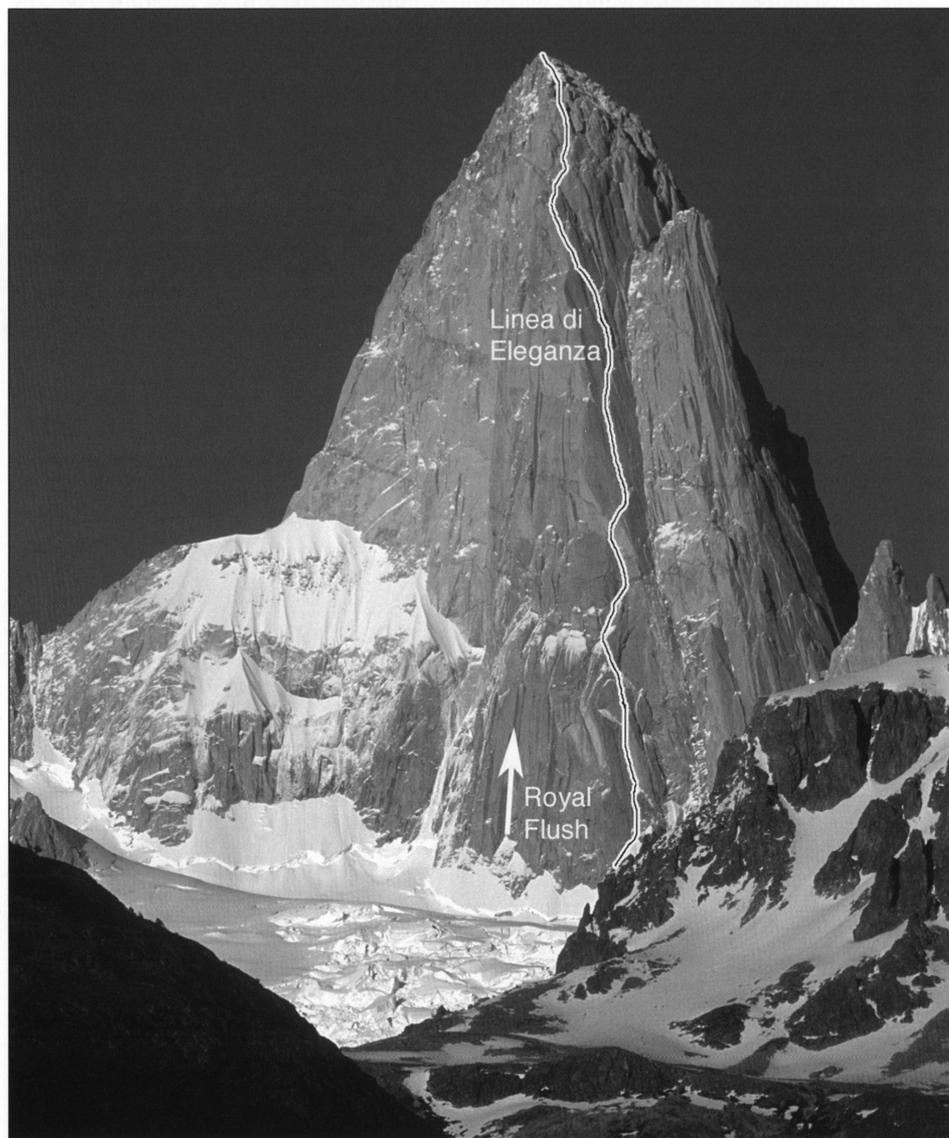


Retreat, or at least some recovery, was mandatory. We rapped to a rounded ledge to rest for the last hour until dawn. For a few minutes we all fell asleep in our harnesses, leaning against each other like three drunks on the back of a motorcycle. Minutes later, we awoke shivering and fired up our stove to melt snow and greet the sunrise with a hot drink. When the sun hit the face and we turned to pull our ropes from our rappel, we all laughed. The ropes hung across the steepest part of the face. In daylight we never would have gone off-route the way we did.



