

Long, Difficult Free Climbing

MAX JONES

IN RECENT YEARS the free-climbing level in the United States has risen dramatically, and, as always, climbers are looking for new places to test their skills. The small cliffs have long been the home of the extremely desperate routes, but they have only so much to offer as a climbing experience. The fluidity of climbing all day is broken when hopping from one short climb to another. Long free climbs in Yosemite Valley, where one works all day to climb a 600- to 2000-foot face, offer a special feeling of accomplishment that a one-pitch route even of extreme difficulty or beauty cannot match. Most long climbs used to be day cruises with maybe one or two hard pitches that would not be very difficult if on the ground. They are a very enjoyable way to spend a day. A few climbs, however, challenged this early stereotype. Jim Bridwell, Ron Kauk, Jon Bachar and Dale Bard's (alias Bridwell & Co.) *Freestone*, on the Geek towers, is a powerful route. With its scary and delicate lower-face pitches that lead to a very ominous and difficult 5.11 first and off-width pitch, it still repels strong parties. *Hot line*, a very fine six-pitch route with some aid on the first pitch, went free to Kauk and Bachar. The 5.11+ to 5.12 finger traverse put one of the harder pitches in the valley on a long climb. The *Steck-Salathé* and the *Northeast Corner* of Higher Cathedral Rock, test pieces of their time, still wear out climbers (who say 800 feet of chimneys and off-widths are easy).

When Bachar, Kauk, and John Long got together and managed to free the *East Face* of Washington's Column, climbers were astounded that so many top standard pitches were done in a row on one climb. The two 5.11+, three 5.11 and five 5.10 pitches made this the hardest climb in the Valley to complete in a day, while still being one of the best. They were criticized by purists, however, for jümaring pitches when seconding because free climbs are usually seconded free. These thoughts were silenced the next year when both Kauk and Bachar on separate days each led every pitch of the climb free with a second jümaring. A new

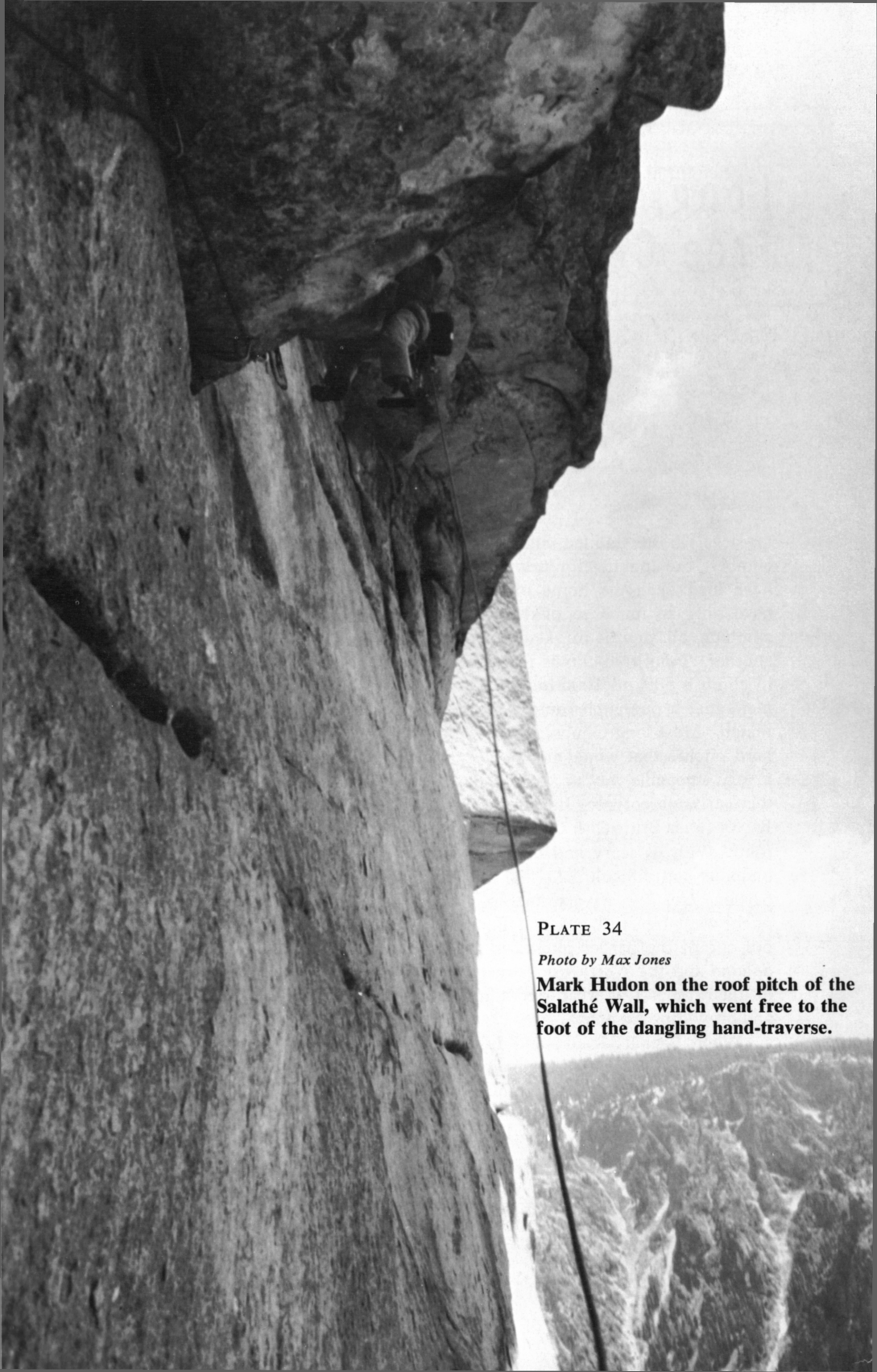


PLATE 34

Photo by Max Jones

Mark Hudon on the roof pitch of the Salathé Wall, which went free to the foot of the dangling hand-traverse.

