

90 Hours on Half Dome

by Erik Fischer

Introduction

Ten months after our failed attempt to climb Half Dome's Regular Northwest Face, Ross and I went back to Yosemite Valley with one goal in mind, climb Half Dome. Half Dome is one of the most prominent features in Yosemite Valley. Half of it is a gigantic granite dome. The other half is the intimidating shear North West face. The North West face was first climbed by Royal Robbins, Mike Sherrick and Jerry Gallwas in 1957. It was the first grade VI climb completed in the US. This is our story and trip report of how we managed to repeat their ascent in July of 2010.

Failed attempt in September 2009

In September 2009 we attempted to climb Half Dome without a haul bag and without fixing pitches. We planned to do one or two bivies on the wall. The end result was failure and demoralization. We tried to carry our gear in a backpack and two fanny packs. After reaching pitch 2 we decided we had chosen the wrong technique. The cumbersome sleeping pads and combined weight of provisions proved excessive for both of us. Ross had to aid sections that he could normally free climb with little or no protection, and I wasn't able to free climb at all. Also, as I ascended the rope, I felt as if I were being "split in half." The only way we could have succeeded would have been to aid and jummar most of the route. We are typically free climbers, and that was something we did not want to do. So, we tucked our tails and hiked back down to the Happy Isles Trailhead. It was a long day with no reward. We vowed to return again for another try as soon as possible.

Training: From Injury to Big Wall

by Ross Andrea

It became my personal mission to train for the arduous undertaking of leading all of Half Dome if necessary. Over the next ten months I prepared myself mentally and physically for several long days of very strenuous activity. This time, "Failure would not be an option." The first step of my training program was to do nothing but rest. I had acquired a nagging tendonitis of the elbow and knew that the only way to recover was to take a prolonged break from aggressive climbing.

The second step of my training program was building strength. After a month of rest, I began slowly integrating a climbing specific training regime into my daily lifestyle. I had been away from hard climbing for a long time and my level of proficiency was low. During the winter of 2009/2010, I was living in Calgary with relatives. It was too cold to climb outdoors, so I found a local climbing gym and began route setting in exchange for free climbing passes. I would cross train by bouldering in the gym, hang boarding, campusing and doing opposing muscle group exercises. Once my bouldering strength came back, my girlfriend, Richelle, and I successfully climbed Time Wave Zero, a 23 pitch sport route in Potrero Chico

Mexico. We accomplished this in two days completing the climb on Jan 1st, 2010. Climbing this route, again, gave me the confidence that I still had the necessary endurance to climb Half Dome. It also afforded me the opportunity to haul a haulbag 11 pitches. This was something I had never done before and would have to do on Half Dome for 20 pitches. The Tendonitis in my elbow had abated and did not affect the climb. Best of all, I was able to be a part of Richelle's first multipitch climb. We celebrated our success by driving to Hueco Tanks and Bouldering for a week. This was the true tendon test for me. Needless to say, I crushed at Hueco, disposing of many of my projects and flashing some new ones.

Phase three of my training came in the form of power maintenance, endurance climbing, and cardio vascular training. I accomplished this by bouldering, lifting weights, cycling and crag climbing. Also, once a week I would climb 1000 feet in the gym. I continued this cycle for weeks until Erik and I went on a short trip to El Dorado Canyon. We climbed most of the "Naked Edge" (before it got too dark) and "Yellow Spur 9". We also climbed "Cussin Crack" (5.7) in Boulder canyon. Erik only led a few pitches out of many throughout the whole trip. His psychological outlook on traditional leading was still shattered from two terrible lead falls. He had taken a 70 foot and a 30 foot fall that resulted in serious injuries. His left foot still doesn't have full range of motion. After this trip, I knew I would have to be prepared to lead most of the pitches on Half Dome if we were going to succeed.

Once we returned from Colorado, I began tapering my training concentrating on strength burns in the gym and using a home bouldering wall for maintaining my power. I continued cycling for leg strength and cardiovascular endurance. I rested ten days before the climb and felt I was ready to climb Half Dome.

Strategy

We decided we would do four bivies (two bivies at the base of the wall, one on the wall at pitch 17 and one on the trail on the way down). The reasoning behind doing an extra bivy at the base was twofold: One, it was a holiday weekend, and we weren't even sure if we could get a campsite at camp 4 and two, for a little extra food weight (1 dinner and 1 breakfast) we could get half a rest day before we started up. So the first bivy was really in lieu of camping in Yosemite valley for one night. The last bivy was added because I believed if we did make it all the way back down to the car on the last day, I would be in no condition to drive out of the valley to find camping. Also, I have heard that you can get in a lot of trouble if you sleep in or next to your car. So, we figured a trail side bivy on the last day would allow us enough time to get back to the car, leave the valley, and get to Tuolumne Meadows in time to secure a campsite.