Linea di Eleganza is the first free route up Fitz Roy's east face. The free ascent involved two 5.12 pitches, one pitch rated 5.12 M8, and numerous 5.10 and 5.11 pitches. *Rolando Garibotti*

We headed right on much easier terrain and began a dash for the summit. Clouds rolled across the ice cap, and the wind was increasing. We were a long way from the summit and the descent of the Franco-Argentinean Route on the other side of the mountain. We measured our progress against the massive north pillar; it was slower than we wanted, but we toiled onward. Ice appeared in all the cracks just as the angle of the wall broke. I led a wacky double offwidth choked with beautiful blue ice before handing the lead to Erik for the anchor leg. A few pitches later, Erik tied off a huge boulder on the summit and Tommy and I jugged happily.

Now, standing on top, I wonder what you would have thought of climbing Fitz Roy. I know you would have loved the uncertainty of the weather and the psychology of trying against all odds. You always wished the world had a mountain so big and so difficult that no one could reach its summit. Climbers would merely try hard and go as far as possible with no hope of actually making it to the top. Climbing in Patagonia is a little like that. To succeed on the first free ascent of this face, we had to forget the summit and immerse ourselves in the process. We had to leave behind anything that did not directly fuel our ascent. We forgot about success, and by doing so we succeeded.

Our climb is far from over. We will watch our third sunrise before we reach our tents and the other comforts of base camp. I wish I could have shared this lofty peak with you, but I guess in some ways I did. I am thankful for all the peaks we did share, and certainly without you I never would have been here.

*Your son,
Topher*

SUMMARY:

AREA: Fitz Roy, Patagonia

ASCENT: Alpine-style first free ascent of the east face of Fitz Roy, via the second ascent of Linea di Eleganza (1,250m, 33 pitches, VI 5.12+ M8, Codo-Fava-Orlandi, 2004); Tommy Caldwell, Topher Donahue, and Erik Roed, February 22-24, 2006. Free attempts on Royal Flush (ED+ 5.12b A1, Albert-Arnold-Gerschel-Richter, 1995) to 23rd pitch, Tommy Caldwell and Topher Donahue; Caldwell led crux pitch 19 free at “probably around 5.12c if dry, but since there was not an inch of dry rock on the pitch it felt more like 5.13 to me.”

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Topher Donahue, 34, lives in Nederland, Colorado, and works as a writer and photographer. He learned to climb as a child in nearby Rocky Mountain National Park, which he considers the best training ground in North America for high-standard rock climbing in alpine regions. His father, Mike Donahue, was the longtime owner of Colorado Mountain School, the guide service in the park. Mike died on November 16, 2005, at the age of 59.



Caldwell (top) and Donahue greet the day. *Topher Donahue*

TWICE AS NICE

The all-free ascent of two El Capitan routes in a single day.

TOMMY CALDWELL

Sunday, October 30, 2005

I'm strolling nervously to the base of the Nose with Beth and her dad, who will carry my shoes and empty water bottle back to the car. The night is calm and the stars are out. El Cap shimmers in the moonlight, massive and intimidating. I was in my sleeping bag for only about four hours and slept less than two; logistics and doubts kept playing in my head like a skipping DVD with no stop button. By the time I got out of bed I was frustrated and wondering if I was crazy for thinking I might be able to free climb two El Cap routes in a day. The egg sandwich I fixed for breakfast sits like a lump in my stomach.

1:00 a.m. (pitch 1)

"C'mon, you need to relax!" I feel tense and uneasy, and at this rate I'll run out of energy before sunrise. At the top of the first pitch, I fix the rope and close my eyes.

"Only 64 pitches to go," I laugh to myself. "This is totally ludicrous."

1:15 a.m. (pitch 2)

I'm feeling a little more relaxed. Beth's excitement and encouragement are contagious. At times, just her presence can melt all my worries away and replace them with focused concentration. Two weeks ago, we free climbed the Nose together. It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life, and we probably should have gone straight into retirement. How could we top that? But some flaw in my genes always pushes me forward, creating curiosity and a need to discover what I am capable of. Beth somehow puts up with it; her company has become an addiction, an essential fuel for my existence. Two and a half days after finishing our free ascent, I went back to the Nose and led it all free in around 12 hours. Five days later, I led Free Rider in a day. Now, after another eight days, I'm back again.

