

# For Better or for Worse

## The first ascent of Hainabrakk East Tower

BRIAN MCCRAY

December, 1999. Steve Schneider was in Las Vegas for a slide show from his solo first ascent on the Central Tower of Paine in Patagonia. “Yo, Shipooi!” he exclaimed when he arrived at my home. He shoved the cover of the recent *American Alpine Journal* under my nose. “Doesn’t it look killer, dude?! Want to go to Pakistan?”

I was stunned and excited at the same time. The wall looked pretty cool, and going to the Karakoram had been a dream of mine for a number of years. The idea was an attractive one: two married couples, Steve and his wife, Heather Baer, and Roxanna Brokk and I, would travel to the other side of the world to put up a new route on an unclimbed 3,500-foot-plus granite tower. Easy! Right?

Soon after the excitement subsided, thoughts of simple logistics, such as money (!), time, the fact that we’d really just met Steve and Heather, and the chemistry created by mixing marriage and big walls began to cause a slight nagging in the back of my mind. But. . . what the hell. Roxanna and I love the pursuit of adventure, and we decided it was an excellent opportunity. We began to move forward with the plans. Roxanna offered her skills in the grant-writing department, Steve checked into guide services, Heather worked on the plane tickets, and I ended up with the easiest job: gear guy.

On the morning of June 15, Roxanna and I arrived at the Las Vegas airport, where we were forced to condense our seven overweight bags into five legal loads. We barely made it on the plane in time, and I wondered vaguely if I had forgotten anything.... We met Steve and Heather in San Francisco, then flew to Islamabad via London, arriving on June 17. Six days later, Roxanna and I reached Shipton base camp. We had traveled along a dirty glacier for hours when we came over the top of a moraine. Immediately, we were swept with beauty. A lush green meadow with little purple and yellow flowers everywhere was surrounded by some of the most famous and impressive big walls in the world: Shipton, Uli Biaho, Hainabrakk, Great Trango, and Nameless towers. I was overwhelmed by emotion. Up to this point I had been preoccupied with traveling logistics, frustrating politics, and financial insecurities. For a moment it all blew away in the realization that no matter what happened, everything would be OK.

On our last day of hiking, we had gone from 12,000 to 14,000 feet, and we were beginning to feel the effects of elevation and fatigue. Steve had told us earlier that he had had problems in the past arriving at 14,000. When he and Heather showed up at base camp, he looked ashen. He had been puking for a little while, and was barely able to utter a “Duuuuude.” He had practically crawled the last couple of grueling hours from Trango Camp.

Our first task in camp, after setting up our tents, etc., was to decide upon an objective. We had had mixed reports on the quality of Hainabrakk and had considered a new route on Shipton or Cat’s Ears. It all looked good, and, with 40 days ahead of us, it seemed like we had all the time in the world. In a “group meeting,” we decided to start with Cat’s Ears Spire. Our plan was for each team to take turns leading every other day. We had nine ropes to fix;



when we ran out of rope, we would commit to the wall and stay up there until we summited.

Rox and I were chomping at the bit, and, after a day of rest, we headed out of base camp early. We have both been told that at times we have too much energy. Sometimes this is good; sometimes it causes problems. This was one of the times it seemed to cause some uneasiness. I felt that our pace was putting pressure on Steve and Heather to move faster than they wanted to.

The approach to Cat's Ears and Hainabrakk from our base camp was a straight shot across the glacier. After three hours with 50- to 60-pound loads, Rox and I got tired of hiking. We would reach Hainabrakk just before Cat's Ears. We decided to change plans. I contacted Steve on the small radio that he had convinced me to purchase for the trip.

"Steve, we're sick of humping our gear. Rox and I are itching to climb. What do you think of starting in on Hainabrakk?"

"Yeah, man! We're psyched on everything. It all looks good. You guys are doing a great job. Get up there, dude!"

