



AAC Publications

Culmination: The Complete Southwest Ridge of K7 West

Pakistan, Karakoram, Masherbrum Mountains

IN THE SUMMER of 2014, Ryo Masumoto, Takaaki Nagato, and I aspired to reach the summit of unclimbed Badal Peak (ca 6,100m) and then traverse to K7 West (6,615m). Badal is located on the north side of the Charakusa Glacier in the eastern Karakoram. Although we had some success, making the first ascent of Badal Peak by a 58-pitch new route, over four days of climbing, we could not complete the traverse. After seven more pitches along the ridge toward K7 West, poor weather, lack of food, unstable conditions, and an injury to Masumoto's knee forced us to retreat.

Badal Peak was named after the first route climbed up one of the huge rock walls along the west and southwest sides of the mountain. Four climbers completed the west face over 15 days in 2007, but they did not continue to the summit. Since then, at least five parties have attempted or climbed various routes on these walls and pinnacles, but none got higher than the 2007 team until our climb.

In the summer of 2017 we were back on the Charakusa Glacier. This time, Masumoto and Yusuke Sato had their eye on a big-wall free climb (see page 283). Nagato and I had two possible objectives in mind. One was the southwest ridge of K7's main peak (6,934m), one of the last major projects remaining in this area. But since much of this ridge had already been traced by various parties, there was less of the unknown, and so it no longer had as much appeal. On the other hand, the traverse from Badal Peak to K7 West felt more alluring, especially if we started the lower wall with the untouched buttress just to the left of the line we had previously climbed.

Upon arriving at base camp in July, we began acclimatization in the surrounding mountains. However, because of bad weather, we were unable to go higher than 5,800 meters.

On August 2, Nagato and I gathered all of our ropes and headed for the foot of Badal's southwest face at about 4,300 meters. Ordinarily, we might have tried the climb to K7 West in one push, but this lower section would be one of the keys to the climb and would take some time to negotiate. We'd be unlikely to enjoy much free climbing en route to K7 West. Therefore we decided to spend a day fixing ropes, with thoughts to take pleasure in free climbing for at least one day. Both the leader and follower free climbed all day, on solid 5.11 terrain. After nine pitches we deposited some gear on a small terrace and descended, fixing all the ropes. [This new start ascends a prominent pillar in between the 2014 Japanese route (on the right) and a 900-meter pillar climbed by Marko Prezelj and Maxime Turgeon in 2007.]

We rested for two days and then left base camp at 3 a.m. on August 5. As the light grew in the east, we started up our fixed ropes. At our high point, we threw down a haul bag with six ropes that were now unnecessary (safely recovered on the day after our descent). Above this point, we had already decided that Nagato would lead all the remaining pitches on the rock wall, and then I would take the lead higher up. Nagato had the ability to easily cope with the rock climbing, and I was more experienced for the alpine terrain of the traverse, plus I was accustomed to climbing with heavy loads. Unless we sought maximum efficiency, the difficulty of this mountain could not be overcome.

Up to 5.10, Nagato led with light loads and I carried a 15kg pack. The angle of the wall generally did not allow simul-climbing. On harder pitches, Nagato led with no pack and hauled our heavier pack, using a thin rope we had brought; I then followed him with a light load, sometimes climbing with a

Micro Traxion for self-belay, sometimes jugging.

At the end of our second day—the third day including fixing—we joined our earlier route at approximately 5,600 meters, after 27 pitches of climbing. The route-finding on the buttress was complicated, and the wall was so steep in places that we relied on aid climbing many times. This was more time-consuming than we had expected, and it wasn't until the afternoon of the third day that we finished the lower rock wall. The top was guarded by a 60-meter rock face with just a single crack splitting it, which we aided up. Above this we carried on, simul-climbing for another 1,000 meters of ice and snow mixed with rocks, losing elevation to four rappels off gendarmes that blocked the way. We stood on top of Badal Peak right at sunset. It was our second time on this summit, and we knew we still had a long way to go.

The ridge beyond Badal Peak toward K7 West is a complex mix of rock towers and snow and ice walls, with the challenge created more by complicated route-finding than by technical difficulty. Speedy and wise use of tactics such as rappelling and simul-climbing was essential. The big question mark on the upper route was a steep rock buttress in the last part of the ridge. As we neared the buttress on the fourth day of the climb, we suddenly changed plans and decided to detour around on the north side of the ridge, which would mean climbing beneath a 30-meter-high serac. The serac had looked awful from a distance, but as we got closer it seemed relatively stable. We could not say there was no danger, but to go the other way would have caused another risk. Our first priority was how speedily we passed through this crucial point. If we had gone for the other route, we would have failed to reach the summit.

