Free, Fast and Clean

The future of Yosemite climbing

BY CHRIS MACNAMARA

On a brisk fall night on the top of El Capitan, Eric Sloan and I sat huddled around a fire, warming our bones after a day of replacing bolts on the top of the Big Stone. Out of the darkness stepped Jim Bridwell, who had just topped out on the *Wyoming Sheep Ranch*. He sat down next to the fire, lit a cigarette and, at our prodding, eased into a tale or two from the 1960s and '70s.

Here was a man who owned a decade of climbing history—and he was still ticking off Grade Sixers. Eric and I were impressed. As the night grew long, we asked him questions and he spun out answers while the fire lit up the pine trees and kept the cold at bay. Among other things, we both wondered how his recent ascents compared with the ultra classics he had put up in his heyday.

"What do you think of wall climbing in Yosemite today?" I asked.

Jim was quick to respond.

"Yosemite is dead," Jim said. "The future of wall climbing is in the big mountains."

These were not words I wanted to hear, and I wanted him to take them back. But the godfather of big-wall climbing had spoken. Whatever disagreement I may have had was withheld as I nodded my head in agreement. The conversation continued as Jim talked about an incredible unclimbed face on Nuptse that others deemed suicidal. I was in awe of his boldness, which threaded such a fine line between vision and insanity. As the fire died down and we went to sleep, I tried to accept Jim's words about the future of Yosemite—tried to convince myself that I should spend my time in more exotic parts of the world. But in the end, I could not.

For me, Yosemite is very much alive. Granted, it may not be the same as in years past when Bridwell put up his epic ascents, but I believe Yosemite Valley today is vibrant and growing, and that its future will be an exciting one—different, of course, than it has been, but new and challenging in its own singular way.

As every serious climber knows, Yosemite is not just a beautiful place, a grand place or a special place. It is a sacred place, the place where, for decades, the world's greatest climbers have embellished upon the history of the sport. From putting up the first Grade VI climbs in the world, to making leaps in free climbing standards, to devising enormous equipment advances, Valley climbers have always explored new realms. As a result, Yosemite has been the single most influential area within the world of rock climbing. In my view, it will continue to maintain this place in climbing's future.

For nearly 40 years, the chief lure of Yosemite and the measure of its greatness was first ascents. From the landmark first ascents of Half Dome and El Capitan, Yosemite was propelled forward as the world's leader in ingenuity and boldness on rock. The extreme commitment needed for the first ascents of the *Muir* and *Salathé* walls shattered what was thought possible on the big routes. Once climbers were sure they could climb El Cap in good style, the challenge lay in finding the most difficult line. This challenge was found on routes like the *North America Wall*, which in turn paved the way for extreme aid climbs such as the *Pacific Ocean Wall* and *Sea of Dreams*. Indeed, nearly every first ascent in Yosemite seemed to make an enormous contribution to the climbing world.

Yet if we continue to gauge Yosemite's pulse by first ascents, then it is indeed in trouble. Veteran climbers have for years said that there are no new lines left in Yosemite. Still, every year, new wall routes are put up. While some recent first ascents such as *The Reticent Wall* offer brilliant nailing in well-defined features, most new routes involve lengthy sections of what appears to be blank rock. Surprisingly, these seemingly contrived lines often have remarkably low hole counts, the measuring stick for whether a line is natural or not.

So what gives? Had earlier climbers really been missing these "natural lines" for the last 20 years?

Not quite. The definition of "natural line" was simply changed to suit the situation. Some modern climbers, finding few defined features, just recalibrated. Whereas earlier climbers defined a feature as a section of rock that could be climbed without enhancement, some of today's climbers define a feature as anything that with the help of a drill and chisel can be enhanced into a copperhead or hook placement. By this theory, just about anything is a feature, as demonstrated by the first ascent of *Ring of Fire* on El Capitan in 1995.

