



AAC Publications

Drug Dome, Northeast Face, High Times

California, Yosemite, Tuolumne Meadows

My first climb in Yosemite was over 20 years ago, and in the months and years I've spent there since I've mostly repeated existing routes. Meanwhile, I've spent many months of my life in faraway places, exploring for new route possibilities. I had not yet tapped into that pioneering spirit here in Yosemite. This year would be different.

In 2012 I spotted the steep, northeast-facing side of Drug Dome, nestled in the shade of tall trees, around the corner from well-trodden classics and hidden in plain view from the dome's descent. The black streaks and seemingly blank rock took root in my subconscious; I dropped a pin on the location in my mental map of possibilities.

One day in July I talked Katie Lambert and Brittany Griffith into checking out the wall and some of the existing single-pitch routes on the northeast side. The prospects were exciting. One of the routes, Red Banner Week, was established by locals Jake Whittaker and Sean Leary. True to their reputation as master climbers, and consistent with a lot of routes in Tuolumne Meadows, this route is hard and committing. After taking some big falls past the crux, I made it into a series of unprotectable traverses. I decided to bail off their bolt and move onto the next option, Spinner, established by Dave Bengston. This route climbs up an easy dihedral for 30' before splitting right and out a 12' roof crack, again protected by a bolt. This route is really cool, hard, and unique in Tuolumne for being so steep.

At the base, the tall trees swayed gently in the breeze, mirroring the long black streaks that draw the eye up this wall. *Are there any other possibilities here?* A few days later I walked to the top of the dome, loaded down with gear and uncertainty. Rappelling down a long static line, I began to scour the wall for signs of a climbable line. Eric Bissell came up for the afternoon, but we never quite found what I was looking for. On another mission I found a few signs that some climber had tried to piece together a climb, but the project seemed abandoned. This section of wall is steep, and the small, knobby holds easily become inadequate for upward progress.

My perceptions changed on my second and third days of trying the old project. On the fourth pitch, a line of knobs links a crack to horizontal holds, and then tiny knobs climb through a roof to the top of the wall. I had found the line. After splitting left from Spinner at 25', I could forge a way through cracks and steep face to finish up the top bulge of the wall. On my fourth day on the route I was accompanied by Ian Nielsen and Ryan Alonzo. Seeing these two folks up there enjoying themselves really helped me to commit to the hard work to follow. They both liked the climbing and the setting, and seemed inspired by the line.

The seventh day on the route was hard. Ian and I spent the day hand-drilling protection bolts and anchors. A few days later (day eight) was Labor Day (literally), and Ian and Steele Taylor helped me put the finishing touches on the route. After nine days of work, the climb was ready for a ground-up attempt.

On day 10, the first pitch went without a hitch. The second pitch requires a bit more skill to surpass the crackless dihedral, with palming, stemming, and micro-knob edging. As I made my way through the crux, I could almost feel the excitement of the onsight, even though I had top-roped the pitch earlier. Pitch three is a joy, with moderate, knobby arête climbing and steep cracks. Pitch four begins

at a cramped belay ledge below a steep crack. There's a loose block (caveat emptor) to get things started and then some pumpy moves up the crack, leading to high-quality, knobby, bouldering-like moves. Leading this pitch took a bit more energy than the top-roped rehearsal I'd done. I found myself at the rest below the roof, shaking out for way longer than I'd anticipated, feeling the pressure to send and simultaneously present this little gift to the world. A few lock-off's, edges, heel-hooks, and knobs later and I was on top. The journey was complete, but the destination had been reached weeks before. I watched gleefully as Katie Lambert worked out the crux, finding her own beta to suit her style—High Times (350', 4 pitches, 5.13b).

– Ben Ditto

Images



Ben Ditto leads the fourth pitch of High Times.

Article Details

Author	Ben Ditto
Publication	AAJ
Volume	58
Issue	90
Page	102
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions