upcoming Patagonia trip. He said no.

"Dude, you do now," I told him.

Our goal was to bring our combined strength and speed to the *Compressor Route* on Cerro Torre. A season of almost 30 grade V and VIs in Yosemite still did not completely prepare me for the harshness of Patagonia. I was run over by talus, charred by the sun and beaten down by the endless hiking. Still, fortified by our recent speed pursuits, we had the confidence that, provided we got a weather window, we would use our Valley lessons to the fullest.

In our first week, climbing with Bruno Sourzac, we made an ascent of Innominata via the *Corallo Route* (V 5.11). The line was characterized by striking features and some loose rock. An incredible summit sunset provided the visual inspiration to endure the next month of storms.

As that month passed and we began to resign any hope of another summit, the weather indiscriminately opened, offering up three days of stability. We all grabbed at once. Utilizing a tip from Kevin Thaw, Nathan and I decided to try a line first attempted by Andy Perkins on Cerro Standhardt while waiting for the *Compressor Route* to come into shape. After negotiating the Torre Glacier, we simul-climbed 600 feet of 60- to 80-degree snow and ice to reach the col between Cerro Standhardt and Perfil de Indio. We then stowed our plastics for the next 14 pitches of Patagonia crack climbing. Since we had no photos or prior knowledge of the face other than the fact that Andy's efforts had reached about 400 feet, we were excited to find multiple crack systems lining the 2,000-foot face.

After two pitches of lower-angle simul-climbing, the wall steepened for 800 feet and provided the crux pitch of stemming and jamming out a series of overhangs. The route then kicked back considerably to allow for several pitches of simuling and rapid leads. The day was hot, with intense sun causing ice and rock to careen down to the left of our route. We arrived at the north mushroom at 5:30 p.m. A 40-meter rappel into the notch that separates the northwest face from the summit ridge brought me to an 80-foot face of 5.10, on loose flakes, with pro more questionable than Clinton's sexual ethics.

Three more pitches had Nathan placing one of our two ice screws at the base of the summit mushroom. With a running belay, he led up the northeast side of the "hongo," smashing his way up 45 feet of overhanging rime and ice. We topped out as the sun melted into the ice-cap, completing the route in about 12 hours. We chopped our first-ever ice bollard, simuled back to our packs and began the 12-hour descent, rappelling into the *Exocet* route.

The north and west faces of (from highest to lowest) Cerro Torre, Torre Egger, Punta Herron, and (far left) Cerro Standhardt. Routes are as follows. 1. the Northwest Ridge (Martin-O'Neill, 2000) (climbs to summit via final four pitches of Exocet, which is shown); 2. Otra Vez (Giarolli-Orlandi-Salvaterra, 1989); 3. Spigolo dei Bimbi (Cavallaro-Salvaterra-Vidi, 1991); 4. La Giocanda (to the col "dei Falchetti") (Giovanazzi-Salvaterra, 1998). ROLANDO GARIBOTTI



Nathan Martin on the first ascent of the Northwest Ridge of Cerro Standhardt. TIMOTHY O'NEILL

