



AAC Publications

Sport + Adventure: Speed Records and a Solo Ascent of the Infinite Spur

Alaska, Alaska Range, Mt. Foraker

Sometimes alpine climbing is all about the adventure, sometimes it is all about the sport, and usually it is partly about both. Adventure is not superior to sport, and sport is not superior to adventure, they're simply different. In 2016, a place like the Mont Blanc massif provides an alpine climbing experience that is 90 percent sport and 10 percent adventure. By contrast, a place like Alaska's Hayes Range provides an experience that is more like 70 percent adventure and 30 percent sport. I deeply appreciate and enjoy both these aspects of alpine climbing.

At the end of a long trip in the central Alaska Range in 2012, I skied from Kahiltna base camp toward the base of the Infinite Spur (ca 2,750m, Kennedy-Lowe, 1977) on the south face of Sultana (Mt. Foraker, 17,400'/5,304m) with a heavy backpack, hoping to make the route's first solo ascent. Having never been on the route before, I would've been in for a very big adventure had I not bailed near the end of the approach, convinced that conditions were too warm.

Before the 2016 season, my friend Rob Smith, who knew of my Infinite Spur solo intentions in 2012, suggested that we could climb the route together, and that afterward I'd be all primed to solo it. I was into the idea straight away. I knew that climbing the route beforehand would detract from the adventure of soloing it, but also would allow me to try the route in a super-lightweight, fast style that would be greater in the sport realm, and simply damn good fun. I also really liked the idea of descending the Sultana Ridge with a partner before doing it alone, as I knew this descent would be one of the most dangerous aspects of soloing the Infinite Spur.

After a period of acclimatization on Denali's West Buttress and the lower portion of the Sultana Ridge, Rob and I skied to the base of the Infinite Spur on May 26. On the 27th we crossed the bergschrund at 5:46 a.m., and after about 2,700m of simul-climbing and simul-soloing, we reached Sultana's summit just past midnight. Our schrund-to-summit time of 18 hours 20 minutes was a new speed record, aided by good conditions and by tracks left on the first half of the route by three British friends. We moved at a more leisurely pace on the descent, stopping in crevasses twice to take naps while sheltered from the wind. At around 6 a.m. on May 29, Rob and I arrived back in Kahiltna base camp. After a few hours of sleep, I gave Rob a hug as he boarded a TAT plane bound for home, a great and successful trip already achieved.

Around 7 a.m. on May 31, after less than two full rest days, I departed Kahiltna base for a second lap on the Infinite Spur, this time by myself. When I crossed the bergschrund at 3:43 a.m. on June 1, I had gotten only a couple of hours of fitful sleep. I think conditions were still a bit better than average, but the earlier tracks were filled in with fresh snow and the snowpack had only partially refrozen during the night. I was nonetheless able to make good time, thanks mostly to my very lightweight kit. I had my crampons, ice axes, helmet, a swami belt, ice axe umbilicals, and two key-chain carabiners (for clipping the axes to my swami belt on the rock climbing portions). I did not carry a single real carabiner, nor a single piece of protection. My only rope was a 15m section of 5mm perlon, which I used to haul my pack twice on the hardest bits.

Considering that the forecast was supposed to be solid until the afternoon of June 3, I was a bit surprised to see it start lightly snowing around 8 a.m. on June 1. Nonetheless, the vast majority of the route felt very casual ropeless, although the sustained blue ice on the upper portion of the Knife Edge Ridge was certainly tedious. The only section where I felt I had to move very slowly to do it safely

without a rope was in the Black Band. Despite being only two rope lengths long, this section took me over an hour to ascend.

At 11:20 a.m. I finished the Knife Edge Ridge and settled in for a rest and brew stop for about an hour and a quarter. I was off again at 12:36 p.m., my pack reloaded with about three liters of warm water. After a bit more 60° ice, I was soon slogging on Sultana's upper slopes. The snowfall from a couple of days earlier made for a bit of trail breaking, but still much better conditions than average. With the technical climbing behind me, I switched from bars to gels, busted out my iPod Shuffle, and dropped the hammer. I had an absolute blast pushing hard on the upper slopes and arrived on the summit at 4:18 p.m.—12 hours 29 minutes after crossing the bergschrund. Considering how big and serious a route the Infinite Spur is in general, it had been a shockingly casual and joyful ascent. [Editor's note: The fastest previous times on the Infinite Spur were about 25 hours, by Rolando Garibotti and Steve House in 2001, and by Samuel and Simon Anthamatten and Andreas Steindl in 2009.]