To reach the ice below the serac, we first made a full 60-meter rappel off the ridge. Then, for two hours, we climbed across a 60–65° ice wall. This was roughly the same path followed in 2011 by the Slovenians Nejc Marcic and Luka Strazar, who reached this point after climbing the northwest face, while making the third ascent of K7 West. Near the top, we found a crevasse through the serac wall that gave access to the summit plateau. Nagato joined me and we decided we'd bivouac there. As there was still plenty of light, we started climbing toward the summit, about 200 meters above us. But the snow was so soft in the afternoon sun that we were forced to make a snowplow to the waist. In ten minutes we gave up. We got into our sleeping bags, planning to start again before dawn the next day.

We woke at 1 a.m. with snow falling on our tent. The snowfall got stronger and blasts of powder snow incessantly hit the tent. We spent a sleepless night, wondering, "Will it be possible to reach the summit tomorrow?"

At 4 a.m. we looked outside: Luck was with us—the snow had stopped. Though we were worried about bad conditions, there was less new snow than expected and the snow was firmer on the slope above the tent. We filled a small pack with water and simple food and started up. For two hours we climbed the broad snow ridge until finally Nagato belayed me up a 30-meter pitch to where the slope eased off. In thick clouds, we couldn't even see our own feet. We crouched and felt the snow around us, and finally determined we were right on the summit.

We took a few pictures, buried a snow picket, and rappelled off the summit five minutes after getting there. When we got back to the bivouac site, we could see glimpses of blue sky. We packed the tent and started down the northwest face, more or less following the Slovenian line. The free-hanging rappel off the first serac from a single snow picket was dreadful. However, once we were onto the northwest face, we found good anchors on rock spikes and V-threads. Another storm moved in during the descent, and soon we were soaked. Finally on the glacier, we set up the tent and recovered the feeling of life and comfort. Before noon the next day we were safely back to base camp. The six long days were over.

NEITHER NAGATO NOR I indulged in happy and pleasant moods throughout our time on the mountain. We were preoccupied from early morning until night. The only time I felt I could relax was while having some instant soup in the tent each evening. Nonetheless, I cannot remember experiencing more fulfilling and satisfactory climbing in my 30 years of mountaineering life. Which was the most interesting or most difficult among my climbs in the past? I can't simply compare or rank them. The only answer to this question is that the K7 West traverse was the outcome of a lifetime of achievements in mountaineering so far.

My experiences on the frozen giants of Alaska, the Himalaya, and South America fostered not only an improvement of mixed climbing technique but also stepping up skills and mental strength, making it possible not to give up climbing even in the most miserable conditions. The enchainment of two hard routes on Denali over a week of climbing in 2008 and the first ascent of Mt. Logan's southeast face in 2010 are good examples.

Next we focused on the Fitz Roy massif in Patagonia, where real rock climbing feats were essential—both improved rock technique and sustained power for speedy and long-time climbing were required. During five seasons in Patagonia I made some first ascents and free climbs. But it was always my aim and serious desire to put the abilities gained in Patagonia to practical use in the high Himalaya. I believed that the experiences in Patagonia would only be fully rewarded when they were actually practiced in all-round mountaineering.

To be frank, our technique and power of ten years ago would not have been sufficient for this expedition. The lower rock wall on Badal Peak was so huge and difficult to climb that the experiences in Patagonia were undoubtedly very useful. However, even greater skills and technique than those we'd mastered in Yosemite and Patagonia would not have ensured our success on the traverse to K7 West. Here, the route required tougher strength, complex route-finding, speedy and right action to minimize danger, and the mental pressure inevitable in alpine-style climbing. Unless we had these abilities, acquired in the greater ranges of Alaska and the Himalaya, we could not have succeeded on the full K7 West traverse.

