



AAC Publications

Royal Robbins, 1935 – 2017

The morning of March 14, 2017, Royal Robbins passed away, a man who stamped us with his elegance and class. The American Alpine Journal published an article of Royal's in 1963, when I was a high school kid. I was moved especially by one line:

What was the significance of our adventure? None. So we took it for what it was, a meaningful experience which awakened our minds to a lust for life and a keener awareness of beauty.

I still like that passage, the way it describes what it is to climb and the paradox that something can be of no significance yet be meaningful and mind-awakening. I was young, and his words made me think.

Every climber worth his salt has a sense of Royal's many accomplishments. A few stand out. Years ago, I listened intently when Royal told me of his repeat of Tom Higgins' Jonah (6 pitches, 5.10+ R) on Tahquitz Rock in 1964. He later would write to me about it, "It was very hard, and I was determined to get up it, because Higgins had done so. I got up it, but I remember it as the hardest climb I had done up to that point." Soon after, also in 1964, Royal led Athlete's Feat in Boulder Canyon: four pitches of 5.10, the first of which he managed without chalk, entirely unprotected, at the risk of a ground fall onto a blade of rock. This pitch would be identified a few years later as solid 5.11, among the first in the country and one of the boldest. The crux is now bolt-protected.

Of course there were Royal's great pioneering adventures in Yosemite, which included a fast, day-and-a-half second ascent of the North Wall of Sentinel (later called the Steck-Salathé) in 1953, with similarly young Jerry Gallwas and Don Wilson, all three in tennis shoes, and in 1956 the first ascent of the Northwest Face of Half Dome, with brave Gallwas and Mike Sherrick. Half Dome was the first wall in this country of such an order of magnitude. Royal's climb in 1960 of the Nose of El Capitan, the wall's second ascent, with Joe Fitschen, Tom Frost, and Chuck Pratt, was a visionary, committing achievement without fixed ropes. Above all, perhaps, was Royal's sojourn in 1961, with Pratt and Frost, up into the white granite of El Cap's Salathé Wall.

It is hard to imagine so great and strong a soul could be reduced by illness, along with older age, to near paralysis. He had reached a point where he no longer was able to say much. He could not see the chess board or play Sudoku. His PSP (progressive supra-nuclear palsy) had made things increasingly difficult for Liz, his wife, for quite a long time, even with helpers. She was his faithful companion to the end. I spoke for an hour with Royal's daughter Tamara the early evening after he passed away, and she shared with me things about their family, a few of which verged on guarded secrets. Every famous or even slightly famous person fears that the realities of his or her life will be exposed. I have never been intimidated or disappointed by the imperfections of my friends. It is my belief that we are here to learn, and there would be nothing to learn if we were perfect. Tamara said Royal's faith had more or less failed, by the end. I did not care about this, because given another few months or years he would have turned it around again. There was enough greatness, in any direction one wanted to look, to define him.

Robbins, our Royal, that mighty heart that traversed high, our captain, the bearded Duke of Exeter, with that professional grade of seriousness, was and would remain precious to us. His name is in all of Yosemite's declivities. When I met him, in 1963, he seemed so...evolved. I had no idea how people could come to the world so far "ahead" in many ways. People such as Royal and John Gill seemed to

know about integrity before anyone could have taught them. For others of us, many of life's most important ascents have only in part to do with rock. Each of us, Royal included, is a potpourri of imperfections, and our life is, if not to fully overcome, to know and confront those imperfections.

In an email dated October 30, 2008, Royal reflected about an extremely well-attended show Layton Kor gave in Boulder: "The more I hang around, the more clear it becomes to me that I have many sorry qualities, and that wanting to be a 'hero' is one of them."

Royal was his own enigma, which reminds me of a line from a poem by Howard Nemerov, poet laureate of America:

...it is not knowing, it is not keeping,

But being the secret hidden from yourself.

I loved Royal when I first saw him in those early AAJ photos from the Salathé Wall. I loved him the evening at the Longs Peak shelter cabin in 1963 when we stepped surreptitiously into each other's lives, and I would love him at every point along the way after that. When he and I climbed, I tried to avoid any little *cri de coeurs* of distress or indignation, which were a bit more readily at the flow when I was roped to Layton Kor, that beautiful gatekeeper between happiness and fear. I think of a photo I took that was published in *Quest* magazine, in which Royal leads the steep Horn Pitch on Shiprock, in 1964, the caption, "Man Is His Own Star." Nothing was more true about a person than those words—to suggest a life, and the life, of Royal Robbins.

– Pat Ament

Images



Royal Robbins on Shiprock.

Article Details

Author	Pat Ament
Publication	AAJ
Volume	60
Issue	92
Page	371
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	In memoriam