

THE NOSE IN A DAY

by HELEN SINCLAIR
foreword and postscript by EWAN SINCLAIR

ABOVE *The one and only El Capitan, Yosemite Valley, California, USA. The Nose is in profile on the right.*

Mark Watson

Foreword

Our idea was to climb The Nose of El Capitan in one day. It seemed reasonable enough. Our local crags of Turakirae Head and Castle Hill had provided the perfect training ground for granite off-width cracks, and as a brother/sister combination we had the perfect team. What could go wrong between two siblings who had spent the better part of 30 years perfecting the art of squabbling, bickering, and competing for attention? The idea had taken root some years earlier while Helen and I were stressing out on crack climbs at the world famous Auckland Grammar Quarry. Those early experiences nurtured a healthy dose of optimism, a little naivety and a few delusions of grandeur. In the time between those early climbing experiences and our Nose In A Day (NIAD) attempt, we lived in denial of the gaps in our capabilities and experience. The NIAD may be easy for some, but I was quickly realising that our minimal big wall experience would make it a serious undertaking. I was driven on, however, by sibling rivalry. I could not let my sister travel to Yosemite Valley and attempt the route without me, nor did I have the courage to tell

her that I thought it would be too difficult for us. As a result, I bought a ticket and travelled in early May to the Valley for a date with my sister and a rather large piece of granite.

Upon arrival in Yosemite Valley, my brother Ewan and I realised how high the bar really was. As we drove into the Valley, El Capitan stood menacingly to attention in the early morning sunlight. It looked *huge!* After years of talk, endless struggles to organise time off from full time work or study, and many injury set-backs, we had finally arrived. We both took a deep breath before continuing. Excited and quivering with anticipation, we drove on to establish camp in the infamous Camp 4.

The Nose route consists of 31 pitches. To climb it in 24 hours requires an average of 46 minutes to be spent on each pitch. At that pace we figured we would need to employ all means possible to move up the wall in a fast and efficient manner. That would require techniques of speed, aid and free climbing. In addition, both of us knew we had to begin the climb in top physical

shape. During the year leading up to our trip Ewan and I trained and trained. From our respective homes we used all means necessary to get fit enough, and encouraged each other often over the phone or through emails. We compared what each of us had been up to and pushed each other to train harder. I would ride my bike about 30 kilometres over the Port Hills to work and back, and Ewan would work out several times a day, during his lunch hour and after work. When we did get together we did ridiculous activities such as jumaring with 10 kilogram weights for two hours or going on huge hill runs at 6.00 am (on a Sunday!). And of course we climbed. We climbed at every opportunity, on whatever rock was nearby, and frequently with a backpack to get accustomed to the extra weight we would be carrying on the NIAD attempt.

On top of physical preparation we also needed to acquire the right gear and develop a thorough knowledge of the route. The beta available for *The Nose* is extensive. Ewan and I became NIAD nerds. Prior to entering Yosemite Valley we read everything we could get our hands on. We discussed, debated, and practiced speed climbing techniques. We listened to a podcast by Hans Florine over and over, drew up spreadsheets of the gear we needed and wrote countless notes on topos of the route.

After our arrival in Yosemite Valley we found many other people with similar aspirations to us. We compared notes, beta and techniques with them all. We also stubbornly ignored anyone who advised us to climb the route in three days first. Instead we formulated a disciplined strategy (a typical Sinclair trademark). This quasi-military strategy consisted of three prep days spent on the lower pitches of *The Nose*, with detailed planning and organisation conducted well in advance. Adequate sleep, nutrition, and hydration were important aspects of our strategy as they would help ensure we could recover quickly and sustain a high intensity of climbing. After each day on the route we debriefed, discussing the good, the bad and the ugly. The next step was to refine our approach, re-strategise, practice and memorise the new beta we had acquired for ourselves before returning to *The Nose* for our next prep climb.

We decided that climbing to Dolt Tower (completing the first 11 pitches of *The Nose*) at least twice would be necessary in order to be suitably prepared to tackle those pitches in the early morning darkness. The first time on *The Nose* was memorable for all the wrong reasons. It took us more than 11 hours



ABOVE *Ewan leading off on the Jardine Traverse, pitch 17, during the one-day ascent. Helen on belay.*

Tom Evans

to climb the 11 easiest pitches. Reaching Dolt Tower had been a long, complicated and tiring day. After abseiling down to the ground we were exhausted and soon began to question what we were getting ourselves into. Nevertheless, after the following morning's food, coffee and routine debrief our conviction returned. Another day on the route was in order, this time we would climb to pitch 17.