We decided to haul a bag for three reasons: One, we weren't sure if we could make it in one day; two, neither one of us had ever done the route; and three, neither one of us had ever done a grade VI climb. Also, we figured if we ever wanted to do a one day ascent we could always come back later and do it once we had the route finding difficulties behind us.

I would carry most of the load to the bivy site and on the descent after summiting, and Ross would do most of the leading. I would essentially blow myself out on the approach so that Ross would be fresh on the wall to do most of the leading. As far as a team effort goes this approach worked well for us. Ross was a superior trad leader, and I can still carry very heavy loads for long periods of time.

Day 1

The Approach

On day one we started our approach from Curry Village at 4:15 PM. We used the John Muir trail and Mist Trail to get to the shoulder of Half Dome and then descended down to the base of the climb. From the Curry Village parking lot, it is approximately a nine mile hike, with about 4000 feet of elevation gain. I carried the 65 pound haul bag while Ross carried a 30 pound Golite jam pack. After about 300 yards of hiking my body went into shock and was telling me to quit. I had to go into a mental trance to keep pushing myself up the trail. When we passed Vernal and Nevada Falls we got drenched by the mist. This was a welcome relief from the heat. We arrived at the Bivy site after the sun had set, and my whole body ached.

1st Bivy

The spring was running well and there was still a lot of snow at the base of the climb. There was another party getting ready to turn in for the night when we arrived. They had fixed to pitch 3 and were going to climb to the pitch 17 bivy the following day. There were a ton of mosquitoes, and I regretted that I hadn't brought any bug spray.

Day 2

We woke up about 9:30 A.M.. I stayed in my sleeping bag for a while and watched the other party jumar to there high point from the day before. We ate breakfast and then started fixing pitches around 11:00 A.M.

Fixing the 1st 3 pitches

Pitch 1 (5.10c)

Pitch 1 started off as class 4 and then turned into a 5.10c finger crack. There is a pin in the middle of crux with an OK piece of cord that Ross grabbed and then he free climbed the rest. The bag got stuck about half way through the pitch. I had to climb up and do a pendulum swing to free it.

Pitch 2 (5.9)

Pitch 2 started with what guidebooks refer to as an awkward 5.7. We both felt this section was a lot harder than 5.7. The 5.9 chimney actually seemed easier than 5.9 to both of us. There was a finger crack in the back of the chimney for protection.

Pitch 3 (5.8 Loose)

There is a human size loose block that could kill you or your belayer about halfway though this pitch.

The Rappel Screw Up

After Rappelling from pitch 3, I realized Ross left the jampack with our gear on the pitch 3 ledge. While we were fixing pitches another party had come up from the "Death Slabs" to fix pitches. So I asked them if they could retrieve our backpack for us. They said, "No problem". It was going to be a long wait to get our backpack, and our water purification drops were in the First Aid Kit in the jam pack. I did not want to get dehydrated, so we started drinking right out of the spring (we never not get sick from it) and then we took a nap. When the other party came down they had forgotten the backpack so Ross jumared back up and got it.

2nd Bivy

Animals around the bivy site ate about half of the other party's food. We noticed that our food did not get broken into by the local animals. We had it in bear bags that I bought from REI. So, I guess they really work. Once again sleeping was a problem as there were a lot of mosquitoes.

Day 3

We started Jumaring in the Dark at 4:15 AM. I immediately wished I had a Gri Gri instead of the ATC I was using to ascend with. It was more work and a lot less secure. The party ahead of us was doing a one day ascent and had left an hour before us. They got one of their fixed ropes stuck and had to rappel to retrieve it. I got the heads up and tied a couple of extra safety knots so I wouldn't have as much rope out. We reached our previous high point in half an hour. When I arrived at the top of pitch 3 the other party was there and had decided to bail. We drank most of their water since they would be able to refill after three rappels. I drink so much that I almost threw up. After organizing the haul bag, which was a major pain in the ass, Ross started climbing. We probably should have started up an hour earlier. Organizing the haul bag and ropes took a lot longer that I thought it would.

Pitch 4 (5.11/C1)

Pitch 4 started off with an overhanging crack that joins up with a bolt ladder. Ross had a hard time transitioning from aid on the bolt ladder to free climbing the 5.9 off hands crack above. When I put on my climbing shoes I noticed that a wall rat had chewed away a lot of my left shoe. I was very concerned about it lasting the rest of the climb.