On this route, the climbers declared that they had found a natural line and were going to prove it by not placing any bolts except at belays. They said that in lieu of bolts they had developed certain "new technologies" in order to ascend "blank corners." They declined, however, to explain these new technologies, saying it would all be in their book about the climb.

Anyone climbing on the east face of El Cap that year didn't have to wait for the book to find out what these "new technologies" were. For more than 20 days the repetitive tap-tap-tap of steel drill against rock could be heard echoing throughout the big stone.

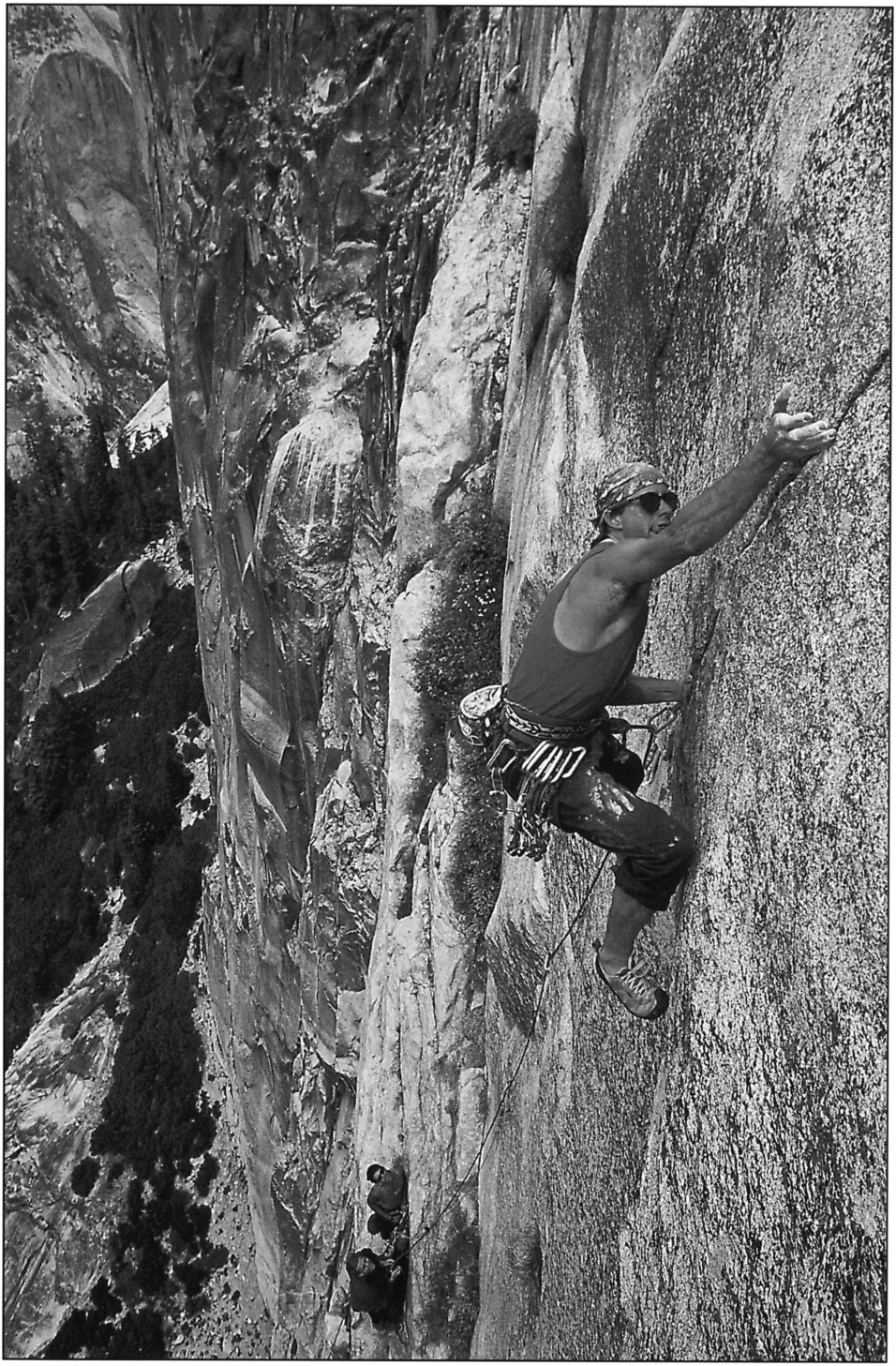
The climbers were using tactics common on modern aid lines; they just took them to the extreme. *Ring of Fire*, however, showed just where the practice of drilling and chiseling the rock can lead. Eventually, there could be hundreds of routes on El Cap, each separated from another by only a few feet. Without some restraint, El Cap could come to look like a high-traffic sport climbing area, or a very tall gym wall with scenery. The adventure and challenge of finding natural lines and then adapting oneself to the rock would give way to using force to bring the rock down to one's level.