Rox and I hiked up to the top of the large talus cone at the base of Hainabrakk East Tower. Four feet off the ground, we found the first remnant of the 1997 Hungarian attempt (see 1999 AAJ, pp. 207-208), a hangerless bolt (for a portaledge, I presume?). I led the first pitch that day, which turned out to be about 10a and a little scary. The goldish granite, complete with colored lichen streaks, was pretty good, though some of it was the coarse, ball-bearing-type rock common in the alpine environment. Rox led a short 5.8 crack that brought us to the top of a pedestal. I traversed around an arête to another crack, which turned out to be wider and harder than I had anticipated. I got my first sense of hyperventilation as I finished this 10+ offwidth pitch. It's hard to breathe and climb at 14,000 feet! Rox finished the day with another 10a pitch up a face to a large grassy ledge. We rappelled back to the ground in three rope lengths and returned to base camp.

Steve and Heather's first climbing day was postponed for two days, initially by Steve's altitude sickness and then as he and Heather counseled me and Rox. The stress of the trip was taking its toll on our already ailing relations. Even though Rox and I could do a lot of things together, getting along while we were doing them was a rarity. This in turn put a lot of tension on the group as a whole.

When Steve and Heather did get out of camp, they climbed two pitches. The first was an imposing chimney that turned out to be 5.7. The second scary and challenging pitch crossed some large, loose flakes, before making a slabby runout traverse to a devious corner. Steve employed double ropes after the traverse because of serious rope drag, protecting it with dubious pins placed in the heat of the moment for the last 40 feet. By this time, it was getting late, and they didn't have time to clean up the mess before retreating to base camp.

I arrived at their high point the next morning to find a cluster of entangled ropes and a belay of five or six pieces connected with various slings, chords and knots. I spent some time cleaning everything up, then readied to climb.

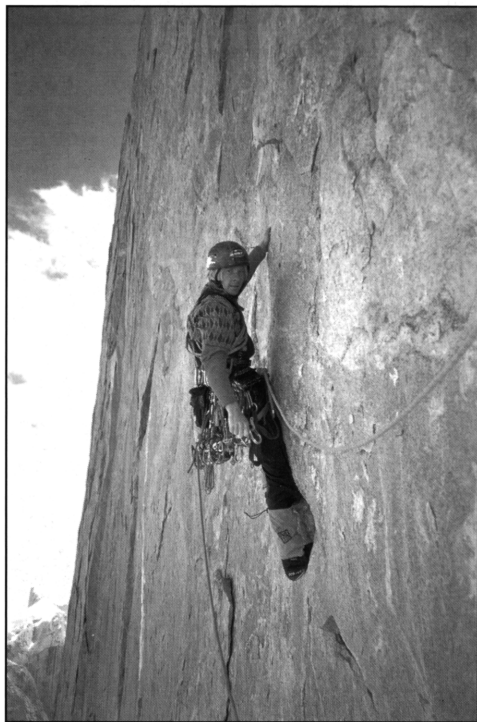
The next pitch turned out to be a gift. After ascending a wide, wet crack, I traversed to the right to a left-facing corner. This corner looked steep and difficult but, with careful stemming, I continued to ascend with relative ease, finding awesome fingerlocks in the many cracks of the right wall—and even getting great gear all the way up!

Rox led the next pitch (5.6 or so), which took us up to what looked like another large

*Hainabrakk East Tower, showing 1. Tague it to the Top (VI 5.11 C2, 3,700', Copp-Pennings, 2000).*

*2. For Better or for Worse (VII 5.12a WI3, 3,500', Baer-Brock-McCray-Schneider, 2000).*

KENNAN HARVEY



*Brian McCray on pitch 18-ish, the "Paper Flake."*

STEVE SCHNEIDER

ledge. Instead, it turned out to be the top ridge of our wall. Between us and the rest of Hainabrakk was a 100-foot wide gap. We were going to need to rap 250 feet into the gully (quickly dubbed the "Gully From Hell") and try to climb up on the other side.

Rox and I descended 1,000 feet that evening, using all of our rope to get back to the ground. It was time to commit to the wall.