Our second day on the route was a dramatic improvement on our first day. In only eight hours we re-climbed the 11 pitches to Dolt Tower and then rehearsed the next six pitches. Our siege style preparation continued with Ewan's return to the route to climb to pitch 19 (just below the Great Roof) in order to drop extra water and food for the big day. After he abseiled 15 odd times to the ground he said, 'I am not rapping that route again, next time I get back on it I am walking off'. We were as ready as we could be. It was time, to rest, rack and pack.

A storm looming in the near future forced our attempt to be brought forward by a day and although we were not as rested as we would have liked, we realised that 20 May was probably our best opportunity to complete the NIAD on this trip. Ewan and I set off at 3.00 am on our attempt. I have vivid memories of the first eight pitches. I was absolutely terrified, I was afraid of falling, and afraid of failing. Ewan has since reflected affectionately that, 'Helen started out really grumpy. Her initial fears were characterised by a constant stream of mumbling about how heavy



Helen arriving at the belay after climbing The Great Roof, pitch 22.

Tom Evans

her rack and pack were and how tired she felt. The grumpiness was endearing and reassuring for me because I was concealing my own fears and my own performance anxiety.' As time passed both of us began to climb the pitches we knew with increasing ease and enjoyment. We arrived at Dolt Tower in our best time and with plenty of energy to spare. We were having the time of our lives!

To move as quickly as possible we employed techniques of simul-climbing, short fixing, french-free and free climbing. These speed climbing techniques force the climber to accept a certain amount of personal responsibility and risk. Occasionally safety is

compromised for speed and some difficult decisions have to be made to accept risk in areas where the likelihood of falling is low. For instance, short fixing allows both climbers to move at the same time, but prevents the leader from re-racking. As a result, we often had to spread our rack over four pitches, which created some substantial run-outs. Despite our determination to be as safe as possible there were moments when falling was not an option. To aid fast we often used a method called french-freeing rather than traditional aiding. French-free technique can entail leapfrogging cams by holding one cam in each hand and plugging them in one over the other without leaving them behind as protection. Imagine leapfrogging Black Diamond Number 2 Camalots for 30 metres without leaving them in the crack as protection. That is what the Stove Legs pitches were like for us. I decided it was important not to look down at the frightening run-outs whilst utilising that technique.

Encountering traffic on the route, passing other parties, and rope and gear clusters at belay stations is all part of the excitement of climbing the most popular big wall in the world. Alex Honnold and Uli Steck sped past us just after Dolt Tower on their attempt to break the speed record (they ended up summiting in about four hours, falling short of Hans Florine and Yuji Hirayama's record). We felt honoured and humbled as they politely climbed around us.

We climbed through the day, collected the water and food that was stashed at pitch 19 and ate without remembering the taste or taking the time to feel hungry. We made it through the Great Roof without a hitch, one of the few times we had to revert to traditional aid methods. Having climbed 21 pitches, we were beyond the point of no return. But it was getting late in the day, and the hardest ten pitches were ahead of us. Pitches that we had never been on. The 'Sinclair Pancaking Chapter' was about to begin.

Pancaking is a term used in the army for becoming flustered and losing composure, leading to a sudden deterioration in effective decision making. While climbing the pitch following the Great Roof, Ewan took a lead fall that resulted in a large chunk of his finger being left behind in the crack. The huge flapper was quickly patched up with tape. The sudden loss of composure was more difficult to patch up. That pitch is called the Pancake Flake, and in hindsight Ewan felt that it was rather appropriately named. We soldiered onwards.

Interestingly, another team of two Swiss guys

were also pancaking. Ewan fondly remembers their screaming when their haul bag became stuck, 'I thought they were yelling at me to hurry up with my aiding. I was at the Glowering Spot crux, a very poor time for the panic from the Pancake Flake pitch to return. With the loss of concentration I placed and stood on some average gear, pulling it free as I tried to stand in the top step of my aiders.'