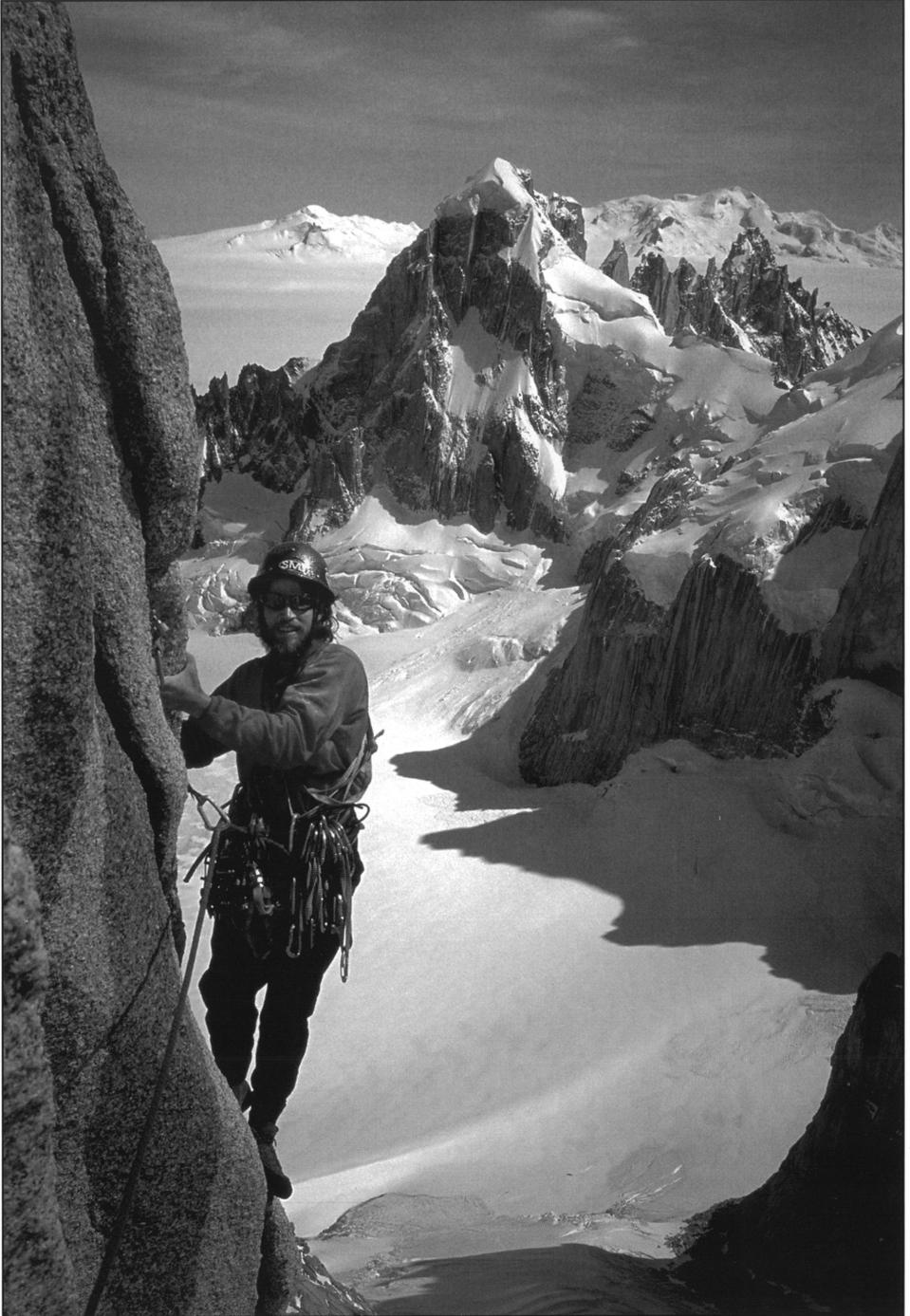
Having only four days left before we flew out of Santiago, Chile, we rested for 12 hours, then went for an attempt on the *Compressor Route* on Cerro Torre. We made it six pitches up before the weather collapsed. Heinz Zak, Peter Janschek and Elmar Sprenger, who had been forced to retreat after Peter snapped a piece of fixed webbing 50 feet from the mushroom, joined us in the descent. (Peter had sailed for 60 feet, pulled out a rivet and a copperhead and grazed the compressor, but was uninjured.)

Back at Norwegos, we decided to gamble with the weather and miss our flights. We rested a day to hydrate and refuel our fatigued bodies. The following morning, we left camp at 3 a.m. equipped with a few rivets, some heads and a drill that Heinz had loaned us. We reached the Col of Patience, brewed tea and soup and stripped our belongings down to the essentials.