But, as we rested in base camp, the weather began to deteriorate. Up until now, we had enjoyed a week of perfect skies, and we really hadn't considered weather as an issue. On top of the rain, our team's personal relations were ailing as well. Our attitude of go, go, go had been a sharp contrast to Steve and Heather's very relaxed approach. Adding to our worries was the concern of whether we had enough food in camp to last the duration of our stay.

Our cook, Issah, continued to cook with an excess of oil. He tried to mediate happiness for our group to no avail. All this and more came to a head in the kitchen tent one morning over a bottle of Tang. I had taken our last ration of sugar water into my tent but had forgotten to mix it up with the

Tang. This caused already short tempers and issues of mistrust to flare up, an incident that we still laugh over today.

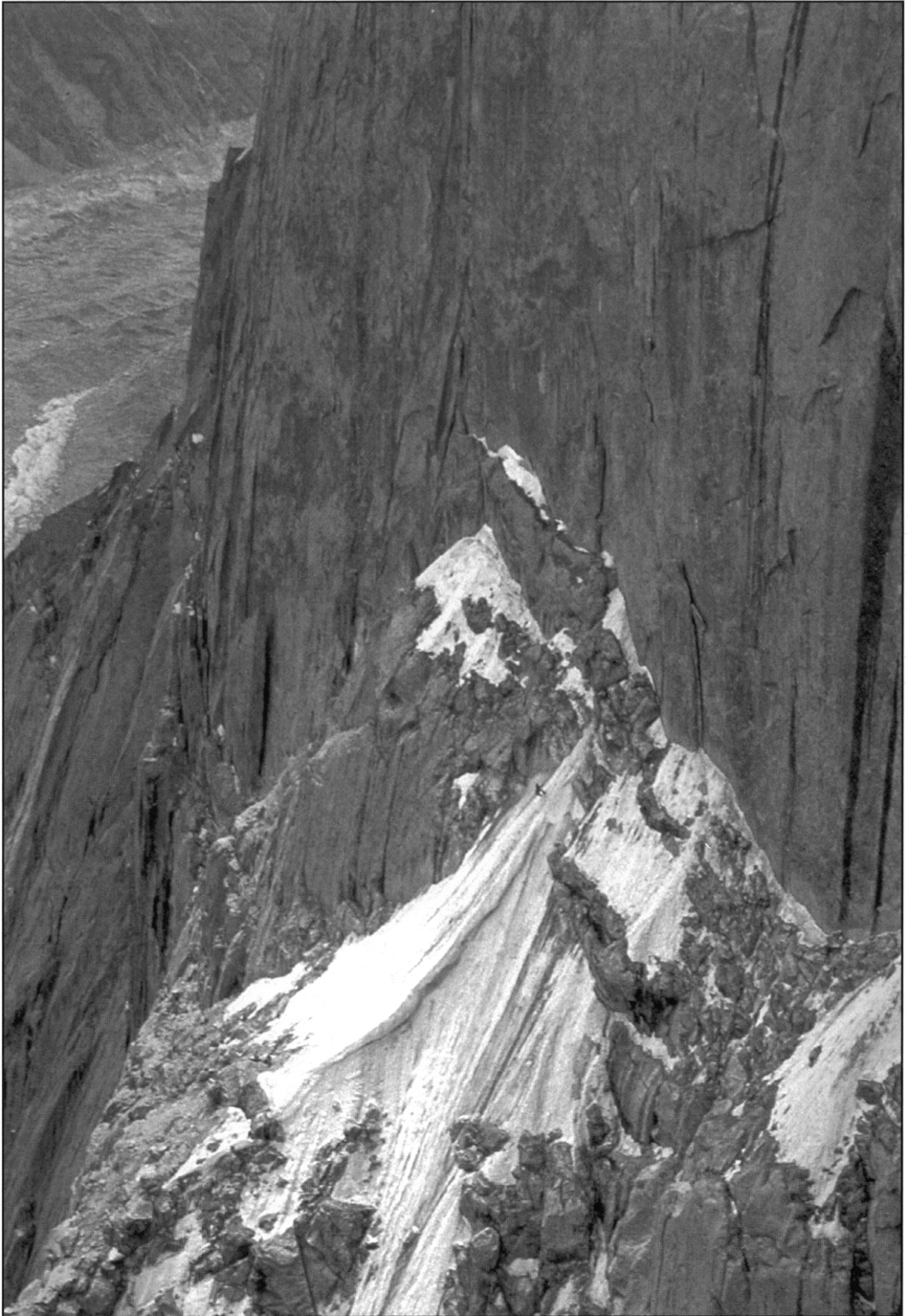
But there in camp, it took a few days of rain and pain before we decided to go ahead and climb together on Hainabrakk. We finally decided that as soon as it cleared, we would head up on the wall. We prepared food and supplies for seven to ten days.

