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My Life in Climbing

By Ueli Steck

MY LIFE IN CLIMBING Ueli Steck. Mountaineers Books, 2018. Paperback, 224 pages, \$21.95.

My Life in Climbing is a terse and passionate record of the late Ueli Steck's drive and determination to reach summits quickly and prolifically, with partners and often alone. The book expresses the anxieties, uncertainties, joys, and passions that attend one whose career, and maybe sense of self, depend on pushing the limits of novelty on mountains, most of which, of course, were previously climbed, by many routes and in many styles.

Steck long dreamed of soloing Everest's West Ridge, linking to Lhotse, and possibly over Nuptse in a push. While acclimatizing for an early attempt at this feat in spring of 2013, Steck's team of three marched, perhaps a bit casually, across a "construction zone" where many Sherpas were fixing lines to the South Col. The Sherpas angrily confronted the three unroped and unanchored friends, even punching Simone Moro. Unnerved in many ways, the climbers headed home.

Steck's solo of Annapurna's south face in the fall of 2013 was both lauded (with a Piolet d'Or, his second), and doubted. First climbed in a British siege, the face offers almost two vertical miles of intense alpinism. After his partner bailed, Steck impulsively crossed the 'schrund, and reported summiting 28 hours later. High on the climb, a dropped camera carried away any unambiguous verification. Though some witnesses reported Steck's headlamp very high on the route, for many his Annapurna was tinged with doubt: no camera, no GPS track, no sightings on the summit. Steck's responses were rational, within the limits of belief, and were generally accepted, but some remained unconvinced and, as he suggests in his book, drove him a bit deeper into himself. [Editor's note: Ed Douglas thoroughly examines this controversy in "What's Eating Ueli Steck," collected in *The Magician's Glass* (Vertebrate Publishing, 2017)].

The chapter "Shishapangma" offers more intensity and mishap. Near the summit in 2014, Steck was along with four other climbers when an avalanche was triggered, which carried three of the five far down the mountain, two of whom were killed. It was reasonable for Steck and his remaining partner to be wary of the avalanche's hang-fire and of adjacent slopes. However, their response was questionable: After spotting a survivor (Martin Maier) who was initially mobile but then assumed dead, far below, it was incumbent upon them to investigate. And they did not. (Maier would miraculously self-rescue.)

The final chapters show Steck differently, in his familiar Alps. These later tales allow us to sense his joy as he climbs the Eiger's north face repeatedly, each time ever more quickly, until setting the current record of 2 hours, 22 minutes, and, incredibly, 50 seconds. Another goal was to link all Alpine summits above 4,000 meters, solely under human power, which he did, mostly alone, over a 62-day span of climbing, skiing, biking, and running.

Like no other, Steck blended a mixture of athleticism, alpinism, and ambition seamlessly and nonchalantly. Published just after his death from a fall on Nuptse in 2017, while preparing for another attempt at the Everest-Lhotse-Nuptse linkup, *My Life in Climbing* certainly doesn't answer every question one would want to ask Steck, but it will likely provide the most personal insight into this singular climber that we will ever have.

– Carl Tobin

Images



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