



## AAC Publications

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### Ryan Johnson, 1983 – 2018

**On a blindingly sunny day, March 5, 2018, Ryan Johnson's face radiated with the kind of satisfaction only an alpinist can appreciate.** In a video sent to his girlfriend, he was smiling and calm, spinning in a slow circle to show a panorama of Alaska's Coast Mountains. Though he'd reached the table-size summit of the main tower of the Mendenhall Towers numerous times before, this occasion must have felt exceptional. A few feet away, his climbing partner, 25-year-old Marc-André Leclerc, took in the view of granite spires erupting from sea-bound glaciers.

There is no doubt these men were ecstatic. The pair had just made the first ascent of the Main Tower's 2,500-foot north face, a concave enormity of compact granite. Winter storms had left it laced with tendrils of ice that hung like whispers in the wind. This was one of Johnson's ultimate dream lines, and it wasn't off in some far-flung corner of the world—it was right in his backyard, near his hometown of Juneau, Alaska.

At age 34, Johnson would have been filled with pride to share this grandest of adventures with one of the world's most famous climbers. Few would question that Leclerc held him in equally high regard. Johnson wasn't as internationally well known as Leclerc, but in tight-knit climbing communities across the country, he was widely lauded for his broad skill set, spanning the spectrum of rock, alpine, and especially difficult ice climbing. In Alaska, Johnson was highly regarded for his knowledge and exploration of the Juneau Icefield and the Coast Mountains. In the Mendenhall Towers massif alone, he had established several major climbs, including Great White Conqueror (2,500', V AI4 M5 A1) on the north face of the West Tower and the first free ascent of the South Buttress Direct (2,000', 5.11a) on the Main Tower.

Growing up in Alaska's capital city, Johnson had been surrounded by the mountains, covered in old-growth timber, that adjoin a glacially cut fjord. On rare clear days, the fierce granite spires of the Mendenhall massif can be seen piercing the sky above the city. From an early age, Johnson took to rock climbing on nearby boulders and to hiking on the ice of the Mendenhall Glacier. After high school, he made many pilgrimages to Yosemite, the Canadian Rockies, the desert Southwest, and the Cascades. He honed a skill set that he later applied to the ranges of Alaska and the Himalaya. In 2005, he and Stefan Ricci made a fast 51-hour ascent of the Cassin Ridge on Denali, with a round-trip time of 84 hours from base camp to base camp. A few years later, he nearly summited Pumori (7,161m) in Nepal and went on expeditions to Kyzyl Asker (5,842m) in Kyrgyzstan and beyond.

After attending college at the University of Montana, Johnson returned to Juneau. With rainfall measured in feet instead of inches and no roads leading out of town, most climbers would dismiss Juneau as a place with limited prospects. Johnson took the other perspective and cultivated a community of climbers. To date, no one has been more instrumental in developing new routes around the city. Thousand-foot ice routes near town such as Tide Line (420m, WI6) and Bathtime with Toaster (400m, WI5) and world-class rock climbs all bear his name. Slowly, the outside world began to take notice, and Johnson became known as the local climbing expert.

As a climber, Johnson didn't really care *what* you did. He cared *how* you did it. At Kahiltna base camp, he gave genuine congratulations to a team of young climbers who had just reached their first minor Alaskan summit. To him it was just a walk-up, but it was the hardest thing they had ever done. Even after they left, he was excited for their accomplishment.

After years of selling tours to Princess Cruises tourists in Juneau, Johnson began laying plans to start a Crossfit gym in Juneau. A few years later, Tongass Crossfit opened its doors. Business was slow at first, but Johnson attained numerous certifications and gained a loyal following in the community. He didn't care if members were the best athletes; he just wanted them to always give their best. While Johnson worked to help others reach their potential, he was also bettering himself. During this time, he tuned his body into an alpine machine, and his once-erratic thoughts and goals sharpened to a knife-edged focus.

Undoubtedly, Johnson's proudest accomplishment was his son Milo. Ice climbs and trips to Chamonix were replaced with weekends building sand castles and going on toddler hikes. Instead of sending pictures of new routes to friends, he sent pictures of Milo covered in bath bubbles. Ryan was a 5.11 climber but a 5.15 dad.

At the start of 2018, monumental things were happening for Johnson—the culmination of several years of specific training and life restructuring. His family was closer than ever, and Johnson had begun a new era in his approach to technical alpinism. By early February, he had already established a five-pitch WI5 first ascent in Suicide Basin with his best friend, Sam Johnson (unrelated). They planned to attempt a new route that spring in Alaska's Hayes Range. His business was expanding, three-year-old Milo was learning how to do push-ups, and the future seemed ever more promising.

"Ryan was a wonderful climbing partner and a thoughtful and compassionate friend," Sam Johnson told me. "He was always there for me when it counted, whether it be to shield me from falling ice, suffer together through interminable open bivies, as my best man, or as a coach through some of the tough decisions of early fatherhood. We shared too many great and meaningful times together to count, but my experience is not unique. Many people thought of him as their best friend, due to his openness and encouraging nature."

On the summit of the Main Mendenhall Tower, Johnson's final video shows a man who was relaxed and confident. He was more at peace than friends had seen him in years. A few minutes later, he and Leclerc started down the east ridge and then rappelled into the Fourth Gully by the Fourth Tower. In a few hours, they should have reached their skis and celebrated what should be regarded as one of the greatest achievements in the Mendenhall Towers' climbing history. They were never heard from again. Despite heroic efforts by the Coast Guard, local helicopter companies, countless friends, and volunteers from Juneau Mountain Rescue, the pair has not been recovered.

Clouds, tinged in shades of somber gray, get tangled among Juneau's hillside timbers. They appear to echo the sadness felt throughout the tight-knit maritime community and beyond. Two of our own have yet to come home.

– Clint Helander

## Images



Ryan Johnson under the north face of the Main Mendenhall Tower in 2015



Ryan Johnson near the Mendehall Towers in 2015.

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