Jumaring our 1,000 feet of fixed ropes and hauling four stuffed haul bags was neither fun nor easy. Rox and I made it up first and descended into the Gully from Hell just before dark. Steve and Heather camped in their portaledge on an awkward slab on the front face. The contorted placement of their new ledge ended up bending the poles; from then on, a hammer was necessary for setup and takedown.

It is strange to climb a big wall and be able to take off your harness and start humping loads again mid-route, but once we were back in the Gully, this is what we did. The gully floor was composed of very unsettled scree, with incredibly colorful rock shot through with minerals (mostly iron) indicating that it had gone through a major geological twist in the past to give it its broken and loose nature. We spent the next day shuttling our gear to the top of the Gully, where we set up camp. It would be our home for the next four days as we shuttled loads, climbed, and hauled.

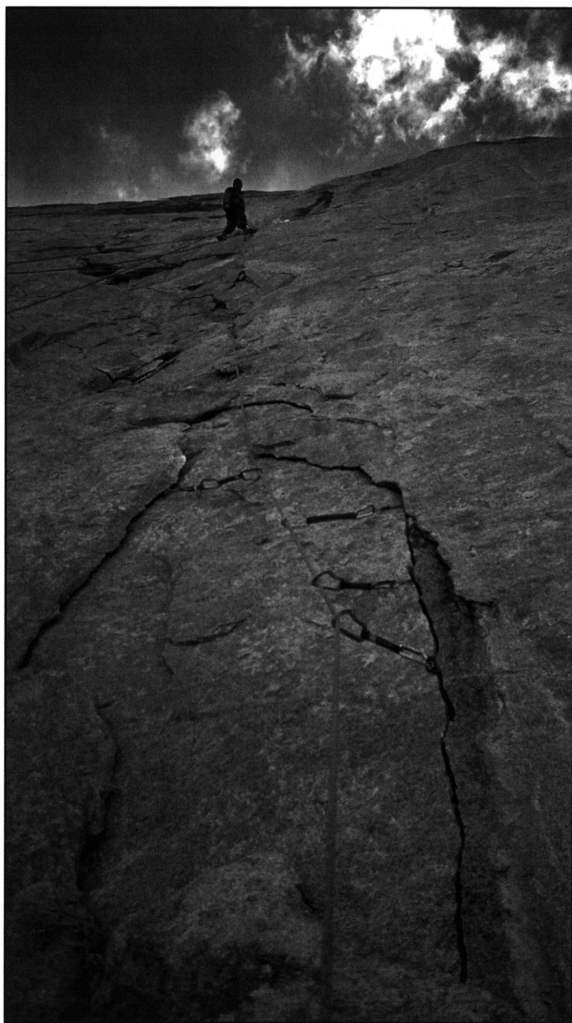
From there, Rox and I led. We had a hard time finding a reasonable path to free climb. I chose a line that didn't look too bad on the very right edge of what we would eventually call





*The snow camp, with Schneider leading the "Jigsaw Puzzle Pitch," Heather Baer belaying, and Fly'n Brian jumaring the icefield, as seen from the Cat's Ears Spire.*

MIKE PENNINGS



*Steve Schneider on the "Jigsaw Puzzle Pitch" (5.11+).*

ROXANNA BROCK

the "Choss Wall." It ended up being our first 5.11 pitch—and was fairly dangerous as well. I led the next pitch, too, because it was very, very loose. Rox brought us out of the chossiness, but we still couldn't get to what looked like another prominent ledge that day because of the complicated nature of the climbing.

