

# Method and Madness

## Evolution of Yosemite Face-Climbing Standards

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WHILE NOT AS strenuous as some cracks, Yosemite granite face-climbing is an equally demanding technical and intellectual discipline. John Gill is said to have switched from granite to sandstone bouldering because microflakes damaged the tips of his fingers too much. Light weight, large bones, and early youth seem prerequisites to counteract the inevitable advance of arthritis and tendonitis. Like Olympic gymnasts, face climbers flower at seventeen. A crack is a natural feature of the rock that can yield to a strictly purist approach, but face-climbing, by its very nature, is based on innovation. Extraordinary means serve to achieve extraordinary ends. Most new cracks can be ascended by a competent party equipped with a standard hardware selection. However, like any other aesthetic artifact, a virgin face line exists more in the mind of its first ascensionist, a projection of the living human imagination on the possibilities dormant in the features and weaknesses of the stone. The number and varieties of potentially great cracks are eternally fixed, the number and kinds of face-climbs infinite. There is only one *Tales of Power*, although there exists an almost unlimited potential for one-pitch face-climbs along the base of Glacier Point Apron and Middle Cathedral Rock.

Yet in order to avoid the spectacle of sandwiching hundreds of trivial lines between one another—as has already occurred at Tahquitz and Suicide Rocks in Southern California—it becomes necessary to adopt some criteria for new route selection. Fortunately, the process of historical development within Yosemite itself defines how significant new face-climbs will be created in the future. Choice of number, location, and method of bolt placement may determine varying degrees of commitment, difficulty, and style, but the importance of such choices is relative to how they deepen and extend a fixed number of older traditions.

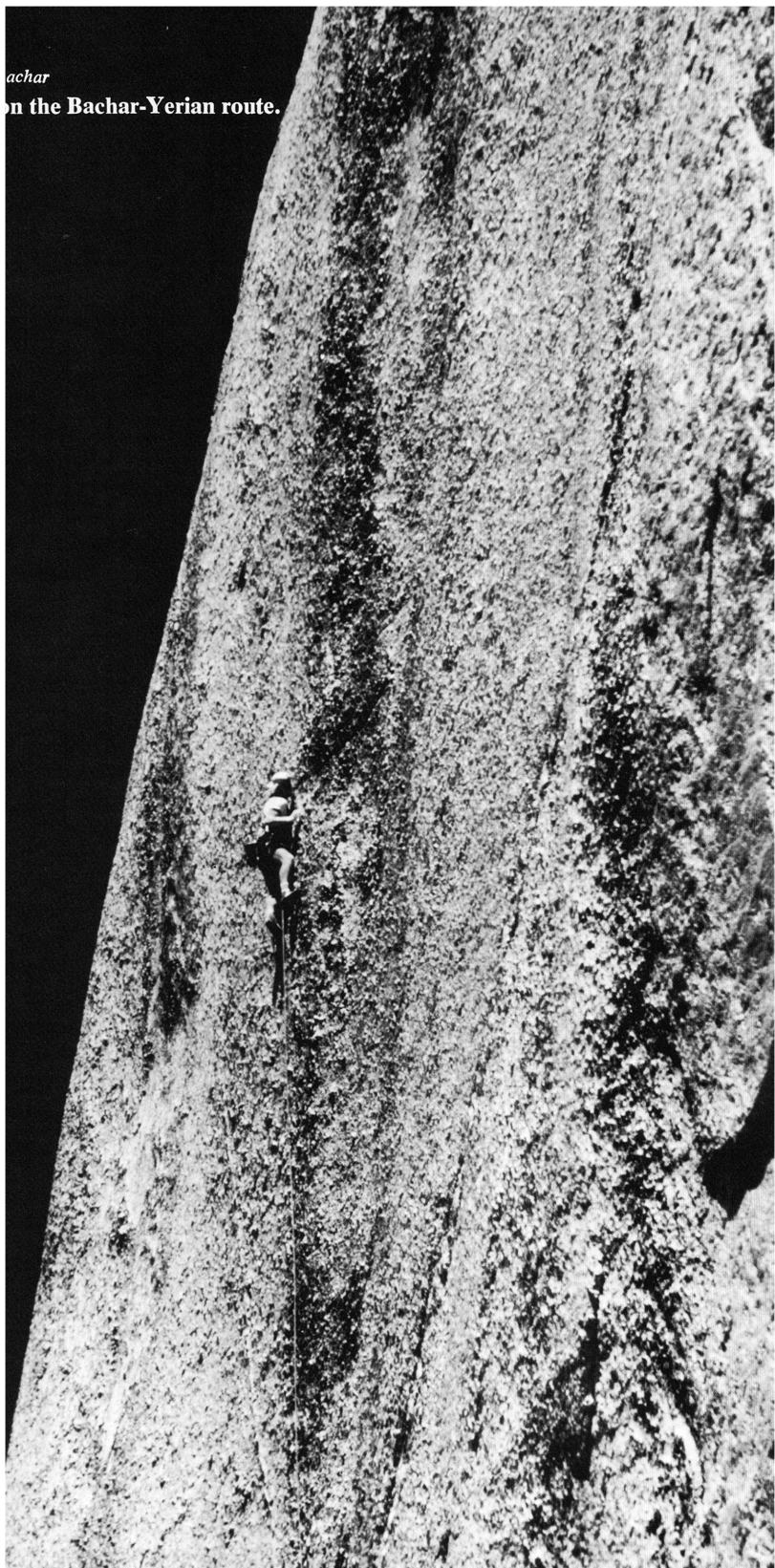
The two most prevalent of these traditions involve a commitment to either maximum technical difficulty or maximum terror. The first