2:00 a.m. (pitch 4)

I short-fix on Sickle Ledge and keep going, getting into a rhythm. Climbing is starting to feel effortless, and my confidence is building. I plan to climb pitch by pitch 90 percent of the day, with very little short-fixing or simul-climbing. My tendency is to get caught up in the climbing and not think enough about the dangers. In the past this has led to some long falls and near misses. I want to be with Beth for at least 100 more years, so dangerous tactics don't seem worth it. Besides, the rest at the top of each pitch is a good way to pace myself and keep my heart rate low.

2:30 a.m. (pitch 8)

The Stovelegs have the potential to consume a lot of energy, with wide cracks and continuous climbing. But I'm feeling great. The pitches are flying by, and the calm, quiet night is relaxing. My arms feel no fatigue and my feet no pain. At each belay I close my eyes for a few minutes

and take deep breaths. I want this so bad. Doubts have disappeared. My world lies within the small beam of my headlamp, and I am unaware of anything else. In the shadows cast by my lamp, the footholds seem to look a little bigger.

4:00 a.m. (pitch 11)

At Dolt Tower I wake a party of five out of a deep sleep. Their first reaction is to offer me water. I discover that it is Thomas Huber, Ivo Ninov, Ammon McNeely, and a couple of their friends. Thomas hopes to free a variation on the Nose, and the others are there for support and for the ride. I tell them my plan, and they look a little shocked and bewildered. I had told almost no one, not even some of my closest friends, what I was planning to attempt today.

5:30 a.m. (pitch 19)

Pitches continue to fly by. My arms are feeling a little tired but surprisingly good after 2,000 feet of climbing. Even though I'm not thirsty I keep drinking electrolyte mix. Dehydration is the last thing I want. Just a few pitches from the Great Roof, it's still completely dark. I climb slower, hoping to take off my headlamp at the Great Roof. It feels strange to slow down when I still have 4,000 feet of climbing to do by the end of the day.

6:45 a.m. (pitch 21)

Looking up at the Great Roof I feel intimidated. An early-morning breeze chills me to the bone and I'm shivering. I've brought very little clothing, trying to minimize weight. We've got some energy bars and gels, plus a bit of beef jerky and salty nuts; we carry only three liters of water, having cached additional water during our recent ascents. I've got two pairs of shoes: one for the cruxes and a more comfortable pair for everything up to 5.12a. I've brought a single rope, a set and a half of Camalots up to a No. 4, a few stoppers, six draws, six runners, and a few extra biners. Before each pitch I hand any extra gear to Beth, carrying only what is essential to protect the pitch. When we freed the Nose together, Beth led the Great Roof; she has the gear list wired and now she helps me rack the necessary pieces in order.