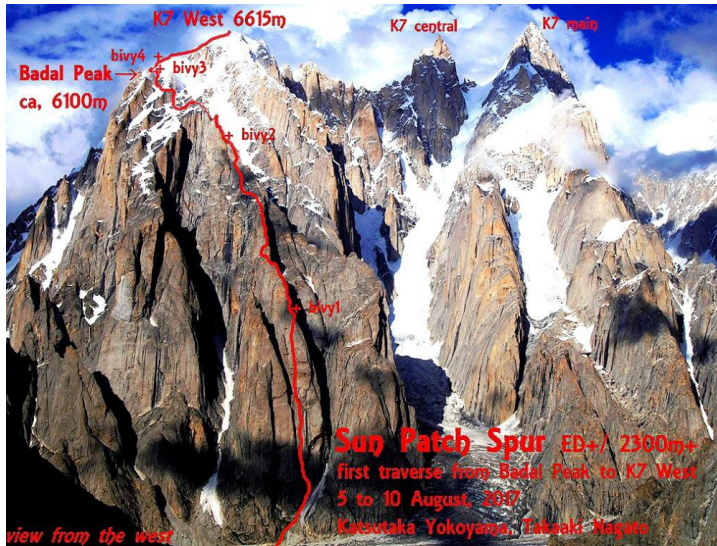
During this expedition the sun came and went. Often the sky was covered with clouds, and we were often tossed about by rain and snow. Sometimes the bright sun of the Karakoram appeared, not only to softly warm us but also to scorch us as if we were in hell. Good weather blessed us during most of the final climb, but on the morning of the summit day we were filled with uneasiness due to snowfall. Recollecting that we had been at the mercy of sun, we chose the name Sun Patch Spur for our route.

This name has an additional meaning too. Coincidentally, all four of us on this expedition were born in the same year, 1979, and thus we were all 38 years old during our time in the Karakoram. The number 38 is pronounced *sanju-hachi* or *san-pachi* in Japanese, the latter being not just a casual but also endearing way to say it. Since Sun Patch sounds very similar to *san-pachi* in Japanese, the name felt like a way to bless these 38-year-old climbers, who were all very happy to achieve their ideal ascents in the greater Himalaya.

Summary: First complete ascent of the southwest ridge of K7 West (6,615m) by the Sun Patch Spur (ED+ 5.11c R A2 M5 90°), by Takaaki Nagato and Katsutaka Yokoyama, August 5–10, 2017. The two Japanese first climbed a partial new route up the southwest face of Badal Peak (ca 6,100m), then traversed the upper southwest ridge of K7 West to the summit. With six rappels en route, the climb gained well over 2,300 meters; the total climbing distance was approximately six kilometers. They descended the northwest face.

About the Author: Katsutaka "Jumbo" Yokoyama was born in 1979 and began mountaineering at age eight. He lives in Yamanashi Prefecture, Japan, with his wife, Chihiro, and two sons, Yoh and Kan. Tamotsu Nakamura assisted with translation for this article.

Images



View of the K7 group from the southwest, with the 2017 Japanese route marked.



Beyond Badal Peak the traverse is a complex mix of rock towers and ice walls. “The challenge is created more by route-finding than by technical difficulty.”



K7 from Beatrice to the northwest. The Badal Wall is the large rock face in right center, culminating in Badal Peak. The Japanese traversed the pinnacled skyline left to K7 West. They descended the sunlit northwest face in center.



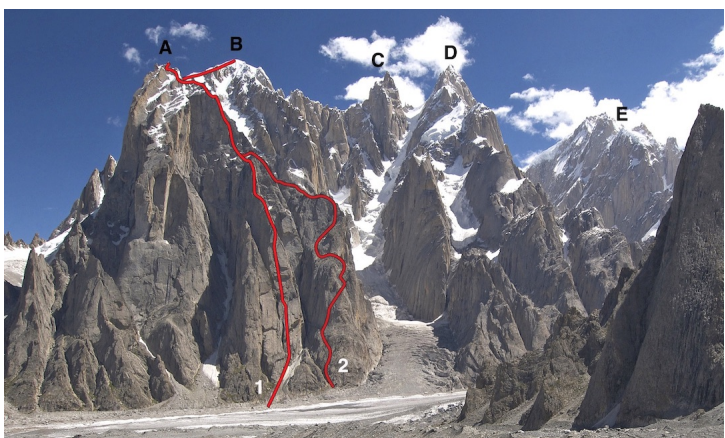
Nagato (left) and Yokoyama on the summit. "The K7 West traverse was the outcome of a lifetime of achievements in mountaineering."



Moving toward the difficult exit through the serac wall on day four of the climb.



Nagato leading on the lower wall. The pair climbed and fixed nine pitches, with much 5.11, three days before starting their push for the summit.



K7 group showing (A) Badal Peak, (B) K7 West, (C) K7 Central, (D) K7 Main, and (E) Link Sar massif. Route 2 shows Japanese climb to Badal Peak in 2014. Route 1 shows 2017 route to Badal Peak and continuation to K7 West (much of the upper traverse is hidden). Other routes and attempts not shown.



Along the traverse between Badal Peak and K7 West.

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