The next day, Steve and Heather juggled up to the top of our lines and led a nice, short 10a crack that allowed us to see our problem: we had yet more ridge hiking to go. The crazy east face of Hainabrakk, as it turned out, is basically three walls separated by two large gully/gaps. The first wall, Disappointment Buttress, had been 1,000 feet high. Steve and Heather had reached the top of the second, the 500-foot Choss Wall. Below them was a deep gap; on the other side was the remaining 2,000 feet of the east face.

Once we got on top of Choss Wall and realized we were going to have to start shuttling loads again, we were all dismayed. We couldn't rap into the abyss and climb out because it was too deep. I tried to imagine crossing the ridge to where it connected to the upper buttress, stringing three or four ropes together and hauling across the abyss that separated us. This was desperate thinking. We

had to do it the old-fashioned way, traversing right along the ridge at its top and crossing a thin rock bridge to gain access to the upper wall.

The climbing across the ridge to the main wall was loose and hard enough that it was wise to fix lines. Once we crossed the ridge, we gained a large sloping ledge with a lot of snow on it. Since it was a water source, we set it up as a major camp.

We disagreed about where to go next. Steve wanted to traverse left across this ledge to access a beautiful buttress with incipient features. I didn't want to go that way, because traversing the ledge was a pain and it did not appear that free climbing on the upper buttress would be very possible. (Up to this point we had been able to free everything. Though freeing

the route had not been our original intent, we had decided to do our best to keep trying to free it all.) I wanted to climb through a series of cracks and large flakes directly above us. Steve didn't like my idea, because one large flake in particular looked very loose and imposing. I agreed with him about the flake, but if we could get past it, we would be set up with excellent features all the way to the summit.

After another group meeting, we tried to go Steve's way. Investigation revealed it to be a pain in the butt, and when I offered to lead the imposing flake, we decided to proceed with my plan.

At this point, we had been on the wall for a week. We had a killer portaledge camp set up but were running out of food. Steve and Heather had only a couple more days' worth; the weather, meanwhile, had been misty, rainy, and cold, and there was no improvement in sight. We had to go down.

We left camp set up and fixed all our ropes on the way down. We would have to reclimb a number of pitches on the way back up the 1,500 feet we had gained thus far. Steve really wanted to place bomber (usually two-bolt) anchors every rope length on the way up to facilitate a descent. This was a good idea, as we had plenty of stainless steel 3/8-inch bolts and hangers, but we were short on bits. It turned out my bolt kit was one of the things that accidentally got left in the airport shuffle. We had to be really careful with bits if we were to be able to fix anchors all the way up this route.

Our team was very tired, and we looked forward to seeing Americans Mike Pennings, Jonathon Copp, Joshua Wharton and Brian McMahon, who had just arrived in our base camp and had communicated with us via the radio we had left with our guide. Still, our stay in base camp was longer than we would have liked. It rained for a week. Rox and I learned to play card games, wrote postcards, and read a few books. As soon as the weather gave a slight clearing, we all jumared back to high camp with 30-pound packs. We were wasted by the end of the day.

After climbing an easy 60-meter ice slope out of high camp, we got started on the rock climbing again. Steve led the first pitch, "The Jigsaw Puzzle," which consisted of a few large stacked plates in its crux 11b section. The next pitch was the dreaded flake, gracefully given to me. It turned out to be only 5.9 at its most difficult, but extremely wild! We led a few more pitches that day and descended back to the portaledges in more mist.

The next few days were spent with some climbing and lots of resting in the rain. I took cards with me this time and coerced a few games out of everyone when I could. Rox beat me countless times at Gin Rummy. We gained another small snow ledge 1,000 feet up after about a week. This was to be our highest camp on the wall. No more hauling! That was the worst.

Above this camp, it appeared as though we had about 1,000 feet to go. The weather was not cooperating at all. The rock above us would have been the best we had yet seen, if it had been dry.