emerged in the relatively exotic atmosphere of Tuolumne Meadows, the second is something of a native Valley product. However, for several reasons, it is very difficult to combine both successfully at once. 5.12 or 5.13 may be very difficult, but never extremely bold. At the top of the standard, boldness very quickly becomes lethal and, therefore, considering the amount of training needed to achieve that level of ability, extremely self-limiting, not to mention self-destructive. Ironically, though, boldness can sometimes result from force of contrast. Whenever you descend from well-protected 5.12 to ordinary 5.11, longer run-outs seem far easier than previously. For example, *Brass Knuckles* on Lower Cathedral Rock, at a modest 5.11d, has never been repeated simply because Chris Cantwell put it up as a tension release immediately after completing the most difficult crux pitches on the *Hall of Mirrors*. On the other hand, if good drill stances are passed up simply to make a route more committing, the crux moves, no matter how frightening, are never as hard as they might be if better protected. Ideally, and on the better routes produced according to this mode, the necessity for a long run-out and the availability of drill stances should coincide. This second tradition at its best is epitomized by the one-man, one-pitch, no-turning-back ethic of Kauk, Worrell, and Meyers that has resulted in the very economical bolt placements of such routes as *Space Babble*, *Quicksilver*, and *Orange Peel* on Middle Cathedral Rock. However, where possible syntheses exist between these apparently contradictory historical systems, Yosemite face-climbing is destined to make its most important future advances.

In Tuolumne Meadows, the jeweled lotus of the Sierra granite world, face-climbing was free to evolve outside the paranoid Valley mainstream and so developed methods of ascent that would finally push the standards of microflake edging higher than if some self-appointed "ethics committee" were watching. Here, at the present moment, and for many years past, aesthetic considerations have displaced most questions of style. With a few noteworthy exceptions, including *Grey Ghost*, *Uh-Huh*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, the goal has remained the construction of a line of technical difficulty at almost any price. "How can a route be worthwhile unless 'questionable methods' were employed on its first ascent?", asks notorious local Claud Fiddler. After all, can temporal ethics ever be successfully reconciled with a mandate to extend contemporary standards beyond the limits of the merely human? Like Pantanjali's *Yogasutra*, the moves on a difficult face-climb should outline the mystical steps toward achieving a deathless super-consciousness.

First of many "atrocities" to grace the Tuolumne scene, as well as one of the first 5.11a's, was the late Tim Harrison's *Handjive* on Lembert Dome. Put up with bolts already preplaced on rappel, the route was chopped a few years later by an indignant Tim Higgins, then just as self-righteously replaced by Dale Bard, Bob Locke, and others in the

*Bachar*  
on the Bachar-Yerian route.



style of the original 1972 ascent, that is, entirely on rappel. It was felt that the popular and self-reliant Harrison, who once hitchhiked alone from Los Angeles up U.S. 395 with a teardrop trailer, deserved a fitting memorial. Of course, the real point is not how or why the route was put up, but rather the impact of *Handjive* on the pace of free-climbing activity. After memorizing its well-protected crux moves, the next generation of apprentice leaders were now mentally prepared to begin to conceive of lines of equal or higher standards of difficulty.

