



AAC Publications

Mt. Thielsen, north face, new route (not to summit); east face, Brainless Child

Oregon, Cascades

I believe many alpinists suffer from an obsession or two. I am certainly no exception: My interest with Mt. Thielsen began in 1990 when I procured a copy of Jeff Thomas' guide to the Oregon Cascades. An entry about the McLaughlin Memorial (Bauman-Bauman-Kirk, 1968) on the northeast buttress piqued my interest; mainly, though, I thought there simply had to be a good winter route on that side of the mountain. Fast-forward about 20 years and my interest had morphed into the obsession. Obviously I am no longer a spring chicken—more like a burned-out capon surrounded by much younger roosters. However, the spirit stays young and steadfast in an old body.

As a pilot and owner of a small plane, I had observed the north and east faces of Mt. Thielsen since 2010. This enabled me to see possible lines, and also just how quickly they came in and out of condition. My first trip to Mt. Thielsen, in February 2011 with Kevin Russell, had me probing weaknesses all around the northeast buttress, north face, and northwest ridge. The mountain was very out of condition on that trip, and nothing much of interest came out of it. My next trip, in December 2011 with Tyler Adams and Bill Amos, ended similarly, but we did circumnavigate the entire mountain and saw first-hand the route on the east face that would become the final objective.

I made a third trip, solo, in January 2012 that resulted in a near catastrophe and also a new line on the north face. (It butts into the McLaughlin Memorial route at the final headwall, but I didn't reach the summit.) This line comprised an amazing 700' white streak of s'nice and some vertical water ice. When I roped up to aid a short rock section on the McLaughlin, a hold broke, then two old bolts failed, and I finally came to a rest hanging from my shabby anchor. I would love to say this didn't deter me, but, badly bruised, I soon looked for an escape route. With my aerial knowledge of the east face, I made the decision to head down that direction, choosing the biggest and rightmost gully of the three. Much downclimbing and some marginal rappels got me off.

My Thielsen obsession lay somewhat quenched and dormant for two long years but was inevitably rekindled by looking through some of the old aerial photos. After two reconnaissance flights in early 2014, I was in full-blown relapse: The east face route looked in the best shape I'd seen so far.

A quick call to Tyler Adams and he was in. We left the car at 1:30 a.m. on March 22 to begin our hike up to the east face. After about an hour, we lost the boot track, donned snowshoes, and went straight up through the woods. A quick GPS check showed we were just below the ridgeline, so all was well. We ditched the snowshoes at the junction of the Pacific Crest Trail and then started laboriously post-holing under the west and north faces. Beneath the north face, the snow improved to crampon conditions and our pace picked up. We reached the small saddle between the north and east faces right at sunrise. Another 30 minutes got us to the base of our planned route on the east face at 8 a.m.

There were still two unknowns concerning the route: Firstly, we did not know how we were going to reach the ice, as it cascades over an overhang and does not touch down; secondly, we did not know for sure if the upper gully had a viable exit, as it narrows at the top and was out of sight as I flew by.

I decided the first pitch would go best up a rocky buttress right of the ice. The first pitch was long (65m, 5.9) and had surprisingly fun climbing on even more surprisingly solid rock, with okay

protection. We belayed just right of the ice gully. The next pitch climbed rolling ice (WI3+) up a narrow runnel for 70m. Unfortunately, the next ice pitch was dripping like a waterfall due to the sun. I got one dubious ice screw in the soft, deteriorating ice of this pitch (WI4+), which had a 10m vertical section near the top.

The fourth lead looked easy from below—how many times do I make that mistake! But the ice turned out to be way worse than “not good.” With huge relief, I found a good cam placement on the left side about 10m up. Another 10m runout brought me to a horn, which I slung and then clipped with a couple screamers to weight down the sling; I doubt it would have held a fall, but it reassured me up the final vertical section. Prior to this last bit, the only thing I’d ever climbed with such difficult, rotten ice was Riptide on Mt. Patterson back in 1994. The technique? Gently place an ice tool as high as possible and pull down till it kind of stops, do a quick weight test, close your eyes, and move up, then repeat. Ten meters of this brought me to a great rock belay above the ice.

Two more pitches up a steep snow gully with a small, vertical ice step on each lead brought us to an easy snow couloir leading to the top. The final step below the upper couloir had such thin, rotten ice that I opted to climb the rock to the right, which was actually really fun with fair pro (5.8). Once in the upper couloir, we pretty much simul-climbed, just keeping a snow picket between us. Luckily, the gully was continuous all the way to the ridge just below the summit.

If Brainless Child (2,000', 5.9 WI5+ X) were in good condition, it could be recommended as a committing but safe WI4+ outing. The problem would lie in finding it in those conditions. It is east facing, getting the sun the moment it rises and not losing it until midafternoon. The freeze-thaw from the sun is what makes the ice, but for it to be good ice, it really needs to be climbed when there’s no sun on it. The problem I’ve found with Mt. Thielsen is this: Right after a cold spell, when the weather clears enough to climb, it either tends to be incredibly windy up there or you have too much sun—as we did.

Ice pellets and chunks pummeled us all day, often conveniently arriving in waves right at the cruxes. High up, we had one close call with rock fall. Generally, protection on the leads was marginal, as screws just wouldn’t work; I think I only placed three on the whole route, of which only one was any good. Rock protection was actually good when available, which wasn’t very often. Luckily, the belays were all pretty solid, although I belayed off my harness for all pitches except the bomber anchor at the top of the crux fourth pitch. A huge thanks to Tyler for being an amazing partner on this quixotic quest. I’m sure the vast majority of climbers would have been whining and wanting to bail before we had done two pitches.

[Editor's Note: Tyler Adams passed away on October 12, 2014 in a flying accident. Steve Elder has suggested an alternate name for their climb: "The Tyler Adams Memorial Route".]

Steve Elder

Images



The north face of Mt. Thielsen, seen from the hike in.



Steve Elder starts the impressive second-pitch ice runnel of Brainless Child.



The east face of Mt. Thielsen, seen on an aerial reconnaissance prior to the successful climb. Brainless Child tackles the obvious snow and ice gully in the center of the photo.



Steve Elder leading the first pitch of Brainless Child.



An aerial photo of Mt. Thielsen, with Steve Elder's 2012 route on the north face marked by the black line.



Tyler Adams enjoying the awesome névé on the third pitch of Brainless Child.

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