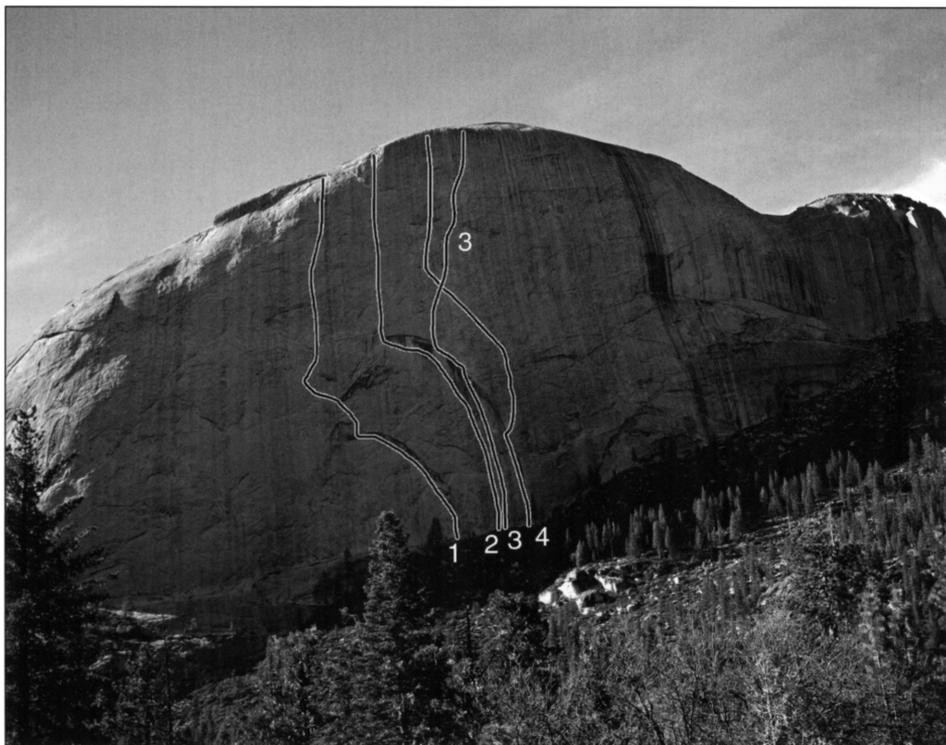


# GROWING UP

*On the south face of Half Dome, Yosemite.*

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DOUG ROBINSON



Half Dome's south face is a mile wide and 2,000 feet high. The routes near Growing Up: (1) Lost Again (5.10 A3+, Eric Kohl solo, 1992); (2) Growing Up (5.13a A0, Sean Jones et. al., 2007); (3) South Face (5.8 A3, Harding-Rowell, 1970); (4) Southern Belle (5.12d with 5.11X, Schultz-Shipley, 1987; FFA: Cosgrove-Schultz, 1988). Based on route lines by Clint Cummins. *Shawn Reeder*

Scaling an icon is tricky. You have to climb through legend to grasp the stone itself. It took me years to see beyond the in-your-face northwest wall of Yosemite's greatest icon, Half Dome. Sean Jones, though, is so over it he calls the northwest face "the dark side."

This is really Sean's story, his stellar new route. But I got deeply involved, maybe over my head. We had both noticed the potential, and been drawn to a new free climb. I set out to film Sean on it, and even before my film ran out of support, I had come under the spell of this bright wall and couldn't walk away. A lot of virtual ink has been spilled over this climb already, if you

