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The Trifecta: All Free, No Falls, In a Day on the Three Howser Towers

Canada, British Columbia, Purcell Mountains, Bugaboo Provincial Park

THE IDEA of linking the three Howser Towers in a single day dawned on me back in 2010. It was my second season in a row climbing above the East Creek Basin; the year before, Jason Kruk, Matt Segal, and I had done the first free ascent of the west face of Central Howser. Now, as Andrew Rennie and I raced up the 1,000-meter All Along the Watchtower on the North Tower, I thought about some of my climbing heroes. Peter Croft, Dave Schultz, Sean Leary, Tommy Caldwell, Dean Potter, and Leo Houlding had enchainned multiple walls free in a day in Yosemite. Why not bring the same concept to the alpine arena of the Bugs?

In January of 2016, I sent Leo an email out of the blue with an image of the towers—three rocket-ship needles, side by side—and spilled my guts about the idea. Given his busy schedule and young family, I didn't really think he'd be able to swing the trip. To my surprise and elation, he responded that he was in. The next summer we teamed up for a couple of weeks in the Bugs and climbed the Beckey-Chouinard, the classic route up South Howser's west side, along with All Along the Watchtower and a first free ascent on the Minaret. Individually, they went down easily enough. But the trifecta seemed intimidating and unlikely.

This past August, Leo and I arrived in the Bugaboos with Wilson Cutbirth, Waldo Etherington, and Adrian Samarra, who were hoping to get some virtual-reality footage of the Beckey-Chouinard and to make a short film about our planned linkup. I was psyched to have them there, but also felt nervous. I had convinced these guys to come all the way to the Bugaboos to make a film about a linkup I wasn't even sure I could achieve.

We fixed ropes top to bottom on the Central Tower to facilitate training laps on Chocolate Fudge Brownie, the hardest of the three climbs, and to enable a fast descent. Not the best style, I'll be the first to admit, but at the time it felt like a necessary step. After two weeks we were still unsure whether it would be safe to climb the North Howser after climbing Central, because of all the simul-climbing that would be required. And the Beckey on the south tower after that? We vowed to play it as safe as possible and "stay on the right side of the wild line," as Leo put it.

On the evening of August 28, we stood at the Howser bivy boulder and each took a nip of Captain Morgan's Spiced Rum, toasting a gorgeous sunset over the wild, uninhabited valley to the west. Leo and I woke at 3:30 a.m., marched up to the base of the Central Howser, and started climbing at dawn. After about five hours of grueling cracks, corners, and the delicate 5.12+ slab crux of Chocolate Fudge Brownie, we had reached the summit.

Buoyed by our fast time, we zipped down our fixed lines to the base and guzzled some Red Bull. We were nervous about rappelling into the basin below North Howser and the mad dash we'd have to make across a bowling-alley snowfield on our way to the climb, especially at high noon, the most dangerous part of the day. But we were both feeling more or less OK, so we decided to go for it.

The next few hours, climbing up the first half of the North Howser, were the most demoralizing part of the day for me. Low-angle, tedious climbing, carrying a huge rack, water, and crampons, all in the blazing afternoon sun—I was worried that this might have been a really bad (read: stupidly dangerous) idea. Luckily, Leo seemed to have hit his stride and playfully teased me out of my negative thoughts. This pattern repeated itself throughout the day: both of us riding the undulating waves of psyche, and

one picking up the slack when the other was feeling down.

The sun started to set just as we started up the centerpiece 200-meter open-book corner of All Along the Watchtower, and I instantly felt better. We both fired the powerful and footsy 5.12c crux pitch. (We each led or followed every pitch free on all three towers.) With the redpoint crux of the day behind us, Leo took the lead and guided us through the technical maze of ridge climbing to the summit of North Howser Tower.

After a technical descent and bergschrund hop, we tried to motivate for the final push as we hiked across the Upper Vowell Glacier, through Pigeon-Howser Col, and down a steep, loose gully into the East Creek Basin. Even though the final tower would be nowhere near as hard as the first two, the Beckey-Chouinard is still a 15-pitch, 600-meter route. Back at camp, the boys had prepared some food for us and were openly jazzed about our progress. Fueled by their psyche, and after some more caffeinated and electrolyte beverages, Captain Leo announced, “We leave in 15 minutes, yeah?”

Around 3 in the morning, we started up the Beckey in a simul-climbing blur of endless granite hand cracks, Leo in the lead. Two-thirds of the way up the route, Leo groggily handed over the sharp end, and I gunned it to just below the summit ridge as the sky turned from pitch black to a muted gray. On top, with minutes to spare before the 24-hour mark, we gazed over at the central and north towers. It was hard to believe we’d just stood on each of them. The sky had turned smoky orange from the wildfires blazing across British Columbia. My fatigue was strangely gone—I felt infused with boundless energy by the rising sun. We shuffled down the standard rappels and arrived back at camp to hugs from the boys.

For a few weeks after our trip to the Bugaboos, one of my big toes remained numb and I felt distant and dazed toward the world around me. Eventually, pure gratitude for the experience seeped in. The word “inspiration” is perhaps overused these days, but I’d like to extend a warm tip of the hat to our fallen friends Sean “Stanley” Leary and Dean Potter, who in no small way helped spawn this idea. And thanks of course to Leo, who had believed in the vision and was rock-solid on the climb. On paper, it had all added up, but I don’t think I’ve ever felt such trepidation before. In the end it was a perfect project: within reach, but barely.

Summary: All-free linkup of the west faces of the Howser Towers in the Bugaboos, British Columbia, Canada, by Leo Houlding (U.K.) and Will Stanhope (Canada), August 29–30, 2017. The two climbed Chocolate Fudge Brownie (5.12+, 11 guidebook pitches) on Central Howser; Spicy Red Beans and Rice and All Along the Watchtower (5.12c, 34 pitches) on Howser Spire; and the Beckey-Chouinard Route (5.10, 15 pitches) on South Howser. They used fixed ropes for the descent from Central Howser and the rappel approach to Howser Spire, and made the standard descent from Howser Spire; all fixed ropes were later removed. From the base of Central Howser to the summit of South Howser, their total time was 23 hours 36 minutes.

About the Author: Will Stanhope wrote about his first free ascent of the Tom Egan Memorial Route on Snowpatch Spire in the Bugaboos in AAJ 2016. He lives in Squamish, British Columbia. An interview with Stanhope about this climb was featured in episode one of the Cutting Edge Podcast.

Images



The southwest faces of the Howser Spire massif. (1) Central Tower, Chocolate Fudge Brownie. Leo Houlding and Will Stanhope rappelled fixed lines to approach their next route. (2) Howser Spire (a.k.a. North Tower), Spicy Red Beans and Rice and All Along the Watchtower linkup. After descending the far side and hiking back to base camp (BC), the climbers set out for their third route of the day. (3) South Tower, Beckey-Chouinard Route.

Article Details

Author	Will Stanhope
Publication	AAJ
Volume	60
Issue	92
Page	52
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	Feature article