On day 8 of this round, I led an awesome 5.11 silver corner with a five- to six-inch crack. I almost puked trying to catch my breath (free climbing at 16,000 feet!) as I pulled the lay-back crux while sliding a 5.5 Camelot along for pro. The next pitch was a nice, wide 5.9 that led to the best pitch on the route, an orange corner with a perfect three-inch crack that went for 160 feet. Rox's initial attempt on it failed due to the water running down the corner. We left it fixed for the next day. After this pitch, the crack turned into a large chimney system that continued for 300 feet. Rox and I got hailed on intensely as I led, and I was able to make it up the chimneys only with great effort and some aid shenanigans.

At this point, we just wanted to get to the summit. It appeared as though we were going



*Steve Schneider and Roxanna Brock at the pitch 27 belay. BRIAN MCCRAY*

to have to give up on freeing the route. The weather was terrible and we were running out of food again. Both of our portaledges had been leaking for days now (thank God for bivvy sacks). We were on day 10 or 11 on the wall, a lot of which had been spent waiting in the cold rain. We looked to our guide, Issah, in base camp for moral support via radio. He sang songs to us out of the Koran. We prayed for a decent day.

Unbelievably, it came. At 5 a.m., day 12 looked shaky but OK. Steve and Heather were in the lead. We thought we might be able to make the summit from our high point if we climbed really hard. Rox and I brought up the rear, fixing anchors and hauling extra gear. We made great progress and the weather only got better. Steve led some awesome splitter 5.10 cracks on nice white granite.

By about 2 p.m. we found ourselves on the summit. Unbelievable. Our chances had really not looked good before today. We all absorbed the beauty, took photos and spoke to Issah on the radio. He was really happy for us.

"Have you freed everything you climbed today?" I asked Steve.

"Oh yeah, bro," he said, and our wheels began to spin.

One more day was what we needed. We wanted to free the two chimney pitches, the beautiful orange corner, and a pitch below our high camp that I had fallen on after a block broke off in my hand, sending me for a tumbler. Rox was game for the plan; Heather didn't want to think about ANOTHER DAY ON THE WALL. I can't blame her. She couldn't blame us.

We were up early the next day, elated from the summit. The weather was splitter. I ended up leading the orange corner at 11a. Steve got the first chimney pitch, which turned out to be 11b.

Now it was my turn. I had been afraid of this. While leading the pitch in the hailstorm, I

had taken a whipper just trying to get up it. But I had a good idea of what to do, so I set out. Before the crux of the chimney, I climbed through a difficult 11+ section protected by a fixed birdbeak that I had placed days earlier. I got to rest inside the chimney before trying to get past the crux, a four-foot roof where the crack narrows to six to nine inches. I went up, then down. We had left a #2 knifeblade in this section for pro, but I couldn't get to it. I wormed my way, inch by inch, up the womb, passing the pin and shooting for a good edge in the crack above me. I found myself totally horizontal, sometimes slightly upside down, as I moved up in tiny increments. I lost track of time and reality. My entire goal in life at the time was to get to that one hold. I couldn't breathe. My clothes were being ripped off me. Then, in a haze of wriggling, I made it. I couldn't believe it. I don't really know how I got there. I never will.

I finished the pitch with another 25 feet of unprotected laybacking on the nine-inch crack. It was one of the ultimate moments in climbing for me.

When I got back to the belay, I apologized to Steve for taking so long. He said it had only been an hour. I thought three or four hours had passed!

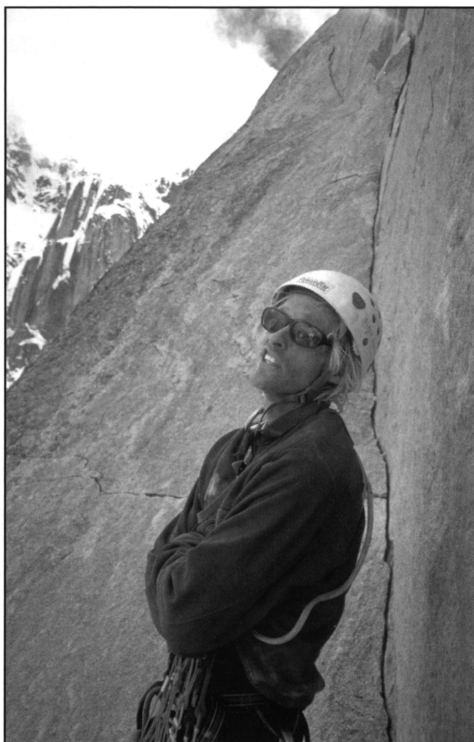
We later dubbed the crux chimney "Chimney with an Altitude." Steve rated it 12a. It's a complete guess. I really have no idea. It could be anything. It doesn't matter.