Still, while the prospects for first ascents in Yosemite might not be particularly bright, any lack of new route potential is made up for in other areas. In the arena of free, speed and hammerless climbing, the challenges remain wide open, begging to be tapped in Yosemite as nowhere else.

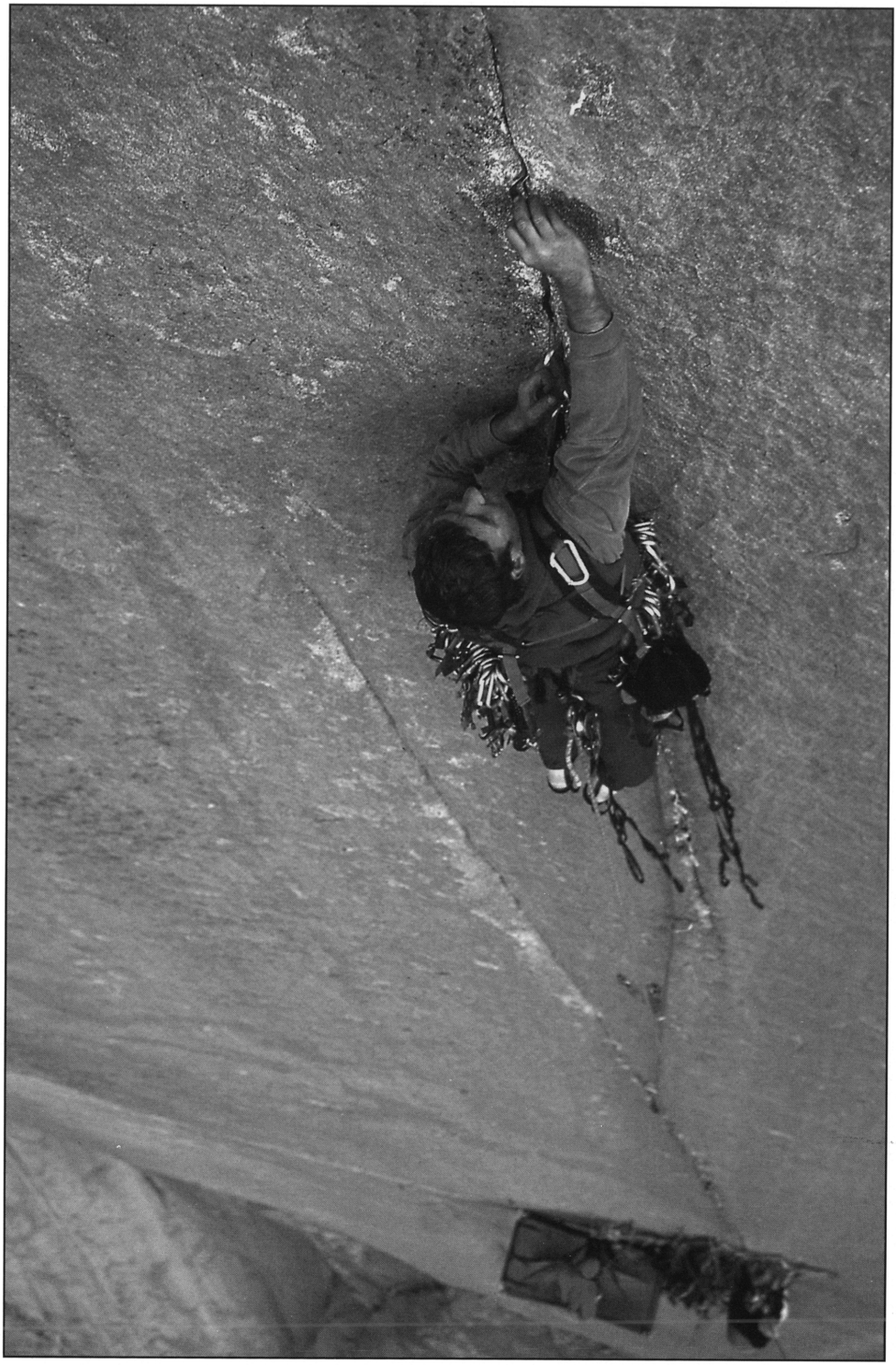
For the past several years, most cutting-edge free climbing has been done in sport climbing areas. But recently, many of the world's top free climbers have returned to Yosemite to free climb big walls. Drawn by adventure and the commitment required to climb a big wall, combined with the sheer beauty of Valley crack climbs, many climbers are finding some of the best free climbs in the world on faces that once were believed to be impossible to ascend by any means.

