



AAC Publications

The Nose Under Two Hours

A Landmark Speed Record—And a Look Ahead

ON JUNE 6, ALEX HONNOLD AND I managed to climb the Nose in 1:58:07 after 11 previous attempts. We had toyed with the idea of attempting a speed record the previous fall, but we only climbed the route together once, which was enough to whet our appetites and get us psyched for the spring season together.

Both Alex and I have extensive experience on the Nose. Alex had previously set the Nose speed record with Hans Florine in June 2012, a record that stood until the fall of 2017, when Brad Gobright and Jim Reynolds climbed the route in 2:19:44 after 15 or so attempts. Alex also holds various other speed records involving the Nose, including solo, solo link-up with Half Dome and Mt. Watkins, and undoubtedly others. I had previously free climbed the route wall-style, then in one day, then once more with the Freerider in a day. We've both additionally climbed it with many different friends over the years.

From the beginning, I questioned Alex's choice in me as a partner. I was far from being in top shape, due the demands of life keeping me from climbing much. I had bad elbow tendonitis as well as a schedule that would require me to fly off for various events a few days each week during our window of attempts. The question of risk also held a bit of a cloud over the project. The season before, Quinn Brett, a friend and all-around inspiring person from my hometown of Estes Park, Colorado, had taken a terrible fall while speed climbing on the Nose, which resulted in spinal paralysis. As a father, I feel a strong responsibility to maintain a solid margin of safety. I had never been all that interested in speed climbing, because I thought going that fast would require too many safety compromises.

Despite all this, Alex seemed to think I was a decent choice for a partner. We approached the project with a relaxed attitude of taking a few slow laps to feel it out, test the systems, and analyze the fall potential. From the start we made a lot of compromises in pure speed in order to make the climb safer. For example, we decided to climb the route in two blocks. My block, which was the first, ended on top of the Boot Flake, 17 guidebook pitches up. This pitch is normally soloed during a speed attempt so the second can swing right across the King Swing without having to clean any gear. I preferred to place a piece midway up the Boot, partially because this was the location of Quinn's accident. If Alex were to have led this section, he certainly would have soloed it, and he was kind enough not to criticize my decision, though it clearly was slower. Also, since we simul-climbed my entire lead block, I had to place a large amount of trust in Alex that he would not fall and pull me off. On his lead block, he short-fixed some of the steeper and more physical pitches. When short-fixing the lead climber takes on all the risk, leading with a huge loop of slack in the system, while the second ascends the rope with virtually no risk.

These compromises made the risk acceptable to me as a father, and despite them our "slow casual" laps ended up being pretty fast—usually between 3 and 4.5 hours. Surprisingly, daily laps on the Nose seemed to completely cure my tendonitis.

Our success in going sub-two hours came down to a constant refinement of technique and strategy between attempts. While that might sound obvious, it's surprisingly difficult to talk through the whole route over and over, speaking frankly with your partner about what they could be doing better and where you personally struggle on the route. It takes a strong partnership to honestly evaluate the

strengths and weaknesses of each attempt, even more so when you involve the questions of inherent risk. (This is the same process that has made Hans Florine so successful on the Nose over the years.) Alex and I would talk through strategy for up to an hour ahead of time (generally on a rest day or while eating meals), then do the climb, and then spend the rest of the day debriefing and trying to learn from our efforts.

We certainly improved physically over the course of the month that we were trying the route, but fundamentally, at this point, the Nose speed record is more about climbing smoothly and efficiently and not making mistakes than it is about flying up the wall. We continually deleted pieces from our rack trying to minimize weight. In the end we had just seven cams, 16 draws, 15 free carabiners, one cam hook, one ascender, one Micro Traxion, and one Grigri. I climbed my entire block with just this rack. Alex recovered a bit of the rack about halfway through his block by soloing a pitch and then tagging up some gear while short-fixing. Our only clothing was running shorts, and we carried no water but were able to take a quick drink from some abandoned bottles behind Texas Flake. We broke the previous speed record set by Jim and Brad after eight attempts, climbing the route in 2:10:14. We then focused on going under two hours, which was always the goal.

I never felt scared while climbing. The logistics were fascinating, and days with Alex always seem to make me a better climber. We would start each morning at sunrise and be back in El Cap Meadow well before lunch, with plenty of time to lounge with family and friends. For these reasons, the whole experience was way more fun than I ever thought it would be.

But there were some heavy moments. On our first “race pace” lap, I unexpectedly slipped and fell about 100 feet. Then Alex slipped while short-fixing up high but managed to grab his own rope, significantly shortening his fall length but tearing a large flap of skin off his finger. After that we vowed not to red-line, letting our improvements come from increased fitness and logistical innovations. On June 2, Tim Klein and Jason Wells fell to their deaths while using speed-climbing tactics on the Salathé Wall of El Capitan. We nearly abandoned our attempts after this accident but instead decided to take yet another “slow lap” and reanalyze everything. To us, it felt reasonable to continue our efforts to go under two hours. Four days after their accident, we succeeded.

One last note about the future of speed climbing on the Nose: a World Cup speed climber travels 15m in around 6 seconds. We climbed a 900m wall in 1:58:07, which is roughly 1/19 the pace of competition speed climbers. Yes, it’s a much bigger wall, with more complexities than a competition course, so naturally the pacing will be different, but if you compare the relative speeds of 100-meter sprinters to marathon runners you see that sprinters are moving at roughly double the speed of marathoners (approximately 10m/s vs 5.9m/s)—an order of magnitude closer than our relative climbing speeds. All that is to say: Humans are physiologically capable of much more. There remains much room for improvement. But it probably won’t come from Alex or me—I think we’re satisfied with our foray into speed climbing.

– Tommy Caldwell, with Alex Honnold

Images



Alex Honnold in the lead, with the rope short-fixed to an anchor below and Tommy Caldwell jugging behind, during the final speed ascent before their 1:58:07 ascent of the Nose on El Capitan.



Tommy Caldwell in high gear on the bolt ladder above Texas Flake during a practice run.



Tommy Caldwell and Alex Honnold (and photographer) at the King Swing off Boot Flake.



Tommy Caldwell displays the paltry rack for a sub-two-hour ascent of the Nose.

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