Pitch 5 (5.9)

The beginning class 3 part was probably more like low 5th class.

Pitch 6 (5.9)

While I was belaying Ross, Madeline Sorken arrived at the belay station. She and Kate Rutherford were attempting to free climb the route in a day, something that had not been done before by an all woman team. What made it even more amazing to me was the fact that they had started from the valley that

morning. When I arrived at the belay station we weren't quite at the end of the pitch. Ross had stopped a little short because he was worried about the drag that would be created hauling the bag over the edge. So, I had to lead a 15 foot pitch to get to the belay station. I finally got to place a cam. The top of pitch 6 is where we let Madeline and Kate pass us. The timing was just about perfect. I don't think either party had to slow down. They were quick and traveling light. I hope they pulled it off.

Pitch 7 (5.8)

We climbed up the slab but turned right before a tree. Then we climbed up and through easier terrain. Ross made a belay station next to two bushes. There are cracks to the left and right of the bushes for protection.

Pitch 8 (5.8)

We traversed right through easy ground to a pin and then up to a bolt. There is no protection on the face, so Ross went straight up the gully until he found a good sloping ledge with bolt anchors.

Pitch 9 (4th/Low 5th)

I did a 4th class traverse right until I was significantly to the right and below the bolt anchors for the Robbins traverse. Once I got to the correct point an obvious 4th low/5th class ramp back to the left appeared. I followed this ramp to get the bolts for the belay. I ran it out because I didn't want a lot of drag, and it was easy. We did not bring a tag line to save weight, so we were using the end of the climbing rope to lower out the haul bag. It was working pretty well until this pitch. Ross could only lower out the haul bag maybe 25 feet with this method on this pitch. The bag took a tremendous swing when he let it go. As a result we lost some water. There wasn't any time to check and see how much. We were starting to run behind schedule. It didn't look to me as if we would make the pitch 17 bivy.

Pitch 10 (The Robbins Traverse, C1)

The first couple of bolts were a "Piece of cake." When I got to the third or fourth bolt I couldn't reach the next bolt. I had to rearrange how I was doing things. I got my fifi hook in the carabineer that was clipped directly to the bolt, then I worked my right foot into the third step and my left foot into the second step. I then used the momentum of pushing off with my right foot to get me to stand tall on my left foot. Then, I reached as far as I could with my right hand to get a quick draw in the next bolt. I then placed my aid ladders in the upper carabineer of the quick draw and clipped the rope to the lower quick draw carabineer. I had to repeat this procedure about 12 times. I finally reached some really old ratty cord attached to three ancient pitons. I clipped into an old rusty leaver biner that ran through the cord. I had Ross lower me out, and I made my pendulum to an obvious hold. After that, it was about a ten foot traverse to the belay station. Prior to Ross making his pendulum swing he backed up the leaver biner with another leaver biner. At least I could have caught him from my belay station if everything blew out, but it still would have been one hell of a long pendulum fall. At that point Ross said something to me about the time. I really just wanted to stay in denial about how late it was, so I told him "It'll be all right" even though I knew we might be headed for another epic.

Pitch 11 (5.9/C2)

Ross aided a couple moves of C2 and was then up on a pretty bomber ledge. He could have done a couple of long 5.10 moves to get from one finger seam to the next (this was well within his leading capability), but his endurance was starting to fade, and we still had 12 more pitches to climb. When he arrived at the belay station he realized he had forgotten the haul line. The pitch was short enough that he was able to throw down his end of the climbing rope to me, and I was able to tie the haul line to it. He pulled it up, and we were back in business.

3rd Bivy

When I arrived at the belay station for pitch eleven, the sun had set, and it was almost dark. The good news was we had only lost 1 liter of water. A water loss experience from a previous climbing trip caused us to pack most of the water into 1 liter containers so that if one of them broke it would not be a catastrophic loss.

The bad news was we were in a conundrum. We had four options: One, we could climb through the night to get to pitch 17 but that would take forever; two we could Bivy where we were and start super early. However, if we took this option we would have to top out once we started climbing and there would be no possibility for a retreat. Also, we were already rationing our water and did not have enough for another bivy on the wall; three we could rappel off the route in the morning. This was not very appealing, because it looked like it would be difficult, sketchy and of course we would not have completed our objective; and four we could jump. We went with option number two.

The bivy was on a 20 inch wide blocky ledge. We had to put the rope in between the rocks in order to flatten it out a little. We slept tied in and with our helmets on. It was not comfortable. I saw a satellite pass overhead before I dozed off.

Day 4

We woke up at 3:30 A.M and got ready for what we felt would be a long and possibly our last day on earth. I did my business in one of our wag bags, and then Ross got up and did the same. After a quick breakfast, I repacked the haul bag and reflaked the ropes. Ross started leading at 4:50 A.M.