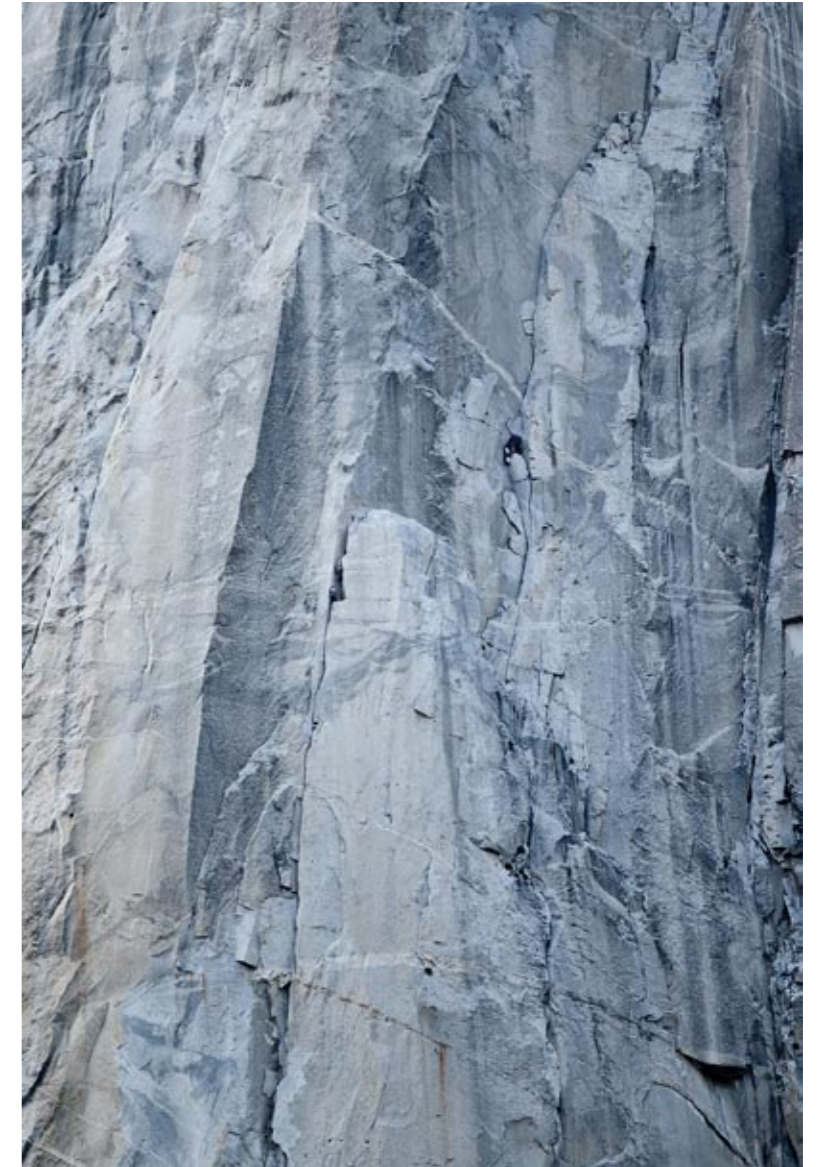
Ewan proceeded to take a massive whipper, ripping an RP and falling onto a ledge. His ankle ended up looking a little like a pink grapefruit, making the following day's three hour descent a painful hobble.

When we met the two Swiss guys on the Camp 6 ledge (below the Changing Corners crux pitch) we decided to team up with them so we could top out in less than 24 hours, rather than spending a very cold night waiting for daylight. One of the guys was a climbing instructor from Interlaken, he introduced himself to me by saying 'you led the Great Roof, that's not bad for a girl.' I decided to take it as a well earned compliment. By that stage it was dark, we had been climbing for 20 hours and we still had some of the toughest pitches to go. Ewan and one of the Swiss guys were out front fixing lines, and I was at the other end setting their haul bag and jugging behind. My memories of the last gasp effort to the top are of loneliness, extreme cold and an imposing black void below.

Postscript

All of a sudden it was 2.00 am and I was lost with a crazy Swiss-German man at a hanging belay, half way up pitch 29. A pitch affectionately called the Death Dihedral. We had rushed at the last handover, not brought enough gear and been forced to construct a make-shift belay in a wet, flaring crack. My climbing style now resembled a drunken monkey trying to ice skate on all fours. My hands and feet were skating everywhere, so I was a happy to let the Swiss-German take the lead.

In the weeks preceding our attempt, as we lived and breathed the Valley lifestyle, Helen and I had talked endlessly about what it would feel like to top out. We hatched plans to stash beer and food at the top in preparation for our victory dance, hugs and photos. We hoped it would happen as the Californian twilight kissed goodnight to the Valley's many granite spires. Clearly, our best laid plans had not transpired. The last pitch is an endless bolt ladder that slowly flattens out to the point where most people begin to walk, giving them an opportunity to admire the view. I was crawling, with my head down staring at the shrinking circle of white light being emitted by my head lamp. My head sud-



Helen and Ewan just below Dolt Tower, pitch 11.

Derek Thatcher

denly hit a tree, a tree that I proceeded to hug. When Helen joined me in my embrace of the tree she asked, 'Is that it? Am I done?' It was 3:30 am, 23 hours and thirty minutes after we had set off.

Although our ascent was not the pure two person top-out that we had dreamed of, the memories now fill Helen and I with pride. We had made it to the top together, having strengthened rather than weakened our relationship. We both feel like we have unfinished business with The Nose, that was not it, and we are not done. The route is addictive, we will be returning to climb it again, to climb it faster, to climb more pitches free and to climb it in better style.