We cleaned everything up and headed back to the ledges. We had one more pitch to go. I rappelled down this pitch and wiped mud off key holds and placed gear for Steve. This was the only pitch led with preplaced gear. Steve dispensed with the steep 11b flare, no problem. Our route was now free!

That night, Pennings and Copp, whose route had converged to within 50 feet of our own, visited us on their way up Hainabrakk. They were on their second night on the wall.

Our descent the next day was a bad one. We were all wasted. Heather had gone on a hunger strike the day prior to protest our climbing addiction. Rox wanted down bad. I went down with Rox first. Each team had three heavy haul bags. I tried to split them evenly, but I think Steve and Heather got the heavy side, due to total disorganization and hastiness. Rox and I ended up way ahead of them.

Steve called me on the radio. "Brian, pleeeeee help us. You gotta wait for us!" Rox looked at me sternly and shook her head no. We had a different system for descending with bags and Heather was not as experienced as the rest of the team. I made a very difficult decision and decided to descend with my wife. I will always be unsettled about this, but that's what happened.



*Steve Schneider near the summit.*  
ROXANNA BROCK



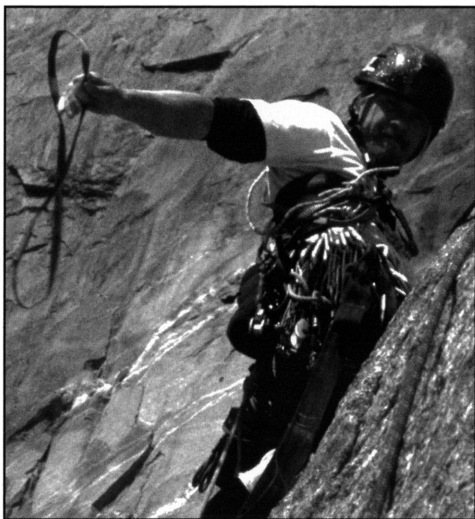
We got down late that night. Steve and Heather slept in the Gully from Hell and got down the next night. It took about three days and a few more group meetings for us to come to terms with each other again.

After repairing our friendships, we spent the remaining days in Base Camp packing, healing, and preparing for the long trek home. We all give many thanks to our guide, Issah, our porters, and our guide agency for their hard work and support to make our expedition to Pakistan a successful and adventurous one. *For Better or For Worse* was chosen as the name of our excellent free route up Hainabrakk Tower; the name also encompasses the pros and cons of life and love.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Pakistan Karakoram

FIRST ASCENT: *For Better or for Worse* (VII 5.12a WI3, 3,500') on Hainabrakk East Tower (ca. 19,024'), June 25-July 27, Heather Baer, Roxanna Brock, Brian McCray, and Steve Schneider



Shortly after Brian McCray started climbing in Dayton, Ohio, in 1989, he quit his job and went on the road, spending winters out west, where he resoled climbing shoes to make a modest living, and summers back east, where he guided and resoled at areas such as Seneca Rocks and the New and Red river gorges. His numerous first ascents back east include *Proper Soul* (5.14a) and the trad route *Temporary Insanity* (5.13a). He made the first one-day speed ascent of *Aurora* (A5) and has soloed *Surgeon General* (A5) in Yosemite Valley. His ice climbing began in 1999 in Alaska on a new route on the Bear's Tooth. He lives in Las Vegas, Nevada, where he owns a resoling business.

Brian McCray on Peak 4810 in the Ak-Su, Kyrgyzstan. ROXANNA BROCK