Certainly the most prolific of this next generation was Vern Clevenger. Three of his best routes, *Golden Bars*, *Pièce de Résistance*, and *Dreams*, all completed during the middle 70s, were precedent setting. With persistence and grim determination, Vern battled his way up *Golden Bars* in a cold and windy June of 1975. No one will ever know for sure whether he drilled all the bolts strictly on the lead; however, most of his stances were of such high caliber, they provided examples of what could and would be done later on even more demanding routes. But Clevenger could not ignore his own lessons, which he had already employed in an even more rarefied context on *Pièce de Résistance*. About six hundred feet above the deck on Fairview Dome is a hard, but short, section of steep, polished granite. Here, where Higgins and Kamps had met defeat, Clevenger and Bob Harrington eventually prevailed. Over the course of one long day in 1974, the pair drilled, bolted, and fell their way up the *Pièce* pitch, sticking miraculously to some of the hardest drill stances then yet achieved. Only one bolt—but they would never say which one—was supposedly drilled on aid. Then, in 1976, came *Dreams* (*Screams*). For the first time in Yosemite, a free face route had begun to approach 5.12, even if that move itself was almost protected from overhead, thanks to Harrington's six-foot-five-inch frame.

Clevenger's achievement had an almost immediate impact. Within a surprisingly brief space of time, certain tendencies had appeared that would eventually make possible longer, grade-six free climbs. Clevenger had, first of all, demonstrated a willingness to cheat selectively in order to produce a route that would form an artistically satisfying whole. Yo-yoing was proper; a bolt or two on aid was all right; bending the rules in certain situations was acceptable as long as it extended the upper range of the free-climbing spectrum. Also, as his routes approached well-protected 5.12 difficulty, the borders of the leading imagination were appreciably stretched. In addition, it now became necessary to reckon drill stances into a climb's overall rating. Once one realizes it can take over twenty minutes of calf-searing torture to stand and drill a good bolt, *Golden Bars* appears a much more serious undertaking than formerly.

The methods promulgated by Clevenger were now transplanted to the Valley and employed with renewed success, particularly on Glacier Point Apron. Since most Apron climbers were schooled in Tuolumne,



the transition was not all that difficult. But the challenge was on a much larger scale. Routes like *Tightrope* or *Mother's Lament* may be regarded as approaches, tentative false starts toward engaging the great headwall that separates the upper from the lower Apron around the nine-hundred-foot level. Here the angle of the polished slabs increases markedly, as does the difficulty of the climbing. It was the avowed intention on the *Hall of Mirrors* to confront this problem directly and ascend it by strictly free-climbing means, never resorting to bolt ladders or hooks.

The history of the *Hall of Mirrors* is now fairly well known. Between 1976 and September 1980, the route grew by a process of accretion, countless attempts by different teams involving various and often enough conflicting personalities. However, for the sake of convenience, the growth of the route may be divided into three distinct stages, dominated, in succession, by the skills and philosophies of three different prime motivators, Mark Wilford, Dave Austin, and Chris Cantwell. Every advance up the wall was likewise preceded by some major change in equipment, technique, or strategy. These include siege climbing from portaledge, the provisional use of aid chains, and the appearance of the Galibier "Contact" shoe, with its softer, more malleable, and adhesive rubber.

During the drought of 1976-77, Mark Wilford of Colorado Springs established the route's first two pitches, titling his effort *The Opening of Misty Beethoven*, after a highly overrated, though somewhat programmatic, pornographic film. After such an ambitious beginning, it is not clear why he stopped so soon. But the route is highly temperamental at best, and its conditions were undoubtedly at their greasiest after a scorching, bone-dry summer. By self-admission, Wilford had never friction climbed before either. He had no way of knowing in advance that using chalk would increase the rating of the second pitch several additional grades. So, the hypothetical third pitch must have appeared impossible, although it was to be rated finally only 5.10a.

It was at this point that Dave Austin decided to administer a salutary dose of technical hygiene. Backed by experience he had gained on *A Mother's Lament*, Austin realized the use of chalk was anathema to advanced foonting\* because the particles that fell down from his hands destroyed adhesion between shoe rubber and the smooth rock surface. After recruiting Chris Cantwell and me from the Lodge parking lot, Austin now added pitches three through eight to a route renamed the *Hall of Mirrors*. Even with the aid of fixed ropes and siege tactics, however, we were unable to complete the *Unfinished Ninth*, a pitch that was eventually to be rated 5.12b.

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\* *Foonting* is a technical Yosemite term used in friction climbing. It involves "smearing" on high-angle slabs while rapidly "padding" upward, moving up, in essence, faster than moving back down.

Accompanied at one time or another by either Scott Cole or Scott Burk, Cantwell took over the lead. In the fall of 1979 he had obtained a prototype pair of "Contacts," a new softer rubber shoe by Galibier that permitted better friction on higher-angle stone. He finished the *Ninth* and, over the next year, undaunted by storms and earthquakes, pushed the route up to the base of the 13th pitch. Here he decided, after drilling a few miraculous bolts up a nearly vertical prow, that a bolt ladder was finally necessary.