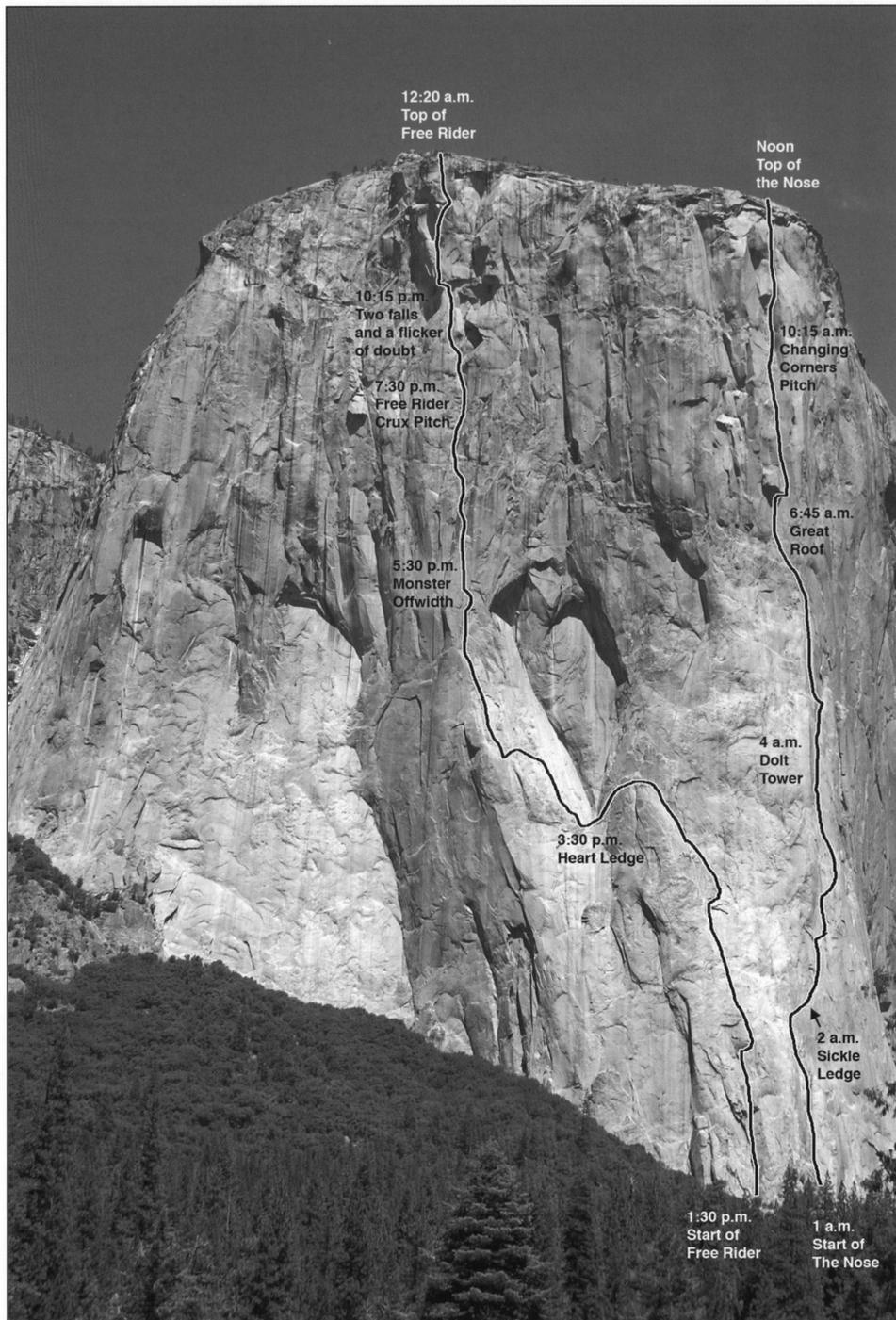
I methodically slide my fingertips into the crack and tiptoe up ripples in the rock. I feel jittery but try to stay relaxed. Most hard pitches on El Cap are all about precision and footwork. One sloppy foot placement and you slip. It makes for nerve-wracking climbing. Exertion warms my body and gives me a boost of confidence. I begin shoving my fingertips in the crack as hard as I can. Nearing the end of the roof, I start getting pumped, my body quivers, and I watch my feet slowly creep off the edges. I reach for a sinker fingerlock and pull myself to the end of the pitch, fixing the rope with a big sigh of relief.

9:35 a.m. (pitch 24)

I start up the Glowering Spot pitch feeling more confident. Beth yells encouraging words. I reach for a one-finger pin scar just as both feet slip. I dangle for a moment from a single finger and manage to grab a lower lock with my other hand. "That was close!" I say out loud. My finger goes numb. I scramble to the top of the pitch and compose myself. Beth is there in a few minutes. We sprint up the next pitch to Camp Six.

10:15 a.m. (pitch 26)

Just before the crux moves of the day on the Changing Corners, I wedge my hip in the crack and close my eyes. I can feel my heart racing as I take deep breaths. This pitch takes such precision, such focus, and I'm nervous. My first attempt ends quickly with a foot slip. I lower, pull the rope, and start again from the belay stance. On my next attempt I make it a little higher and slip again. "I better not keep this up," I mutter. Extra time and energy are not in abundance.