I blasted off at 9:30 a.m., short-fixing the first three pitches. We then simulated the next ten.

On pitch 14, I left my pack behind to negotiate an ice-filled chimney to reach the end of my block. We switched into our plastics and crampons and Nathan began his block, which would take us to the compressor. As the rope came tight, I began ascending one of Maestri's bolt ladders. Then, armed with only one ice axe, I simulated with Nathan through the Ice Towers. He next short-fixed his way up to and over the 15-foot icicle that hung from the compressor. I led the Bridwell pitch, replacing two rivets and the copperhead (apparently, a party the previous year had also ripped out some memorabilia).

We reached the snow mushroom at 8:30 p.m. I expected to find an unclimbable, unconsolidated horror show but was surprised to spot a relatively feasible passage on the east face. Sixty feet of lower-angle snow and rime led to a 20-foot overhanging section of two-foot-thick rime, with another 20 feet leading to the true summit of Cerro Torre. As the mushroom does not see many ascents, I assume most parties must expect to find an unpassable "hongo" and therefore end their ascents at the last anchor on the headwall, but with the constantly changing conditions of Patagonia it's always worth a look.



Nathan Martin on Cerro Standhardt. TIMOTHY O'NEILL

We rappelled through the night and were not surprised to find the Austrians starting up the route for their second assault. (They would summit the mushroom the following morning but would first endure five hours of Patagonia insta-weather inside a two-man bivy sack standing in the Notch.) Once at Norwegos, we collapsed, grateful for the weather, the summit and, most importantly, our health.

Our experience with simulclimbing, short fixing and our extensive aid background allowed us to make the most of the random and fleeting weather windows. Luck also factored in heavily. Timing can be the difference between touching the summit and brushing too closely to death. Speed is an invaluable ally when climbing among peeling ice patches, falling rock and horrendous weather.

It seems as if Chouinard's ideas have begun to manifest themselves in my climbing endeavors. Last season's regiment of speed climbing and constant practice of long easy solos helped carry me up a few of the torres of Patagonia. Although we did need to adjust our style to compensate for the heavy packs and double ropes that alpine climbing demands, we were able to employ the new techniques with excellent results.

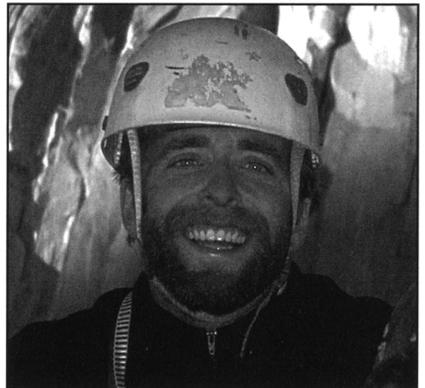
I have learned many valuable lessons as well as techniques while climbing in Yosemite, and I plan on experimenting with them in other remote areas of the world. Regardless of whether I am an alpinist of the future or just one of the present, my personal evolution has brought me the desire to take less with the hope of retaining more.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREAS: Yosemite Valley, California, and Argentine Patagonia

ASCENTS: Various speed records established in 1999 in Yosemite Valley, Timothy O'Neill and others; the *Corallo Route* (V 5.11) on Innominata, January 12, Timothy O'Neill, Nathan Martin, Bruno Sourzac; the Northwest Ridge (V 5.11 WI5, 19 pitches) on Cerro Standhardt, February 15, Timothy O'Neill and Nathan Martin; the *Compressor Route* (VI 5.11 WI4 A1, 28 pitches) on Cerro Torre, February 18, Timothy O'Neill and Nathan Martin

Born in 1969, Timothy O'Neill has been climbing for more than ten years. He believes in freedom, laughter and the beauty of life on the edge. He currently makes his home in his 1977 Ford Econoline.



Timothy O'Neill on the Corallo Route,
Innominata. BRUNO SOURZAC