Free climbing big walls is nothing new; climbers have been steadily ticking off Grade V walls for the last two decades. Yet recently there has been a burst of activity. Notable climbs, like Lynn Hill's free ascent of the *Nose,* have reminded climbers that while many of the ultra classics have gone free, the list of Grade V and VI walls waiting for their first free ascents remains extensive.

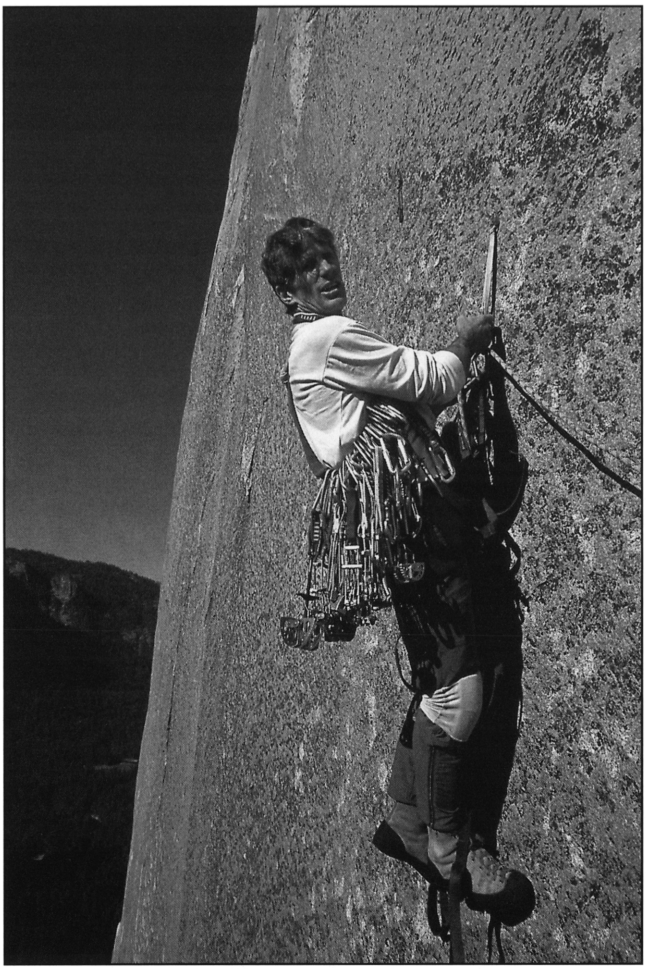
While first free ascents may offer the highest rewards, repeating long routes also is becoming increasingly common. Alex Huber's free ascent of the *Salathé Wall* has set off a wave of attempts. As free climbing standards continue to escalate, ascents of routes such as the *Salathé* that once were mind-boggling will become commonplace. The *Salathé* may very well be



