



AAC Publications

Freerider

Free Solo on El Capitan

ON JUNE 3, I free soloed Freerider on El Capitan, the culmination of an eight-year dream. The year and a half I took to actually realize the climb has, at this point, been well documented. The story of that journey is told in an upcoming documentary film, titled *Free Solo*. I also added 30,000 words to a revised edition of my book, *Alone on the Wall*, which will come out this year. In this space, I simply aim to cover the nuts and bolts—the exact variations and methods I used, just in case anyone wants to repeat a very minor new route.

What I mean by “new route” is that I didn’t exactly free solo the original Salathé Wall and Freerider link-up. (Freerider, first climbed by Alex Huber in 1995, is a series of variations to the 1961 Salathé Wall route, creating a 5.12d/13a climb that is significantly easier than the original Salathé as a free climb.) I followed most of the traditional route but also pioneered a few variations here and there to avoid insecure moves and sections that I didn’t like.

It may not sound like a big deal, but for me there was a significant mental shift when I realized that I didn’t need to stay on the original line. When you’re not constrained by the need to place protection, it turns out you can go anywhere you want on the wall. In this way, soloing is actually kind of liberating. My goal was simply to climb El Cap without a rope; I didn’t care about any specific route or grade.

I HAD PREVIOUSLY free soloed the West Face (5.11c) and the East Buttress (5.10b) of El Capitan, but neither of them is considered a *real* El Cap route. These two routes bookend the nearly 115 *real* routes that climb the iconic, sheer face. Of these, some 16 routes have been free climbed (a total that increases every year or two), and most of them are much too hard and insecure to imagine ever free soloing.

Over the many years that I dreamed of free soloing El Cap, the only two routes I seriously considered were Freerider (5.12d or maybe 5.13a if you climb the Boulder Problem) and Golden Gate (5.13a and quite sustained). Golden Gate was really just a worst-case backup for the Freerider. If I ended up deciding that the crux of Freerider, pitch 23, simply felt too insecure to solo, then I could plan to branch onto Golden Gate a few pitches lower and follow that to the summit instead.

I also briefly considered climbing the first 10 pitches of the Muir Wall as a possible alternative to the Freeblast (the first 10 pitches of the Salathé Wall, rated 5.11), because the Muir is mostly crack climbing and therefore more secure than the tenuous friction slabs on the Freeblast. But the Muirblast also includes a 5.13b undercling traverse, which seemed less than ideal for free soloing.

These are the tradeoffs of free soloing. Is it worth climbing something harder to feel more secure? At what point is the added physical difficulty not worth it? There are no set answers—I just considered every option and followed my gut.

IN THE FALL OF 2016 I worked the Freerider extensively in preparation for the potential solo, but I

ran into a few problems. There was limited shade on the wall in the fall—it was quite cold in the morning before the sun rose, but as soon as the sun crested the opposite rim of the Valley it beat directly onto the wall, creating a solar oven. It went from too cold to too hot almost instantly, which made it challenging to climb the 3,000-foot route in decent conditions. But the bigger problem was that I seriously sprained my ankle in a careless slip on the Freeblast slabs. It didn't break, thankfully, and would eventually recover fully, but I struggled to hike or put on a climbing shoe for the full time I was in the Valley that season.

Nevertheless, by the middle of November I'd done enough rehearsal on the Freerider that I felt vaguely close to being able to solo the route. The weather was closing down for the season, and I figured I should give it one good try before winter.

I started in the dark since I needed to get to the crux before the sun hit it. It felt cold and my shoe felt too tight—my injured foot was still swollen. I felt nervous and climbed poorly. I climbed up to the crux of the Freeblast slab (pitch five) before I finally succumbed to my uneasiness and grabbed a bolt. Then I French-freed my way up the rest of the slab, disappointed that I wasn't sending but happy to be done. From Heart Ledge, I rappelled to the ground with a borrowed sling and carabiner. I'd failed to free solo Freerider. But I had climbed the Freeblast without a rope, which was at least a first step. I considered the whole experience to be good progress.

WHEN I CAME BACK to the Valley for the spring season, I spent the first week exploring some new free climbing potential on the right side of El Cap with Sonnie Trotter. At the time, it felt like a distraction from my real mission, but everything was still super wet from the winter, so I didn't mind the delay. It took me a little longer to understand that the days that we spent swinging around and looking for holds fundamentally shifted my perception of what might be possible for my solo.