Pitch 12 (5.11c/C1)

Ross took the #4s out of the haul bag for the first time and aided up the 5.11c crack. Once he was high enough he did a short pendulum swing to get into the chimney system. The #4s helped him to get off of tension and into the chimney. Ross used all three .5s in the 5.11 crack. I did not have to break out the ascender. I was able to follow easily with a combination of free climbing moves and pulling on some gear.

Pitch 13/14 (5.7/5.9)

We combined these pitches so we would have less problems lowering out the bag on pitch 15 and also to save time. I stayed with the bag while Ross hauled so it would not get stuck. The # 4 came in handy on this pitch as well. The chimneys were not bad for me, but Ross said they were strenuous to lead.

Pitch 15 (5.9)

Pitch 15 starts with a nice short 5.8 hand crack in the back of the chimney for about 20 feet. This leads to a 4th class traverse to the right. I had to climb with the bag a little, and as result I did not have to lower it out.

Pitch 16 (5.9)

From the belay the 4th class ramp continued to the right for quite some time, and it eventually steepened into a 5.9 crack. We belayed from a horn and a bolt. I climbed with the pig to keep it moving and also so it would not swing out onto the face too soon.

Pitch 17 (The Double Crack, 5.9)

I thought this was the best pitch on the route. However, I was too dehydrated and blownout to enjoy it except in retrospect. We traversed right on 4th class to get in the 5.9 crack. After 20 feet of crack climbing we had to turn right to get into the correct crack. The crack is the perfect size for hand jams, but it also has a nice edge in the back that you can grab with your fingers. After a while, there is an obvious ledge to the right that we took to get the " Big Sandy Ledge". We arrived there at noon, only fifteen hours later than planned.

Pitch 18/19/20 (The Zigzags, 5.11d/5.10b/5.11d)

We ate a quick lunch and then started up the zigzags at 12:25 P.M.. The first 30 to 40 feet are 5.9 then it turns into 5.11d. Ross stopped at the top of pitch 18. He was worried about having enough gear and the hauling of the bag. It was a pretty bad belay stance especially since he linked the next two pitches. That made my stay there even longer. If we would have linked pitches 18 and 19 there was a much better belay station at the top of pitch 19. In 1957 Royal Robbins, Gallwas and Sherick actually bivied there on the first ascent. Even though it was a much better belay station than the belay station at the top of pitch 18, a bivy for three climbers looked like it would have been horrendous. Ross back cleaned quite a bit but still managed to use all but one sling linking the two pitches.

Pitch 21 (The Thank God Ledge, 5.8)

Looking at this pitch you can see immediately why this pitch got its name. I could only imagine the elation Royal Robbins felt when he saw this almost perfect crack after a terrible bivy and hard aiding. Ross placed a #1 and a #2 for protection for the traverse. After lowering out the bag, I started the traverse. I had to do a couple of short moves to get up onto the ledge. When I first looked at it I couldn't understand what the big deal was about this pitch. From my perspective, it looked like I could just walk across it. Ross had

already tried this and failed. As I walked farther the ledge narrowed and began to tilt in a more downward direction. Eventually I had to let my legs drop down over the edge and hand jam the crack at the back of the ledge. This was not a big deal, because the hand jams were perfect. At first I just kept moving the #1 forward for protection to prevent a pendulum swing. Then I switched to the #2 as the crack widened. There was a #4 stuck at the end of the ledge. After the "Thank God Ledge" I had to climb up a 5.8 squeeze chimney. It seemed like the easiest way for me to get up the chimney was for me to face outward.

Pitch 22 (C1+)

After climbing the first bolt ladder and lowering out, Ross did a pendulum to the left. At the high point of his pendulum swing he jammed a blue master cam in one of the pods while he was still in motion. That really looked cool! He used the cam as a hand hold. This allowed him to reach the beginning of the next bolt ladder. He back cleaned his pieces so I would have an easier time following. It is possible to climb hard face moves to get to a higher bolt above the highest bolt in the first bolt ladder and then you can make the second bolt ladder without a cam placement.

I followed by ascending the rope. When I got to the top of the first bolt ladder I realized I had no idea how I was going to continue ascending the rope. After I passed the bolt with my ascender, the rope took such an abrupt traverse that my ascender was not going to stay attached to the rope if I continued to ascend. I needed to lower out so that I would be more underneath the rope. Luckily, the other party (David and Josh) that had caught up with us were there to assist me. They showed me how to lower out with a bite of rope and a munter hitch (something I had only read about once and completely forgotten about). It was a pretty wild experience getting some big wall training on pitch 22. While standing there explaining to me how to do this procedure, the piece of cord David was hanging onto gently ripped out of the wall. After ascending to the top of the next bolt ladder, I had to repeat the same procedure again to make the next belay station.