Todd Skinner on pitch five, first free ascent of the Direct Northwest Face (5.13d), Half Dome. GALEN ROWELL



Charlie Fowler on the Triple Cracks pitch, first clean ascent of The Shield, *El Capitan*. BETH WALD



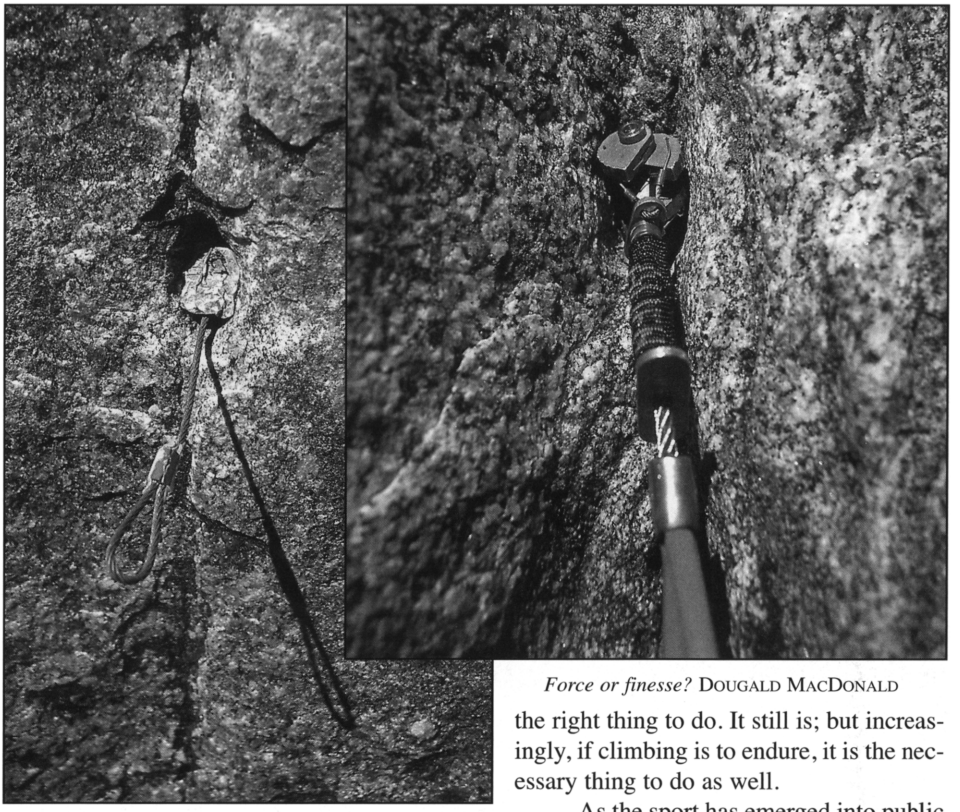
Galen Rowell en route to becoming the oldest climber to climb the Nose *in a day in 1997.* CONRAD ANKER

Yosemite's next *Astroman,* a testpiece that prospective Valley free climbers "warm up on" before attempting the 5.14 wall routes that undoubtedly will be climbed in the future. In addition, impressive efforts like Steve Schneider's on *Excalibur* pave the way for free ascents that may contain some sections of mandatory aid but still offer thousands of feet of free climbing.