After Sonnie left, I returned to preparations on the Salathé and Freerider with much broader vision. Suddenly the route was less defined. If I didn't like a few moves on a certain pitch, I would consider traversing in above them or even try to avoid the entire pitch. Don't like a particular sequence? Find a way to skip it! That became my new motto.

There had always eight sections that I considered scary to solo, listed here from most to least serious: the 5.13a Boulder Problem on pitch 23, the two Freeblast slab pitches, the Enduro Corner (5.12d), the 5.12a traverse to the Round Table, the 5.11c slab leaving Heart Ledges, the 5.12a downclimb to reach the Hollow Flake, and the 5.11d traverse to the Monster Offwidth.

The Boulder Problem, the Enduro Corner, and the Round Table traverse were each immutable—there was no way to avoid any of them. Each was a key weakness linking distinct parts of the wall.

The Freeblast slab pitches, by contrast, are an arbitrary line meandering through an enormous sea of granite. These pitches were defined only by where Royal Robbins, Chuck Pratt, and Tom Frost had chosen to go on the first ascent of the Salathé. While their ascent was visionary, they mostly weren't free climbing—in fact, sticky rubber shoes hadn't yet been invented. No one had ever really looked around for the easiest possible passage.

Before investigating alternatives to the slabs, however, I found my first successful variation on the pitch leaving Heart Ledges. This is a fun pitch of mostly 5.10 crack climbing that has one extremely slippery 5.11c slab move in the middle. I jugged up the fixed lines to the Heart and rope soloed the pitch above with the intention of rehearsing that thin slab move until I could make it feel secure. But once I began swinging around on rappel, I realized that I could probably just loop around the thin slab problem and rejoin the cracks above. To my delight, I discovered the variation was 5.10c knob climbing—it was completely unprotectable and probably impossible to lead in the normal sense, but

much easier and more secure than the original route. I couldn't wait to apply my new strategy to the rest of the pitches on my list.

I spent a few mornings rappelling down the Freeblast, swinging from side to side and looking for straighter or easier possibilities. I even considered harder but more secure possibilities—again, the tradeoffs of soloing. Rob Miller had placed bolts near pitch five on the Freeblast as part of a new route between the Nose and Salathé that would later become the Platinum Wall (39 pitches, 5.13+, see page 114). For a brief time I thought that I preferred the Platinum Wall slab because, unlike the Freeblast, it had handholds (albeit marginal), but ultimately I decided to stick with the original line—the insecure 5.11b on the Freeblast that I'd done dozens of times over the years beat out the slightly more secure 5.12a on the Platinum Wall. The Freeblast slab also held a much smaller chance of breaking a foothold than the newer route to the right.

Eventually I realized that I could bypass most of the second Freeblast slab (pitch six, 5.11a) by simply climbing 25 feet to the right and following a big, blocky buttress-like feature. To exit this feature, I had to pioneer a challenging traverse back left onto the normal pitch. But this variation cut off the majority of a slab that I'd always found terribly insecure. Instead of 20 moves on glassy, tenuous smears, I would have a 10-move traverse with only one really insecure move. The full pitch remained 5.11a, since I would still do the same crux at the top, but at least I could get there more securely.

MY NEXT "VARIATION" was one that had already been established: the traverse left to Bermuda Dunes before the Ear on pitch 18 of the Salathé. This is an alternative way to access the very bottom of the Monster Offwidth on Freerider, where it's still a pleasant hand crack. (It's also much easier for short people who can't make the span to the Monster up above.) While I can't take credit for the discovery, I did clean it up; after rappelling to the ground with a backpack full of rocks, I could tick this one off the list as well.

The final section of the wall that I investigated was the traverse to the Hollow Flake, a pitch that normally requires at least 100 feet of polished downclimbing. I considered climbing higher up into the Heart formation and skipping this traverse pitch entirely, but it seemed too difficult to get back over to the Salathé. I also considered traversing left a few hundred feet lower, but that slab looked futuristically difficult. I spent two different sessions examining the options around the Hollow Flake. Ultimately, I just practiced the normal sequence as much as I could. There was no better option, so I set myself to the task of making the normal way feel as secure as possible.

During this time, I discussed the Hollow Flake traverse with my friend James Lucas, expressing my concern for the thin tips liebacking on the downclimb.

"Why don't you use the big block out to the left?" he asked.

"What block? I think you're thinking of the wrong pitch," I responded. I'd spent two full sessions on that section of the wall. There wasn't some secret jug hidden off to the side.