PLATE 35

Photo by Max Jones

**Mark Hudon leading the crux on the
Third Pitch of Astroman, Yosemite.**



type of free climb had emerged: long, desperate, sustained, and free. Climbers now had other places to go to find pitches of extreme difficulty other than on the shorter cliffs. *The Rostrum* went free with two 5.11 pitches and many strenuous 5.10 pitches, but the final headwall was bypassed because at that time it was too horrendous to look at. When Ray Jardine freed the pitch, he opened the door to a new super route . . . 1200 feet of very steep, strenuous 5.10 and 5.11 climbing to a very exposed 5.12+ roof/headwall pitch. It's only a matter of time before this whole route is climbed free in one day. Sixty feet of aid remained on three pitches of the *Crucifix*, an already stout route with 5.10 and 5.10+ chimneys, off-widths, and fist cracks. Four moves still don't go, but Mark Hudon and I managed to free the top two pitches which involve some wild 5.11+ stemming and thin cracks. This top section, along with Bill Price's direct start, *Mary's Tears*, makes it probably the most difficult day in the Valley with its four 5.11 or 5.11+ pitches and everything else solid strenuous 5.10.

What of the larger than one-day routes, the Grade VIs? For years Jim Ericson and Art Higbee worked on Half Dome and they finally found a free way, only to be stopped on the second-to-last pitch. Ericson thought he saw a way that might go and wanted to come back, but they were beaten to their prize by Leonard Coyne. He climbed it free while doing the route with two friends who just wanted to climb the aid route. Mark and I decided to try to free El Cap by the line of least resistance, the *Salathé Wall*. The lower thousand feet had gone free but the top 2000 feet was at least still half aid. We climbed the route free except for 250 feet, some 100 feet of which were wet and had already been climbed free. All the other aid was in the Headwall area and four moves at the top of the pitch above the Ear. The climbing produced three 5.12 pitches (two have aid at the end of the pitch) and many excellent 5.11 and 5.11+ pitches. A very enjoyable way to do a classic route. At about this same time, Jardine scoped the *West Face* of El Cap and climbed the first seven pitches free. A friend (no pun intended) had told him that if he could get that far, it would all go. So, with two pitches fixed, he teamed up with Bill Price and climbed the face in a day and completely free. The first free Grade VI on El Cap. It's an excellent route with, surprisingly enough, only a couple of extremely difficult pitches. The regular route on Quarter Dome, up the Tenya Canyon, looked like a good free prospect. Mark and I spent one night on the route and freed the entire face, but we had to free-climb around three aid pitches. *Pegasus* (the free route on Quarter Dome), to our surprise, was mostly moderate 5.9 to 5.10 with a couple of harder 5.10 pitches plus two 5.12 pitches (the *All Time Nail Up* or now rather the *All Time Finger Crack* and the two-bolt pitch that followed).

People must wonder what a 5.12 pitch is like when you are up on a wall, and if it's really 5.12. They're not much different from on the

PLATE 36

Photo by Max Jones

**Hudon on the 5:10a off-width pitch on
the Rostrum, Yosemite.**





PLATE 37

Photo by Max Jones

**Hudson on a steep 5:10b pitch on the
Crucifix, Yosemite.**

ground. My opinion is that most of them would be 5.12 on the ground (or maybe a B5.10 or B1 boulder problem). The ethics of doing the pitch and calling it free are the same, meaning when it is done free, it is done in one push from the belay or a good rest. The protection is placed on one of these pushes and not after hanging. Most of these 5.12 pitches took Mark and me a few tries, so the protection is yo-yoed higher by the same person because it is too complicated and slow to pull the ropes and switch ends (not to mention, too scary). The leader must watch, however, for when he gets more than half a rope-length out; he can't lower down after that. If he comes off and can't lower to a rest, that's where the free pitch ends. This happened on the *Salathé* Headwall. I had lowered off once, then climbed to a point about 25 feet from the belay and fell and hung. Then, I free aided to the belay. It's free to 25 feet below the belay.

The next project Mark and I attempted was the south face of Mount Watkins. (Who could resist after seeing Mount Watkins from Quarter Dome?) Mount Watkins almost went free in two days at 5.11+ to 5.12 with only nine moves of aid, five in the bolts, two on the last pitch, and two pendulums. The cruxes were where we went right around the crux aid section off Sheraton Watkins, a scary pitch, and the thin arch-to-pendulum pitch below the pedestal. It's one of the most scenic and enjoyable walls I've ever climbed.

With all these walls going mostly free, the possibilities for free climbing on other walls seem endless. Jardine has climbed to Camp Four on the Nose all free (he found ways around the pendulums and climbed the Grape Race for a few pitches) and thinks the great roof will go free. Well, good luck. It will be an awesome route if it goes. Yosemite is not the only place with big walls. A few excellent routes have been freed on the Diamond on Longs Peak in Colorado. D7 (V 5.11+) was freed by Bachar. It's one of the finest rock routes I've ever climbed and the location can't be beaten. There are also many excellent but different Grade Vs in Colorado's Black Canyon of the Gunnison. The Sierras have many big rock faces. Mount Conness and Keeler Needle go free. Fairview Dome in Tuolumne Meadows boasts four free Grade Vs, the finest of which is Vern Clevenger's new addition, *Heart of Stone* (5.11+). It's one of the best sustained long face climbs around, with its long fingertip layback as the crux.

With all the rock that's out there, who knows what other huge faces lurk in the wilds of the United States, not to mention the World?