12:20 a.m.
Top of
Free Rider

Noon
Top of
the Nose

10:15 p.m.
Two falls
and a flicker
of doubt

10:15 a.m.
Changing
Corners
Pitch

7:30 p.m.
Free Rider
Crux Pitch

6:45 a.m.
Great
Roof

5:30 p.m.
Monster
Offwidth

4 a.m.
Dolt
Tower

3:30 p.m.
Heart Ledge

2 a.m.
Sickle
Ledge

1:30 p.m.
Start of
Free Rider

1 a.m.
Start of
The Nose

Chris McNamara

On my next attempt I feel more focused, placing my feet and hands with precision and applying just the right pressure to hold on. Halfway up, I switch from scissoring my feet and legs to hip scumming, then back to scissoring. With calves and forearms burning, I try to place a small nut, but my body tension starts to give out. I throw the sling around my neck, aggressively palm the wall behind me, and smear my foot high on a small edge. The bolt is 10 feet below, around the corner, and I try not to think about the fall. With a high knee-scum, I palm my hand hard and reach for a jug. My fingers latch it securely and I let out a yell.

Noon (top of the Nose)

I scramble to the summit tree, fix the rope, drop the rack, and down a turkey and cheese sandwich that's waiting with a friend. Before Beth is even up to the top, I've pulled on my descent shoes and started running toward the fixed rappels down the East Ledges. I won't see her until I've climbed El Cap again.

1:30 p.m. (start of Free Rider)

Beth's dad picks me up at the Manure Pile parking lot and drives me to El Cap Meadow, where I meet Chris McNamara, my new belayer. I down a bunch of water and another sandwich, and then Chris and I head straight toward the base of Free Rider. I'm feeling a little tired but surprisingly good. Although we had never climbed together, I knew Chris would be great

as a partner. He has climbed El Cap 67 times, and he knows the Big Stone better than anyone. Our systems click immediately. Belay transfers take less than a minute. He jumars so fast I dub him Rocket McNamara, and I have to ask him to slow down occasionally so I can rest a bit more at the belays.

3:30 p.m. (pitch 42)

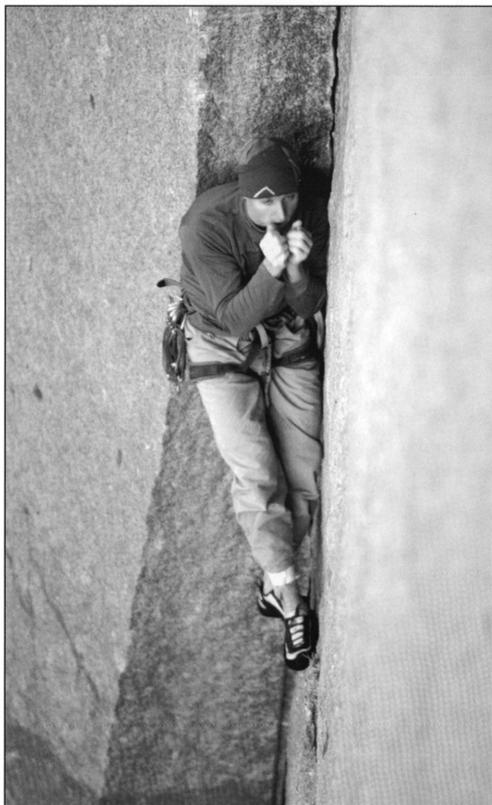
Already on Heart Ledge. The hottest part of the day starts to wear on me. My feet have swollen and my skin hurts. I curse myself for forgetting Advil. With the pain comes doubt. I start taking off my shoes at each belay and rubbing my toes. Chris distracts me by chatting about home remodeling.

5:30 p.m. (pitch 47)

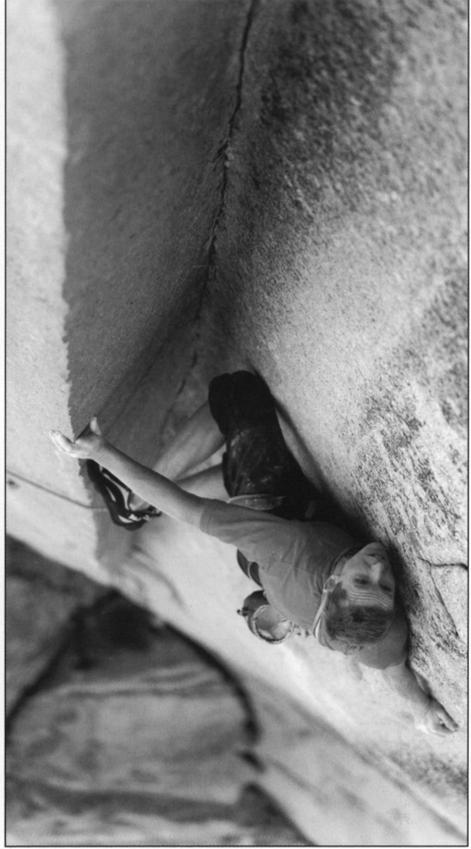
I start up the 180-foot offwidth called the Monster, probably the most tiring pitch of the climb. I'm not worried about falling—just about puking. I climb as efficiently as possible, but it's hard to finesse arm bars and knee jams.