Pitch 23 (C3 and 5.7)

We let Dave and Josh pass us. Dave agreed to trail a line for us and we jumared to the summit. Those guys were awesome. They even helped me haul the bag! We arrived at the summit just after sunset. We were on the Northwest Face of Half Dome for about 40 hours.

If we would have had to lead the last pitch, we would have done an extra 4th class traverse pitch and then headed straight up 5.7 to the top. To go directly to the summit without the extra pitch would have been C3 aid or maybe 5.12 face moves because there is no fixed pin. Josh did it pretty easily after grabbing the last piece of fixed gear, but I think he is a 5.13 Yosemite climber.

The Descent

Once we were on the summit, our only goal was to get water. But first we had to pack up and hike down the cables route in the dark. We have learned from previous experience that the climb is not over until you are back at the car. I told Ross, on the wall, that I would carry all the gear down on the hike to keep him motivated to keep leading. Now it was time for me to suffer. The haul bag when loaded for the descent weighed about 55 pounds. We were so delirious with dehydration that we could not find the cables

descent for several long minutes. Once we did find it we put our rappel gloves on and clipped our daisies to the cables for safety during the descent. Once we were off the cables we ran into a guy bivying. He was hiking the entire Pacific Northwest Trail. After exchanging email addresses, he pointed the way down for us. At that point I got really hot and did not want to dehydrate anymore than necessary. So, I took off my pants and hiked down in my underwear.

4th Bivy

We reached the first creek at about midnight. After drinking a lot of H₂O, we passed out right next to the trail. Ross woke up in the middle of the night remembering that a gel had exploded in his pocket the day before. In his delirium he felt this would ensure he would be eaten by a bear. So he stripped down to his underwear and put his pants in one of the bear bags. When I fell asleep I heard what I thought was a bear, but when I discovered it was just Ross snoring, I laughed my ass off.

Day 5

We woke up to the sounds of hikers discussing two things: One, whether or not our haul bag was a trashcan and two, whether or not they should put their trash in it. One guy almost did. The hike out was physically difficult but technically uneventful. The trail was very scenic, and we stopped often to take in the view. We arrived at our car in Curry Village at 10:15 A.M exactly 90 hours after the journey began. We made it!

Gear list

Protection

2 sets of offset nuts #0-11
Doubles Black Diamond C4 .4 - #4
Black Diamond C3 000- 2
Metolius master cams 00-2
Black Diamond C4 #.3, #.5, #.75
Ball nuts 1-2
2 Cam hooks,
Talon hook
16 24 Inch slings
4 48 Inch slings
4 rope hooks
87 light weight carabineers
13 Small locking carabineers
6 Large locking carabineers
(It would have been better to have 11 small lockers and 10 large lockers)

Other climbing gear

5 daisies
2 rap gloves/auto block
Haul bag
1 left Ascender
2 alpine aiders
1 Minitrac
2 Atc Guides
2 20ft 7 mil
1 GriGris
Ropes 1 10 mil static, 1 10.2 super dry
Helmets
Head lamp + extra batteries
Climbing shoes
Fifi hooks
2 nut tools
Zodiac + extra racking sling

Clothes

2 Polypo base layers
rei taku pants
precip rain jacket
One 12 ounce Down vest to share
Approach shoes

Bivy

2 light weight bivy sacks 3.5 ounces each
2 lightweight sleeping bags
1 sleeping pad spilt in half
Titanium cup
Fuel bottle
Pocket rocket stove
2 Wag bags

Other gear

Black Diamond Touchstone haulbag
Golite Jampack
cell phone
4 trash compactor bags
7 one liter platypuses
2 camelbacks
2 ounces tp
Small lighter

Knife
Whistle
Tape
1st aid kit (6 ounces)
3 bear bags
13lb of food

Afterthoughts about the Gear

Ross did almost all of the leading (20 pitches out of 23) and liked the rack we brought. We did not need or use the cam hooks or talon. We did not use any nuts larger than a #9. We did not use the ball nuts but felt they were a good thing to have just in case. Having two # 4s sped things up since Ross was using a modified form of aid climbing by using them as hand holds. I think no matter what, it would be a good idea to have at least one #4 for protection. Having two gives you a lot more options. We should have brought two Gri Gris. I should have brought two more large locking carabineers. One for tying safety knots while jumaring and one for the clove hitch safety at belay stations.