I made decent time on the first portion of my descent, which follows the upper 1,500m of the Japanese Route (northeast ridge, 1966). By 6:45 p.m. I was taking a break at the junction of the Japanese Route and Sultana Ridge, swapping socks, eating some snacks, and melting more water. I was moving again in less than an hour, and almost immediately the weather socked in badly. From here on, the descent was a long, harrowing blur, done entirely in storm, in which I became progressively more sleep-deprived. From the moment the bad weather came in on the evening of June 1, it took me nearly 48 hours to reach Kahiltna base. During this descent it snowed something like 50–60cm up high, with a lot of wind transport. Avalanche conditions were the sketchiest I have seen in 20 years of skiing and mountaineering.

My biggest problem by far was visibility. I did a decent amount of probing and backtracking, and in one particularly bad instance I did an extra 300m of elevation gain and descent (all with deep trail breaking), when I convinced myself I had accidentally veered off the main ridge. I finally concluded that wasting so many calories to route-finding was dangerous, and I switched to a program where I would only move if I could see something, and then go as fast as I could (not easy with the deep snow). When the visibility was absolutely zero I would simply wait. In one instance I spent six hours in one spot, sitting on my backpack and alternating between bouts of light exercise to stay warm and extremely brief naps with my head resting on my knees. I had consciously packed my clothing fairly conservatively, since I didn't bring bivouac equipment, and was very glad I had.

It was a huge relief to finally arrive at the "Freezy Nuts Castle" (a crevasse where Rob and I had taken shelter while acclimatizing on the Sultana Ridge) around 1 a.m. on June 3. I hadn't had any water or food in about 20 hours, and I was very happy to find our small cache of food and fuel. I also knew that a lot of the route from there out was wanded. When I finally arrived at Kahiltna base around 7:30 p.m. on June 3, I had been awake nearly three full days.

I succeeded in soloing the Infinite Spur in a fun, sporty fashion, and by accident I ended up getting all the adventure I ever could've wanted—and way more. In the end it wasn't "worth it" in terms of all the risk I faced. It was simply way too dangerous, and I'm not proud of that. I am proud, however, that given the very serious situation I stayed levelheaded, made the safest decisions possible, and got back without incident.

Summary: One-day (18 hours 20 minutes) ascent of the Infinite Spur (Kennedy-Lowe, 1977) on the south face of Mt. Foraker, by Colin Haley and Rob Smith, May 27, 2016. Solo ascent of the Infinite Spur (12 hours 29 minutes) by Haley, June 1, 2016.

Images



Rob Smith at the end of the technical difficulties on Mt. Foraker's Infinite Spur, with the Lacuna Glacier stretching out below. The first ascent of the Infinite Spur (Alaska Grade 6 5.9 M5 AI4) in 1977 took Michael Kennedy and George Lowe seven days from the bergschrund to the summit. Haley and Smith climbed the route on May 27 in 18 hours 20 minutes.



Rob Smith climbing the side of the Ice Rib on the Infinite Spur of Mt. Foraker during his and Colin Haley's one-day ascent on May 27.



Looking back down while soloing through the first crux in the Black Band of the Infinite Spur on Mt. Foraker.



Climbing through the second crux of the Black Band on the Infinite Spur of Mt. Foraker. Colin Haley soloed the route in 12 hours 29 minutes on June 1.



Looking down from near the top of the Knife-Edge Ridge on Mt. Foraker's Infinite Spur.



Self-portrait while taking a rest stop to melt snow at the end of the Knife-Edge Ridge on Mt. Foraker's Infinite Spur.



The "Freezy Nuts Castle," where Rob Smith and Colin Haley sheltered during acclimatization for the

Infinite Spur. The cache they left here was Haley's salvation during his solo descent.



Colin Haley near the end of the long descent off Foraker.

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