However, when Austin accompanied Cantwell up the fixed lines to this new high point, there was disagreement. Austin believed that following a ramp a few feet to the right would have eliminated the need for a ladder. Drilling could have been accomplished from all-natural stances, Austin argued. But in order to make the line harder for the sake of difficulty as an end in itself, Cantwell had refused to compromise with the natural rock environment and, instead, had deliberately chosen to construct a pre-placed "free ladder" up what he referred to as the "line of strength." Feeling such tactics were unconscionable, Austin elected to drop out. Still, Cantwell persevered. After freeing the *13th*, at a tentative 5.13 standard, he went on to add two more hard pitches before intercepting the *Coonyard to Rim* route. On this final push, in September 1980, Scott Burk was his partner.

Before they were freed, Half Dome and the west face of El Capitan had been conventional aid routes for over twenty years. The rationale behind freeing the northwest face of Half Dome was based on the fact that it was America's first grade six. But *Hall of Mirrors* was the first time a Yosemite grade six had been conceived of as a free climb from its inception. However, it is especially significant that the Cantwell-Austin break underscores the conflicting face-climbing traditions that were introduced at the start of this article. Cantwell wished to maximize difficulty by constructing a well-protected free line, while Austin wished to preserve boldness by following the natural line of greatest weakness.

At first glance, any functional bridge between conflicting viewpoints seems illusory. This is the case unless it is recalled that its goals have become ambiguous the more distant, the more abstracted rock climbing grows from the older summit-oriented sport of mountaineering. Means have replaced ends to such a degree that Ray Jardine feels justified sculpting holds and preplacing protection across the *King Swing* on the El Capitan Nose route, simply in order to make that particular section go free. Furthermore, the scene as a defining subject area has become so dominant that personal self-worth has begun to be measured exclusively in terms of the free-climbing standard at which an individual performs. This social morality of the letter grade is, I am afraid, more than most are willing to admit, one of the major forces driving the standard upward.

PLATE 17

*Photo by John Bachar*

**Chiseled holds and pre-  
placed bolts on the Nose,  
EL CAPITAN.**



But despite the egotism and paranoia, it does seem quite possible to utilize more sophisticated means of protection placement while preserving an open-ended, summit-directed leading experience. The Bachar/Yerian route on Medlicott Dome in Tuolumne Meadows provides an example of such a productive crossover. What few protection bolts there are were placed by means of a hook, which is standard practice in Dresden where Bachar encountered it on a European visit. Such an arrangement allows the leader to move up confronting virgin territory while making independent decisions about length of run-out. This is a more adventurous tactic than beginning a route at the top and placing protection in advance on rappel. (Still, it should be kept in mind that preplacement, as long as the original number of bolts is never increased, does have the advantage of avoiding yo-yoing, sieging, and the drilling of bolt ladders.) Nevertheless, the bolt placements on the Bachar/Yerian, besides being very exciting in their own right, remove any doubt about the route being only an ambitious boulder problem. Bachar did exercise a fine critical judgment when placing protection, and the route now exists as an independent entity to be repeated by subsequent parties according to a pattern established by its first ascensionists.

There definitely are other alternatives to bolt ladders, as well, such as mixed-media events where the methods of advanced aid and free-climbing are combined. A leader nails an A5 seam until it blanks out on a face. While hanging off his last placement, say a copperhead, he drills a short hole for a 1/2-inch machine bolt using a filed-down drill in the interest of speed. Next, he places a 3/8-inch compression-type shield and frees the face above at 5.12 or 5.13, though still carrying along an extremely light aid rack—a few copperheads, rurps, and hooks. Whenever freeing becomes impractical, he simply places a piece and continues on at A5, backed up by the 3/8-inch and machine head clipped in tandem.

Such futuristic projects are indeed possible when the intrinsic character of the climb and the experience of climbing upward are more important than establishing an identity within the social scene. One can make a personal choice to employ sophisticated tactics, not to denigrate the *King Swing* to a letter grade, but rather in order to experience a higher level of adventure on the sharp end of the rope. For the separation of the technical means from the summit-directed goal does possess one great positive virtue—absolute existential freedom. Short of actually damaging the rock medium, the individual is finally free to determine what kind of climbing experience he wants to have. It is to be hoped that such radical flexibility, coupled with a strong sense of personal integrity and respect for the rock, will provide innovative, but still valid, solutions to such last great face-climbing problems as *The Rat Wall* or the East Slabs of Mount Watkins.