"No, there's a block off to the left. I've always done it that way. You'll see," James replied.

Sure enough, the next time I was on the pitch, I found the little wedged block off to the left, hidden by a tiny overlap in the wall, right where I needed it. With James' new beta, the pitch suddenly felt secure.

Preparing for the rest of the route simply meant rehearsing the Boulder Problem and the upper corners, memorizing the difficult moves that I knew I couldn't avoid. The beauty of the crux boulder

problem and the Enduro Corner was that they involved relatively “normal” climbing. Unlike the Freeblast slabs and similar pitches, which required smearing my feet against seemingly random patches of smooth rock, the difficult upper pitches had actual holds. That meant that as I got stronger and knew the pitches better they actually felt easier, whereas the Freeblast slabs never really felt easy or hard, just slippery and insecure.

MY WHOLE SPRING SEASON in Yosemite was focused around the list of pitches that I needed to work on. By the end of May, I’d scratched everything off my list. If I was ever going to solo the route, now was the time. But then it rained a day, which required rappelling the wall again to make sure nothing had gotten too wet or started seeping. And that took a whole day of effort, which necessitated yet another day to rest. Well, if I was ever going to solo this route, now was really the time.

On June 3 I woke up early, drove to the east end of El Cap meadow, and strolled up to the base of the wall with nothing but my shoes and chalk bag. I started climbing at first light, knowing that I had about five hours of shade until the crux went into the sun. It was slightly warmer and more humid than I would have liked, but it didn’t really matter anymore—I was committed. I was an Olympic gymnast starting up a 3,000-foot floor routine, executing a long-rehearsed sequence on autopilot. All I had to do was lace up and perform.

The climbing went even more smoothly than I could have hoped. My only scary moment was on the second Freeblast slab, when I had to do the awkward step down from my new variation into the crux of the normal route. I knew it would be a scary move and it was, but I also knew exactly how to do it. So I ignored the scariness and did what I was supposed to do.

As I climbed higher, I felt more and more confident. My feet felt welded to the wall and my body felt light and strong. There was no fatigue. If anything, I felt stronger as I got higher.

At the Boulder Problem I dropped even deeper into autopilot mode—I climbed it exactly as I always had in rehearsal but without the rope this time. It felt perfect. And when I reached the finishing jug, after the ten most important moves of climbing in my life, I knew the route was in the bag. I still had the Enduro Corner and traverse to the Round Table above me—three guidebook pitches of 5.12 in a row, with no great rests—but they weren’t nearly as intimidating as the crux. I felt strong and knew they wouldn’t be a problem.

I forced myself to stay calm and not rush, but as soon as I made it around to the Round Table I checked my phone and saw that I was on track to break four hours for the ascent. With all the hard climbing now below me, I stopped holding back and charged for the finish.

The last four pitches got easier and easier, and I summited at a near jog, racing up the final slab. Years of dreaming and several seasons of effort had all come together in 3 hours and 56 minutes of climbing. I’d done the first free ascent of a very minor new route on El Cap. I’d set some kind of speed record. But most importantly, I’d finally climbed El Cap without a rope.

Summary: Free solo of Freerider (33 guidebook pitches, with variations, 5.12d/13a) by Alex Honnold—the first free solo of one of the main faces of El Capitan in Yosemite Valley. Honnold climbed the route in 3 hours 56 minutes on June 3, 2017.

About the Author: Alex Honnold, 33, is an aspiring sport climber.

Images



Approximate line of the Salathé Wall–Freerider linkup, showing key landmarks: (1) Solo variation to pitch six of the Freeblast. (2) Variation off Heart Ledges. (3) Downclimb and traverse to Hollow Flake. (4) Monster Offwidth. (5) Boulder Problem Pitch. (6) Round Table Traverse.



Alex Honnold completing the downclimb before traversing left to Hollow Flake. The 5.12a variation is one key to free climbing the Salathé and Freerider. Preparing for his solo, Honnold sought an alternative to the downclimb but eventually committed to simply rehearsing the moves. A friend revealed a hidden hold that made this section feel secure.



Alex Honnold in the Monster Offwidth section of Freerider during his free solo ascent of El Capitan.



Honnold on top of El Capitan, preparing to fix ropes to work on the climb.



Safely on the summit, a little under four hours after starting. "Honestly, I feel like I could go do

another lap right now," Honnold told National Geographic later that day.

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