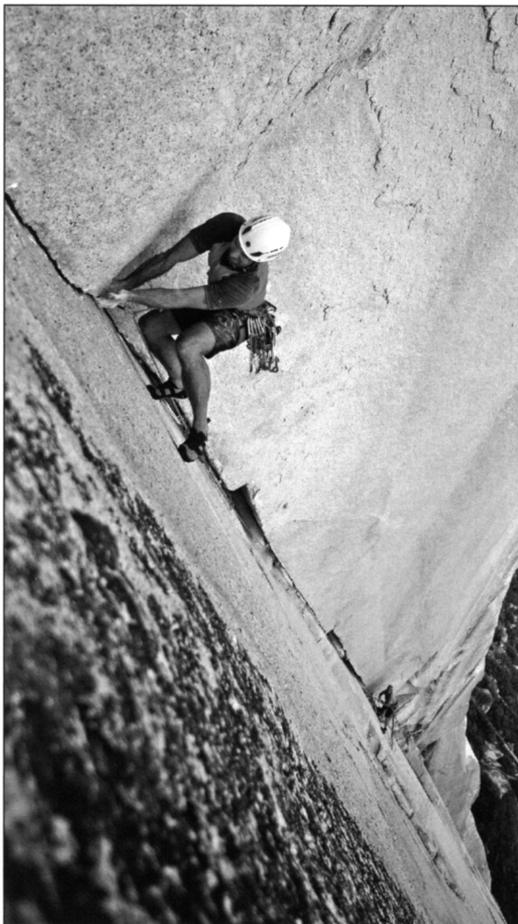
count more words than *War and Peace* on the internet ([www.supertopo.com/climbing/thread.html?topic\\_id=566859](http://www.supertopo.com/climbing/thread.html?topic_id=566859)). The controversy hinged on our decision to rap in from the summit to find a climbable line on the upper wall, and then to put in protection bolts from our rap line. Some climbers got very offended, since Yosemite has always had a staunchly ground-up tradition.

Here in the *American Alpine Journal* climbers usually write their own spray. Even though Sean led the climbing, I'll lay down a few words. For one thing, it gives me a chance to brag about my friend, since Sean flies under the radar in the Valley. Yet he has a remarkable eye for a good line, and more first ascents here (91) than anyone, ever. And I'd like to explain why we bent the Valley's traditional rules along our way up Half Dome's south face.

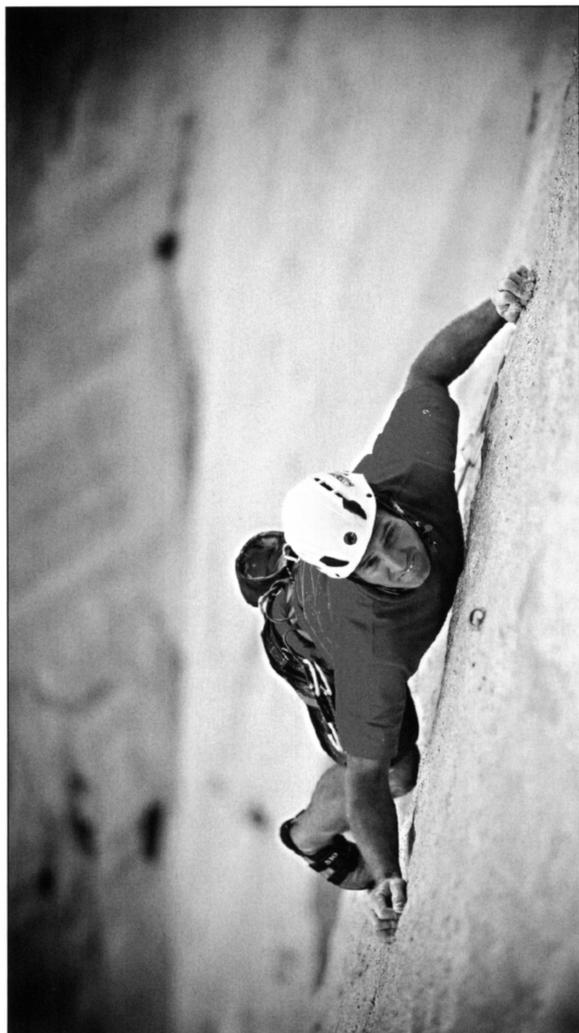
Over on the dark side, the Regular Northwest Face Route, even though streaked with black, still shines. In 1957 it became the first Grade VI in America. "Never had the slightest doubt we'd make it," Jerry Gallwas said last summer during a gathering to mark the fiftieth anniversary of that ascent. He and Don Wilson stood shoulder to shoulder with Royal Robbins at the Yosemite Lodge celebration. Jerry showed off part of their secret: a rack of handmade hard-steel pitons. Fun-loving guys and robust, they have all moved on to big lives beyond climbing.