6:30 p.m. (pitch 51)

A 10-minute breather on El Cap Spire and a Red Bull help me regain a little energy. The sun goes down and my feet



Tommy Caldwell pauses to warm his hands and psyche up for the Great Roof on the Nose. *Corey Rich*



Two views of the famed Changing Corners pitch, the 5.14a crux of the free Nose. Caldwell starts the crux sequence about 20 feet below the protection bolt and eyes the finishing jug about 10 feet past the bolt. *Corey Rich*

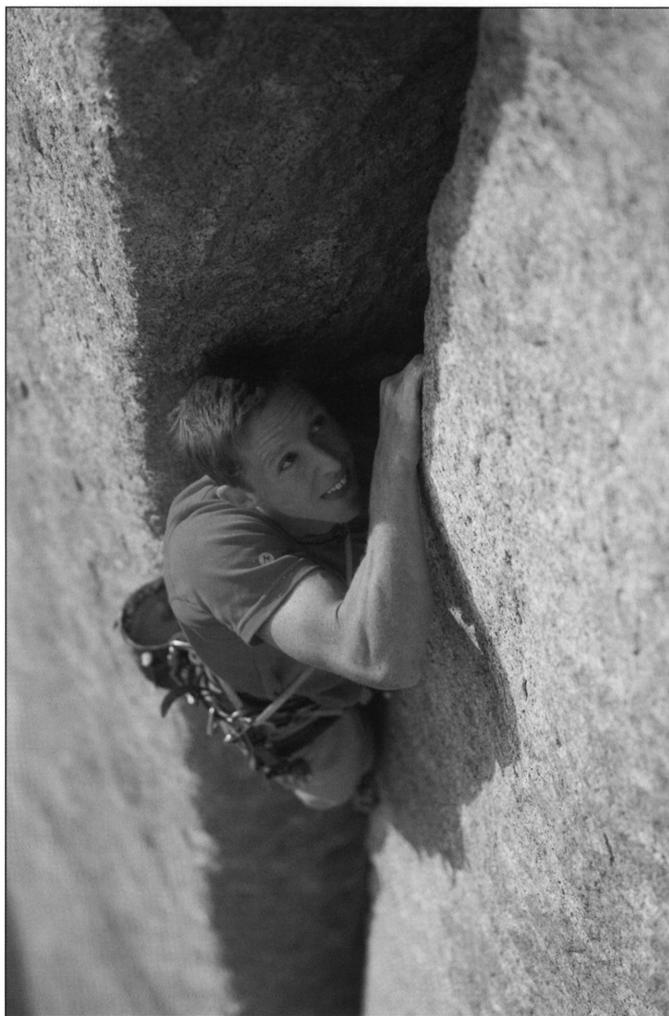
instantly feel better. My arms, though, are beginning to feel like lead weights. As I start the next pitch I get pumped shockingly fast. It's a good thing Chris is jumaring so quickly because I'm slowing down and I need all the time I have.

7:30 p.m. (pitch 53)

The crux of Free Rider is only a short, 5.12d boulder problem, but it definitely takes some power. I take some deep breaths and start pulling hard. My stomach is queasy and I struggle for a clear mind. Climbing into the darkness always gives me an uneasy feeling. "What am I doing here?" I think. I compose myself and try to ignore all conscious feelings and just pull hard. My fingertips are now numb and bleeding, along with my right big toe. I inch my way onto a small crimper and tediously reach for a large side-pull; my foot slips and I swing hard into a corner but somehow manage to hold onto the side-pull.