Speed climbing is another realm in which Yosemite offers immense potential. Originally, speed ascents were used by climbers to train for alpine routes in Patagonia and the Himalayas. But today, as John Middendorf points out, "The dependence on fixed gear and bolts in these fast ascents will limit their training value for climbs outside of the Valley." Instead of being reserved for alpine training, Yosemite's speed climbing today has developed into a sport of its own. It is not uncommon for two or three parties to climb the Nose in a day, while multi-day siege affairs like *Zenyatta Mondatta* and *Iron Hawk* now are falling in times just over 24 hours. Many climbers with jobs in the surrounding area now go to the Valley for the weekend, climb a Grade Sixer and are back in the office by the time a "normal" party they passed has climbed a handful of pitches.

This increased popularity of speed climbing has made the sport more competitive, as most speed climbing teams head up with the hopes of bettering the time of the fastest ascent before them. Yet while the incentive of setting a record may add a bit of fun to the game, there are too many subjective factors to keep such records from ever bearing too much weight. Fixed gear, the use of cheater sticks and whether a party has climbed a route before gives one team an advantage over the next and will keep speed climbing from ever becoming too competitive.

Clean climbing, on the other hand, is something that needs to be taken more seriously. Since Doug Robinson first wrote of it in the 1973 Chouinard catalog, clean climbing has been



Force or finesse? DOUGALD MACDONALD

the right thing to do. It still is; but increasingly, if climbing is to endure, it is the necessary thing to do as well.

As the sport has emerged into public view, it has caught the eye of land managers, government agencies and assorted politicians. With more and more climbers entering wilderness areas, officials now are deciding how the sport fits into the overall picture of human wilderness use. With such weighty decisions in the balance, it is more important than ever to climb as cleanly as possible.

Hammerless aid climbing is one form of clean climbing that has gained acceptance lately, but it has not gone nearly as far as it can. Despite a well-publicized first hammerless ascent of the *Shield* on El Cap, only one hammerless repeat has been made in the last five years. Hundreds of other parties have continued to nail, with clear results: RURP seams now take one-inch sawed angles and continue to widen.

Ten years ago, this might have been acceptable. Today, however, hammerless protection technology is so sophisticated that there no longer is an excuse to nail. Hammerless climbing often is faster than nailing and can be made just as safe. And while preserving the integrity of the line is the main argument for its use, hammerless climbing does more than just preserve the rock: It adds an entirely new adventure to the game.

On the first ascent of the *Shield* in 1972, Charlie Porter placed 35 RURPs in a row on the Triple Cracks Pitch. When Charlie Fowler led this pitch in 1993 on the first hammerless ascent, he hand-placed bird beaks, angles and nuts. Although the equipment was different, the sense of adventure was the same. Both parties pushed the level of boldness; Porter was trying to avoid placing bolts and Fowler was trying to avoid using a hammer. The first clean ascent of the *Shield* showed that an intricate hammerless pitch is every bit as rewarding as a hard nailing pitch—and it adds the satisfaction of knowing that you did not change the route for

the next guy.

Unfortunately, when some routes have gone hammerless at hard grades, subsequent parties have been intimidated into thinking that the climbs are too dangerous for them to attempt cleanly. They shouldn't be. Instead, all climbers should be inspired to reach within themselves for the patience and resolve necessary to do the route as hammerless as they possibly can. For some, it may mean not using the hammer at all; for others, it may mean using the hammer only when the danger becomes too great. But only when every party makes the pledge to climb as cleanly as they feel possible will the true potential for clean climbing be realized.

The first ascent may always be the most glorious and rewarding climbing achievement a climber can earn. Those who only see adventure in Yosemite in first ascents will be forced up lines that are more and more contrived. But many will continue to devote time to first ascents in the big mountains as well—and rarely do these climbers go to the alpine walls without first making numerous pilgrimages to Yosemite. The world's best rock climbers and alpinists will continue to visit Yosemite, current standards will continue to evolve, and an entirely new realm of adventures for the Valley climber will be the result. I believe the potential of Yosemite is decided by what our vision lets us see. For those who are not limited by past accomplishments but are instead inspired by them, an exciting future with opportunities in speed, free and hammerless climbing is on a horizon still brimming with potential.