How many of us have romped up the Northwest Face in their footsteps? Maybe ten thousand. We're the lucky ones. Along the way came all the big-wall firsts. In-a-day: 1966. Solo: same year. All free: '76. And Dean Potter dropped our jaws by soloing with the rope coiled on his back in 2002. I got to join that parade in 1973 for the first hammerless ascent. At that time it was shocking to climb with just stoppers and hexes, but it's boringly normal now (with cams). Still, our first clean ascent slam-dunked a revolution. Environmental action has often been sparked by climbers. John Muir's impetus to make Yosemite a park is an outstanding example. The movement to preserve the rock by climbing clean was interesting because it appealed to climbers not so much as a moral imperative but as an intriguing challenge. It was just plain fun.

As for most of us, the NW Face was my first Grade VI. Always more of a free climber than a wall guy, I felt most proud of leading the Robbins Chimney, flaring, runout, and scary. The



Sean Jones, committed on the crux tips lieback moves on pitch 10, 5.13a. Shawn Reeder



Sean works thin face climbing that hopscotches the porcelain wall right above the lip of the great arch, pitch 15. *Shawn Reeder*

climbing itself is always more core than whatever gets done about protecting it. And free climbing already loomed as the future of our stony practice.

Come around into the southern light; the backside glows. It's a very different wall here. The south face is a mile wide, smooth, and blank. A few dikes crawl down but don't reach the ground. Two arches crack the mirror front and center, hook left and vanish into glass.

Warren Harding first attacked the main arch in 1966, but the eventual first ascent took five tries over half a decade, a trial even for Harding's legendary tenacity, and for the sorcerer's most eager apprentice, Galen Rowell. (Galen loved being "a former second of Warren Harding and Fred Beckey.") Rowell's beginner's camera caught Harding struggling to escape the arch out a double-overhanging corner, "his most strenuous lead" (*Vertical World of Yosemite*). Faced with undulating blankness above, Harding came up with the innovation of bat-hooking: balancing on a filed-down hook in a shallow drilled hole. On one of their attempts, the October surprise of a

fierce snowstorm led to the first-ever big wall rescue, when Royal Robbins spun down out of the summit clouds with a hot thermos and a rope to help Harding and Rowell escape the iced-up face.

In the end their climb left a trail of drilled holes to the summit. Was big-wall climbing growing up or losing its innocence? The drill has, for half a century and more, been the hinge of doubt in climbing. Certainly there would be more drilling, and more ropes from above.

The bright wall's big promise was still to come, because this wall's potential is in free climbing, as one generation's blank face becomes a featured playground for the next. It was well into the 1980s before free climbing made serious inroads onto the main south face. Autobahn (5.11+R, Charles Cole, John Middendorf, and Rusty Reno, 1985) was the opening move. Like

the half-dozen climbs that soon followed, it was a bold statement on exceptional stone.

“Playground,” however, turned out to be far too optimistic. Every one of the new free routes proved hard, sketchy, and serious—R rated at least. Even now they are rarely repeated. Crowning the development, Karma, and the queen of the south face lines, Southern Belle, both crossed the final frontier of boldness to become X-rated. Karma (Jim Campbell, Dave Schultz, and Ken Yager, 1986) has not attracted a second attempt, and the trickle of interest in Southern Belle (established in 1987 by Dave Schultz and Walt Shipley, freed by Schultz and Scott Cosgrove in 1988) has only built its fearsome reputation.