10:15 p.m. (pitch 58)

My eyes jolt open as Chris arrives at the belay. I cannot believe I've fallen asleep hanging in my harness. The night is getting cold, or at least I feel like it is. Goose bumps cover my body, and a chill scampers up my spine. My body may be shutting down from overexertion. I click



Late-afternoon sunlight illuminates Caldwell as he grunts up the Monster Offwidth (5.11) on Free Rider, "the most tiring pitch of the climb." *Corey Rich*

my headlamp on high, slip my shoes over my swollen, red, tender feet, and began stemming up the steep, smooth granite corner. The stars provide just enough light that I can see the base of El Cap 2,500 feet below. I switch to a lieback and continue grunting up the rounded corner. My arms are quivering with pain and fatigue, and as my hand starts to cramp I desperately switch back to stemming. I know that if I fall here it will seriously affect my chances. My feet start to slide and I pull a little harder, but then I'm off.

"Whose idea was it to try and free climb two El Cap routes in a day?" I whimper to Chris.

He lowers me, we pull the rope, and I start up again. The new moon gives little help with finding footholds. I climb as methodically as I can, but keeping a clear mind is a struggle at this point.

Five feet higher, my fingers peel open and I fall again.

"Damn it!" I slap the wall with the pitiful amount of strength I have left. This pitch is 5.12b, much easier than the other cruxes I've faced today, but I'm exhausted. Even though I only have four pitches to go, it seems like miles.

The radio clipped to Chris' harness squawks to life.

"How are you doing down there, Tommy?" Beth says. She's only 300 feet above me at the summit, and just the sound of her voice fills me with adrenaline. "I'm coming for you, baby," I reply.

The truth is, even though I saw her less than 12 hours earlier, I miss her. We started this project together seven weeks ago, and her energy keeps pushing me beyond what I think is possible.

I pull the rope again, tie back in, and start climbing. My mind and body are malfunctioning. I can't figure out which foot to move up, and I'm moving clumsily. I feel like I'm going to puke. But I am so close to completing my goal. I close my eyes, breathe deeply, and summon every ounce of power I can find. I tell my feet to stick like glue. As I reach my high point, determination takes over. I place my hands carefully and stem my feet with precision. I reach the anchor with a nauseous stomach, swollen feet, and yet another big sigh of relief.

12:20 a.m. (top of Free Rider)

I grovel up the last bit of offwidth and stumble to the top, where I collapse on the ground. A small group of friends and my wife are waiting for me. Beth gives me a big hug and fixes the rope for Chris. I feel euphoric but also completely floored. My arms and fingers have fallen asleep. I take some Advil, and within minutes I can feel the blood flowing through my arms once again. I crawl into a sleeping bag and pass out, not able to fully appreciate and understand what I have just accomplished.



After a month I still had not completely recovered. The ends of my toes remained numb, and climbing just hurt. Maybe for the first time in my life I felt a little burnt out, but I also felt a deep sense of contentment. I knew the urge to climb would soon return. I have lived my entire life with it and don't know any other way.

Free climbing two El Cap routes in a day was an idea a friend had mentioned four years earlier, after I freed the Salathé Wall in a day. My first reaction was to laugh at him, and I continued to shrug off the idea for the next two years. But, as my wife and friends know, once the seed is planted I have a hard time letting it go.

SUMMARY:

AREA: El Capitan, Yosemite Valley

ASCENTS: Free ascent of the Nose (VI 5.14a), Tommy Caldwell and Beth Rodden, sharing leads, October 12-14, 2005. One-day free ascents of the Nose, October 17, and Free Rider (VI 5.12d), October 22, Tommy Caldwell. Sub-24-hour free ascent of the Nose and Free Rider, Tommy Caldwell, belayed by Beth Rodden on the Nose and Chris McNamara on Free Rider, October 30-31.

NOTE: In this article, Caldwell numbers the pitches according to guidebook descriptions (31 pitches for the Nose, 34 pitches for Free Rider); during his one-day linkup, he climbed the Nose in 25 pitches and Free Rider in 26 pitches.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Tommy Caldwell, 28, lives in Estes Park, Colorado, with his wife, Beth Rodden. He has free climbed eight different routes on El Capitan.