

a flat ledge beneath the huge headwall that guards the top of the northwest face. Traverse right easily along a spectacular ledge system to join the last two pitches of NYG. We did nine 60m pitches. Include a few thin pitons, cams to 3", and many slings. Pineapple Express (IV 5.8 M6 W13+R).

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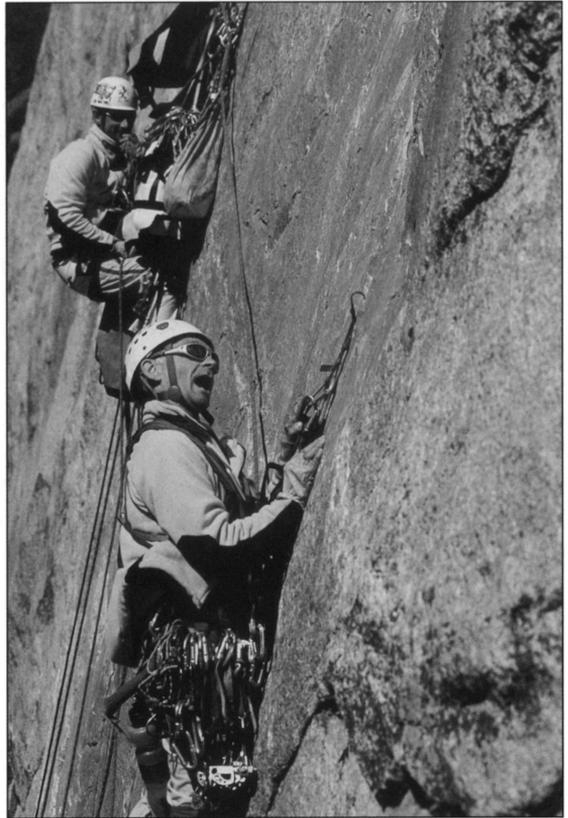
California

Yosemite Valley, various activity. Big wall free-climbing in Yosemite hasn't lost its appeal, and many impressive ascents were achieved in 2004. The Leaning Tower in particular has seen a lot of recent action, probably due to its more manageable length and more moderate grade (5.13a/b). Unreported from 2003, on October 24 Rob Miller made the second "free" ascent of the Tower. The route itself has not gone free, as the first pitch overhanging bolt ladder will "never go free." Hence, when someone "frees" the Leaning Tower, they are freeing everything above the first pitch. Miller partnered with Chris Van Leuven, who followed everything free but the boulder problem to Guano Ledge. It was Rob's 9th day of effort on the route.

On March 26 The Leaning Tower received its first "team redpoint" ascent by Justin Sjong (30) and Adam Stack (19). On May 27 this pair also made the first team redpoint of the Salathé Wall. Stack, who has redpointed Kryptonite

(5.14c/d), felt the hardest pitch was the 5.11b slab low on the route. The pair climbed the Free Salathé Light version, avoiding the crux 19th pitch (5.13c/d), as have every party but Skinner-Piana and Herson. The pair are the 6th and 7th climbers to free every pitch of the Salathé, after Alex and Thomas Huber, Tommy Caldwell, Yuji Huriyama, and Jim Herson. Todd Skinner and Paul Piana are generally credited with the first free ascent of the Salathé, although both climbers did not free all the pitches, a more accepted style of the day (1988).

A week after Sjong-Stack's Leaning Tower ascent, Tommy Caldwell scored the first flash of this route, in just five hours. Previously, Yuji Hirayama onsighted routes of similar length and



Central Scrutinizer, El Cap. Jacek Czyz on lead, Maciej Ciesielski belaying. Tadeusz Montano Grzegorzewski

difficulty on Washington Column (Quantum Mechanic) and Sentinel Rock.

Freeing the Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome is still an uncommon feat, despite its relatively tame rating of 5.12a. One reason is that the route is probably harder than 5.12a. The consensus grade for the final ZigZag pitch is settling at 5.12b/c, but still a relatively moderate rating for high-end climbers. The route has devious sections that avoid two bolt ladders and a difficult 5.12 slab finish. On June 26 Phil Gruber of Boulder, Colorado, flashed the route free. I believe this is only the sixth or seventh free ascent and the first time it has been flashed. Not only that, but Phil climbed the 23-pitch, 2,000' face in only 9.5 hours, possibly the fastest free ascent as well. Technically, Phil had seen the route before, since he had previously climbed it with aid, while linking it with The Nose in less than 24 hours. However, Phil had never seen the Higbee Heedral before, one of the 5.12 cruxes. Phil called the final 5.12 slab the crux for him since he hadn't been climbing slabs. In fact, he trained by working 60-hour weeks in an office!

El Capitan received its first flash ascent, as well (not counting the 5.12a West Face and 5.10b East Buttress routes). Twins Mark and Mike Anderson climbed Free Rider, over a few days. Mike led or followed every pitch free first try, taking no falls, and led the crux 5.12d Huber Variation Pitch and 5.12c/d Dihedral pitch, just below the Salathé roof. They completed their ascent on May 8. The pair had climbed many of the pitches two years earlier, while doing a 30-hour aid ascent of the Salathé, but the aid line avoids many of the hardest free pitches on Free Rider. Perhaps their climb wasn't a flash by the strictest definition, but it is awfully close and the best to date.