By the time Sean stepped up to the south face in 2007, a deathly calm had settled over the wall; free climbing on it had essentially stopped in 1994. Here was one of the biggest and most beautiful stretches of stone in all of the Valley, and it was just sitting there, ignored. Sure it was a long approach walk, and half hidden. But “out of sight, out of mind” was not the main reason for the quiet. Blame it on the runouts. You could say that the story of free climbing on the backside of Half Dome hinged not on the boldness of its first ascents, but on a July day in 1994, the day Hank Caylor took his sick fall. He dropped 70–80 feet off Southern Belle’s eighth pitch. Such a long fall might be okay on steeper rock. Chris Sharma, for instance, has taken many plummets that long on his limestone cave project out in the Mojave. But he falls into space. Even El Cap is steep enough for clean drops. But this face is only 75 degrees. That’s pretty stout for smearing, but hideously slabby to fall on. Somewhere on his descent Hank’s foot caught on the wall and stopped. When his leg kept going, something had to give. Other foot, other leg too. Imagine rapping out of there on your knees, dangling ankles that crackled. He touched the ground gingerly and started to crawl.

Had boldness on the south face crossed a line and become plain stupid? Both the guys who put up Karma say there is no way they would ever go back. Dave Schultz, forging the FA of Southern Belle with Walt Shipley, led that infamous runout eighth pitch. Returning to free it with Scott Cosgrove, he didn’t want that lead again. Cosgrove stepped up to his proudest lead, but says he’d never go back. John Bachar and Peter Croft both turned around below that point. The Belle waited 18 years for a successful second ascent, by Leo Houlding and Dean Potter. Potter later told me he had been scared. Certainly no offense to any of them, then, if some of us find it a waste of a big swath of lovely stone. Maybe there’s another way....

Boldness is something I’ve always admired and often pushed. Just the other day in Bishop I heard that someone had backed off one of my runout leads from 1970, Smokestack on the Wheeler Crest. Sean, too, had put up a 5.11 slab route with a scrape-off-all-your-skin, 100-foot runout—on a slab across the San Joaquin River from Balloon Dome. But then he thought better of what he’d done, and he went back to retro-drill a few more bolts onto his route for the benefit of future climbers.

But we’re getting ahead of the story here, talking about the golden headwall high on the south face. Lets return to the ground, back to early spring 2007, crunching over a ribbon of snow along the base of the wall. Back to Sean’s vision of an all-new, all-free line up the south face. Back to searching for a first step up onto the Dome. It wasn’t obvious where to start. First try, he got 60 feet up slabs and then shut down. Sean’s second try freed five beautiful pitches up Harding and Rowell’s classic aid line before hitting a pitch that was grainy and way harder—if it could be freed at all.

Pause to glance at the guidebook. A route line on a photo turns out to be misplaced. Walk in under that main arch. It’s huge in there, and complex with three major crack systems.

Southern Belle starts up the right one. The central cracks are the original South Face Route. The left system, in spite of being fingered by the misplaced ink, was unclimbed. What a gift. Sean headed up that line of stark and wonderful cracks, where the giant arch meets the main wall of the Dome.

The climbing was as clean as it gets. No munge, no grass, no grit. Just polished, flinty, square-cut corners that gradually leaned left, pressing harder on his right shoulder the higher he went. This was the business; the climbing seemed to run about 5.12 on every pitch. Finally, with the crack closing down to a tips layback, the corner leaning terminally outward at its arched top, and the slab dropping oddly away underfoot, the route cruxed on its tenth pitch at 5.13a.

With the arch now a looming overhang and the crack pinched out, serendipity struck. A few feet down an easy ramp led to a dike. The dike was burly at 5.11+, but kept going for two pitches (with a spot of A0), clear out past the end of the arch. Three months into his south face project, Sean was finally poised on the brink of the golden headwall. This was both a celebration and a problem.

Spending so long up there, Sean ran through many loyal partners. Robbie Borchard, Jake Jones, and Ben Montoya all worked hard on the wall before being recalled to their lives below. I had my own problems. By the time summer rolled around my movie project had fizzled and tendonitis in an elbow reduced my wall time to drill-monkey status. Now we were squarely confronted, not only by the headwall itself, its stone scalloped into shallow dishes rather than edges, but by the beyond-bold climbing ethos that held a stranglehold on the entire south face.

