

## Divided Interests and the Hope for American Alpinism

by Steve House

Author's note: Passing judgments about the worthiness of other's accomplishments goes against the grain of the anarchistic pursuit we call "climbing." That being said, we all make judgments as part of the process of assimilating information to our own personal experience; indeed, I make judgments in the following article. But these judgments are only important within the context of my own values and experience, and I ask that readers of this article recognize them as such.

**D**o you remember where you were when you heard that Mugs Stump climbed the Cassin Ridge in 15 hours, that Messner and Habeler used pure alpine style to summit Hidden Peak or that Hillary and Norgay climbed Everest? These climbers affected us with accomplishments that set the benchmark for their age in mountaineering. And where is that benchmark today? The definition is perhaps most easily stated in terms of what it is not. In the year 2000, the cutting edge in alpinism is not fixing ropes, placing bolts, using oxygen or using high-altitude porters. I could go on, but suffice it to say that these are concepts that stylistically belong to decades of the past. It was a long time ago now that Messner summarized these tactics as "the murder of the impossible."

As an introduction to the coming century, I feel compelled to add that cutting-edge alpinism is also not: re-leading pitches for the camera, making e-mail dispatches from the bivouac or climbing with partners whose only purpose is documentation. These are ideas that according to some will define cutting-edge climbing in the future. I think that these ideas will simply define a new specialty within climbing that I'll call "business climbing." Business climbing will divide our talents and degrade the amount of cutting-edge climbing that will be accomplished.

Historically, the best barometer of the state of climbing has been alpinism. And the last stylistic climax in alpine climbing came in the mid- to late 1980s when many of the 8000-meter peaks were climbed in single-push style, often by new routes. Such climbing was termed "night-naked" by Voytek Kurtyka; he, Jean Troillet, Pierre-Allain Steiner and Erhard Loretan were at the center of adapting this bivouac-less style to the peaks of the Himalaya.

More recently, the "night-naked" or "single-push" approach has been applied successfully to more technical routes in the Himalaya by the Slovenians. But the Alaska Range and Patagonia are also important crucibles for this expression of light and fast. In 1999, Silvo Karo and Rolando Garibotti climbed a 900-meter direct start to the only existing route on Fitz Roy's formidable 2300-meter west face. This was the second ascent of the Czechoslovakian Route which was climbed with extensive use of fixed lines over two seasons in 1982 and 1983. Karo and Garibotti climbed nearly 50 pitches (VI 5.10d 65°) with "some crackers and one and a half liters of water"; glacier to glacier, their ascent took 35 hours. This is an excellent example of what is "state-of-the-art" in alpinism today.

The fact is that big walls climbed using drill bits and static line, and expedition-style climbs of 8000-meter peaks, do not stretch our collective experience anymore. But these are the objectives that business climbing will push people toward. It is a matter of logistics that sponsorships involving heavy use of cameras, web sites and films are incompatible with

modern lightweight tactics.

Then there is the issue of finances. How many of the people that followed the American ascent of Great Trango Tower last summer realized that the trip had a seven-figure budget? That the climbers, cameramen, and technical support were all being paid to do their respective work? Is this kind of expedition “bad” or “wrong” for climbing? I’d say no; they were climbing and, I hope, having fun. Furthermore, it seems that the media attention showed the climbers in a more favorable light than some media events of the past.

However, it begs some questions. Was the 1999 American Great Trango Tower expedition a milestone in the history of climbing? No. Were their accomplishments equitable with the amount of publicity it garnered? Absolutely not. Cast in those terms, the aforementioned attempt on Fitz Roy was a greater contribution—and it was never reported in climbing’s mass media, let alone discussed.

I am not proposing that one team’s effort is worthwhile and the other’s is worthless. Rather, these examples illustrate differences in the visions of the climbers. We the climbing public need to understand the competing visions of climbing the hardest route with the most style versus that of combining a paycheck with an expedition.

Business climbing is not going away; there seems to be a growing demand for it. Good news for the thousands of people who excitedly followed Lowe, Synnott and Ogden’s ascent of Great Trango Tower last year. And fortunate for the sponsors who likely made a return on their investment.

Luckily for the progress of alpinism, people like Karo and Garibotti aren’t going away, either. Neither are the road-tripping life-style climbers in Camp 4 who are the living roots of climbing. However, it is extremely important for the climbing community to understand how important dollars are to an expedition. To state the obvious, having enough money is absolutely crucial to an attempt.

Here we owe a debt of gratitude to the organizations that grew up with our sport. Several of these companies have created an infrastructure for helping climbers fund their personal visions of how and what to climb. Companies like Polartec, Patagonia, Black Diamond, *Climbing* magazine, Gore, and recently, the American Alpine Club have created competitive climbing grants. The more well known are: the Mugs Stump Award, the Lyman Spitzer Climbing Grant, the Helly Hansen Mountain Adventure Award, the Shipton-Tilman Grant and the largest of them all, the Polartec Challenge Grant.

These grants are available to anyone who calls up and requests an application form. They are typically distributed annually, and they award up to \$10,000 to a single team. To motivated teams with good objectives that can win several grants, it is possible to fund the majority of a lightweight expedition’s budget to all but the expensive 8000-meter peaks.

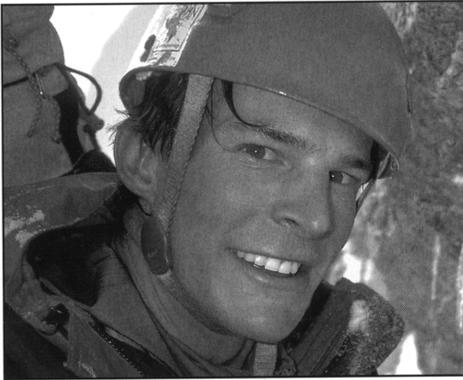
These grants help climbers whose climbing objectives rule out heavyweight film and web site productions. It also solves a dilemma for the many people who simply don’t want to have their climbing publicized in any way.

I believe that it is very clear that these grants have been, and will continue to be, instrumental in helping alpinists define what the state of the art in climbing will be in the coming years. Not only do they provide the crucial dollars for airline tickets, but they also force teams to focus on developing their objectives. The grant applications require maps, route photos, and an explanation of why theirs is an important objective.

The great tragedy of modern business climbing is that the energies of talented and accomplished climbers will inevitably be divided. Just as we have seen guiding jobs on 8000-meter peaks draw talent out of the core of alpinism, so too will these newly popular industries of climbing films and web sites. The lure of notoriety and the reliable paycheck will draw those

hardcore weary of the hand-to-mouth lifestyle, and their vast talents will go with them.

Modern mountaineers, both armchair and active, need to understand the differences among sponsorships. Everyone with a TV can enjoy the result of a well-documented adventure. But as an educated group, we need to ensure the continued support of the organizations that are committed financially to these grants. Specifically, I want to call upon the membership and the directors of the American Alpine Club to do more to help mountaineering efforts at the top levels of development. These trips provide the greatest return to our community by way of inspiration—and without our collective inspiration, climbing would be just another ball-sport instead of the incredible force that it is on our lives.



*Steve House*

Steve House was born in 1970 and began climbing in 1984 with the La Grande, OR, chapter of the Boy Scouts. In the Alaska Range, he established three new routes on Denali in three years and put up *The Gift (That Keeps on Giving)* on Mt. Bradley. In Canada, his new routes include the Southwest Face of King Peak and *M-16* on Howse Peak. He lives in Mazama, Washington, with his wife, Ann, and is a professional mountain guide.