The king of Yosemite big-wall free-climbing is still Tommy Caldwell. He already has first free ascents of Lurking Fear, West Buttress, and the Muir Wall (Shaft variation), and repeats of the Salathé Wall and Zodiac. Now, he's added possibly the most continuously difficult free climb in the world. On May 22 Caldwell completed the first free ascent of the Dihedral Wall. Belayed by his wife Beth Rodden and friend Adam Stack, Caldwell freed the route over four days. Pitches 6 through 10 were the crux, with every pitch 5.13b or harder. A few were 5.13c, one 5.13d, and the 6th pitch 5.14a--the first pitch on El Cap with this rating, though many consider the Changing Corners and Great Roof pitches on the Nose to be 5.14.

Another notable repeat was Justin Sjong and Steve Schneider's ascent of 5.13b Golden Gate on El Capitan, the fourth or fifth ascent of this 41-pitch Huber brothers testpiece. After backing off in May due to jingus fixed gear, the pair returned in June, added a bolt (with the Hubers' permission) and sent the route over six days.

Free-climbing on El Cap has been male-dominated, but Steph Davis added her mark in 2004. Steph Davis added her mark in 2004, becoming only the third woman to free-climb El Cap (the others being Rodden and Lynn Hill). After free-climbing Free Rider in April, Davis returned in late May to send the route in a day. Lynn Hill's sub-24-hour ascent of The Nose is the only other female one-day free ascent. Belayed by Heinz Zak, Davis freed the 38 pitches in 22:15.

But enough about free-climbing; what about speed-climbing? One name: Ammon McNeely. He did 11 speed-climbs on El Cap in 2004 and came away with nine records, the most prolific speed-climbing season ever. McNeely did the first one-day ascents of the Atlantic Ocean Wall (23:38) and Wall of Early Morning Light (23:43) with Brian McCray, and Never Never Land (16:00) and Horse Chute (20:39) with Chris McNamara. Other records included Iron Hawk (30:42) with Cedar Wright, Pacific Ocean Wall (33:02) with Ivo Ninov, and the 2nd ascent (and first one-day ascent) of Pressure Cooker (23:41), also with Ninov.

Heidi Wirtz and Vera Schulte-Pelkum teamed up for three female speed-climbing records. Training for a Half Dome-El Cap link-up, which they ran out of time to attempt, the tireless two-some climbed the West Face of Leaning Tower on June 17 in 5:15. Two days later they did the Regular Route on Half Dome in 5:19, and on June 23 they climbed the Nose in 12:15.

Yes, new routes are still being put up in Yosemite. Unreported from 2002, Kirsten Kremer, Greg Collins, and Paul Turecki put up The Twisted Road (19 pitches, VI 5.12-) on the southeast arête of Higher Watkins Pinnacle. They speculated that this could be the last major unclimbed wall in the Valley. The pinnacle is attached to the south face of Mt. Watkins, and the route follows the first seven pitches of Hook, Line, and Sinker before breaking left to ascend the pillar. The route took 16 days to establish from March to May.

In 2003, over ten-days, Hannah North, Tom Harper, and Tom Malzbender established an "alpine rock route" on Cloud's Rest, which they named My Favorite Things (15 pitches, IV 5.10-). Cloud's Rest is the largest unbroken sweep of granite in Yosemite, though few routes are documented on this huge, lower-angled slab. The route is accessed by descending Tenaya Canyon from the top. Information has been posted at www.mindspring.com/~thharper/FTTop.html.

A new route on Higher Cathedral Spire was mentioned on Supertopo.com. The route is 5.10 or easier, except for a 5.11+ hands pitch through a roof.

Cedar Wright, with Luis Rivera, did the first free ascents of both the Camp 4 Wall and the Arrowhead Wall. Wright onsighted these routes and graded them 5.11.

As a final Valley note, Jacek Czyz (46) and Maciej Ciesielski (28), both of Poland, did the second ascent of the VI 5.11 A4 Central Scrutinizer on El Cap. They repeated the 22-pitch route in six days.

In Tuolumne, in 2002, Sean Krietch and Bob Jensen put up 5.11+R Separation Anxiety on Fairview Dome. It starts up Inverted Staircase, before breaking right to a dike. It follows this dike for a long way, before merging with the route Roseanne for the finish.

Also on Fairview Dome, Mike Schaefer established an eight-pitch, stiff 5.12 route, between Pièce de Résistance and Hemispheres. It was established top-down, the first route on Fairview done with "sport-climbing tactics." Schaefer writes, "I'm not sure if I should be ashamed or proud. It is one of the best climbs I have ever done. If it was not rap-bolted, it would have been a ground-up bolt ladder with poorly placed bolts and more than I placed. I do believe rap-bolting produced the better route with the fewer bolts. But I still struggle with the fact that it was me who brought rap-bolting to Fairview Dome."

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El Capitan, Dihedral Wall free ascent. In May, adding to his phenomenal list of El Capitan free routes, Tommy Caldwell freed the incredibly sustained Dihedral Wall (26 pitches, VI 5.14a), perhaps the most difficult free route on El Capitan. See Caldwell's feature on big-wall free climbing, earlier in this journal.

Hetch Hetchy Dome, Resurrection and In Memoriam. Hetch Hetchy is the next canyon northwest of Yosemite Valley. From Tuolumne Meadows, the Tuolumne River flows west into what used to be the "other valley." A bit smaller than Yosemite, but every bit as beautiful, Hetch Hetchy was composed of 1,000-2,000' foot walls of golden granite, waterfalls, meadows, animals, and of course native people. But it was stripped away from them, as a reservoir was built in the 1920s