Our next move has been debated hotly and endlessly, in Yosemite and on the Web. Partly because Half Dome is an icon, and its history matters. Partly because we were up-front about what we'd done. But ropes have been dropping in from above on Valley walls for decades, especially on El Cap ever since the free-climbing gold rush began there in the 1990s. Coming in from above is a handy tactic, after all, for spying on free climbing potential, and maybe for slipping in some pro that would be useful later. In many ways, *Growing Up* just became a lightning rod for a lot of half-hidden behavior that had actually been skulking around our beloved gulch for decades. We poked at the campfire, squirmed in our beach chairs, popped another set of beers, and dove back into discussing our thorny predicament. First of all, we didn't have a clue which direction to climb. Crack systems lead you clearly, but hard slabs confuse, because sometimes you can't see the next move even when it's in front of your face. We had already been confronted by the tendency of this wall to blank out, beginning with Sean's first foray off the ground. By now we had seen it so often we were starting to call it "the fortress effect." So we hesitated to simply forge out onto the upper slabs, which risked putting up a route that blanked out in a sea of porcelain: bolts to nowhere.

If you could even get in a bolt. As slab climbing goes, this wall is way steep and way slippery. It's hard to find a stance to drill from, and even hook placements to aid the drilling (hooks have been considered acceptable style ever since the Bachar-Yerian in Tuolumne) were rare on this scalloped terrain lacking in edges. All this had already been highlighted by the existing routes—and by how few routes actually existed.

We flatly rejected putting up another near-death runout like the other routes on the wall to date. That's a dead end. With no one willing to accept such a mortal gauntlet, climbing on this great wall would continue to wither away to nothing. Sean had a better idea, one that has opened the beauty of the south face to be climbed a little more often, as it deserves. But it would



High on the golden headwall, Sean enjoys easier climbing with killer views of Little Yosemite Valley and the Clark Range. *Shawn Reeder*

require a change in ethos, an evolution in style, which is a bitter pill in a Valley steeped in tradition. Including a thousand feet of it, freshly climbed beneath our heels.

Finally, we sighed, loaded our packs with fixed rope, hiked to the top, and dropped in to find the line, and then to drill the bolts. And what a sweet line we found! At times there were barely a scattering of holds weaving through the porcelain. Especially traversing right, above the lip of the arch, where sometimes a divot broken out of mirrored polish formed the tenuous line onward. That stretch came in at 5.11c. Even so, it demanded another 60 feet of A0. We were thankful that we explored, because it saved us from bolting our original vision of where the route would go, one that fizzled out after two pitches. That would have left the pollution of a line of bolts to nowhere.

On a wall loaded with dikes, we found only one on this upper slab, but it's such a beauty we started calling that pitch the "Mini-Snake Dike." It was surprisingly moderate at 5.10c. The climbing stayed consistently good, and consistently hard with sustained 5.10 and 5.11, leading to a 5.11d move that turned out to be the crux of the upper slabs. There's more noticeable texture up high, but it's hard to grasp, and would have been daunting to try to drill from stances.

Sarah Watson became Sean's final partner on the route. Sarah had only been climbing two years, but the former gymnast went hard-core desert rat and hung out for weeks at a time in Indian Creek, honing her jamming skills. Her first day on Half Dome, Sarah led hard 5.11 pitches down under the arch. Then a sprained ankle confined her to couch surfing while Sean



Sarah Watson romps up the Mini Snake Dike pitch, 5.10c. This 200-foot dike was the only clear feature on the thousand-foot upper headwall. *Shawn Reeder*

and I hand-drilled on the upper wall. But with the ankle fully taped, she joined Sean for the final send on July 28.



