



AAC Publications

Trust But Verify

The AAJ exists to document important ascents, and so it may be surprising that we will publish reports of great climbs with no proof they actually happened. The notable example from 2013, of course, is Ueli Steck's solo new route on the south face of Annapurna. Steck lost his camera low on the climb, carried no tracking device, and passed the crucial sections of the route, including the summit, late at night. You will find his account of this climb starting on page 12.

It seems almost inconceivable that a heavily sponsored athlete could fail to document the most important ascent of his career. Yet, other than a possible sighting of Steck's headlamp high on the wall from advanced base camp, we have only his word that he climbed up and down Annapurna in 28 hours. That's good enough for the two French climbers, Stéphane Benoist and Yannick Graziani, who followed in Steck's footsteps two weeks later—metaphorically, as his footprints had been erased by snow and wind—and who staunchly defend Steck's ascent against detractors. Given the Swiss climber's extraordinary fitness and unique track record, his ascent seems plausible, and so, unless we receive real proof to the contrary, his word is good enough for us, too.

Countless climbers reach summits without producing any evidence—there are ample aesthetic, stylistic, and practical reasons why someone might not carry or use a phone, GPS unit, or even a camera. We also believe the great majority of climbers—even those paid for their successes in the mountains—are honest about their accomplishments, even though we recognize a few will exploit the general trust of the climbing community. When climbers are not honest, we will not hesitate to say so. To cite just two examples: Bradford Washburn reported extensively in these pages on his long campaign to debunk Cook's claims for the first ascent of Denali, and Rolando Garibotti definitively rebutted Maestri's claims on Cerro Torre in AAJ 2004. In this edition you will find several revisions of the historical record. We derive no pleasure from countering climbers' claims. We simply want to get it right.

We ask a lot of questions even when we have zero reason to suspect dishonesty. In this age of intensive self-reporting through blogs, sponsor websites, Facebook and Instagram feeds, certain key details of an ascent—even whether a summit was reached—often are omitted in the initial accounts. Names are misspelled. East becomes west. We check the facts, clarify descriptions, and provide historical context. When we receive new information on previously published reports, we update the stories at our website (publications.americanalpineclub.org). It is the job of magazines, news sites, and marketing departments to churn out the first drafts of history. We take the longer view.

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