This Valley has a staunch tradition. I like that, have loudly upheld it, and contributed my share. But it's also a tradition that has been breached many times over recent decades, first by sport climbs on short cliffs, and lately on nearly every newly freed line on El Cap Done, but not much talked about. Somehow, by just plainly saying what we were up to, we became the whipping boys for shadowy behavior by most of the leading activists. Suddenly I went from the father of clean climbing to an evil rap-bolter. I don't mind drawing the heat, but a lot of folks see only black and white. Growing Up is not an ideological repudiation of ground-up style, not open season to grid-bolt the Valley. Rather, it came from listening to the stone itself, taking a cue from the can't-stance-to-drill-and-can't-even-hook nature of this particular piece of terrain.

Have I mentioned that it's drop-dead gorgeous up there? And private? Even hanging out in the

ponderosa forest at the base. A mile east of the south face, hundreds of people a day went up the cables on the east shoulder. Half a mile west they cue up for the Snake Dike on the west shoulder. On the south face, though, we didn't see a single visitor in four months of coming and going. Up on the wall there is a spread-eagle view of the high country. The rock is oh-so-clean. Squeaky clean. Slippery polished crystalline clean. It's a brilliant surface to be poised upon, and it had been locked away from the common enjoyment for too long.

I'm sorry to take up so much of this good community's time and attention talking about ropes from above and how bolts get placed. It distracts our attention from the climb itself, which in the end is what really matters. This whole dispute over how bolts are placed is badly skewed, as if the experience of the first ascent party matters more than how it feels for the thousands who come along after. But Sean and I would rather focus on these people, the ones who

will actually climb the route. As an example, take the proud and wonderful Snake Dike around the corner. There is no counting how many people have romped up its unlikely dike, generously littered with holds, which offers the only reasonable climbing on the face—come to think of it, it's the only popularly accessible free climbing on the entire monolith of Half Dome. Surely hundreds of thousands of us have climbed it. My life is richer for having climbed Snake Dike, and I've spewed about how cool the moves are to hundreds of people. Does it really matter how it was for those guys who put up this route back in the Iron Age? Growing Up opens a similar experience to a lot of climbers. Sure, it's far harder, but times change. Evolution happens.

I get increasingly anti-elitist about climbing. It is such a profound experience—changing my life over and over—that I believe more climbers climbing more will help tilt our troubled planet in a better direction. In that context, a bit of crowding on occasional routes is hardly worth whining about. We're not going to have a planet to quibble about saving unless a few more people start having the experiences that motivate us to love this fragile skim of life clinging to our stony sphere, and to help preserve it. Maybe this is a way for climbing to actually become less of a selfish, elitist pastime. Not that selfish is bad. It's actually essential. The pursuit of such intense personal experience is at the heart of our solitary transformations. And only by such growing up as individuals can we come together into a more profound environmental force.

Growing Up: the line speaks for itself. Go climb it. And then, if you feel slighted, tell us it's not worth it. Sean calls this the finest climb he's ever established. I think even among the modern standards being forged on El Cap, this is Yosemite's climb of the year. Now it's your turn. Climb it if you can, or even rap in from above to sample some of the final slabs. The climbing up there is not like anything else in the Valley or in Tuolumne. It's hard, beautiful stone. And it's accessible: runout beyond sport climbing but definitely not a death route. In the end, bucking tradition seemed worth it to us. But the resulting line is what matters. The route belongs to you now. You decide. As Dylan Thomas said, "The function of posterity is to look after itself." The matter is out of our hands.

#### SUMMARY

AREA: California, Yosemite Valley.

ASCENT: Half Dome, south face, Growing Up (21 pitches, VI, 5.13a, A0). Sean Jones, Robbie Borchard, Jake Jones, Ben Montoya, Sarah Watson, April–July, 2007.

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Doug Robinson has seen plenty of revolutions in 50 years of climbing. Called the father of clean climbing, he also assisted Yvon Chouinard's ice climbing revolution, and co-wrote Climbing Ice. His route Dark Star is the longest alpine climb in the Sierra. He was the founding president of the American Mountain Guides Association, and he likes to challenge clients. Doug's book A Night on the Ground, A Day in the Open has been called "John Muir meets Jack Kerouac," and his video Moving Over Stone became the best-selling "rock video" of all time. Doug's Half Dome movie still awaits funding.*