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Charles Cole, 1955 – 2018

In 1975, as a sophomore engineering student at the University of Southern California, Charles Cole saw *The Eiger Sanction*, a Clint Eastwood thriller that featured dramatic climbing scenes. With his native passion and intense focus, he threw himself into the sport. After buying some pitons and a rope at Sport Chalet, he strongarmed a friend into joining him. They drove up a road on Mt. Wilson looking for a rock outcrop. I recall him telling me, “It took me awhile to figure out that you pound the pitons into cracks and not directly into the rock.”

A man of extraordinary intelligence and athletic ability, Charles hurled himself into rock climbing. I experienced his drive first-hand. My first climbing trip to Yosemite, in 1978, happened to correspond with the first for Charles. He had never done a big wall of any sort. Within two weeks of arriving in the Valley, I was with him when he topped out on the Salathé Wall on El Capitan. Over the next month, Charles climbed the west face of the Leaning Tower, south face of Mt. Watkins, and northwest face of Half Dome. Then he recruited me to do the Shield on El Capitan, a route that, at the time, had been climbed only a few times. When we reached the top and he undid his homemade, one-inch-webbing swami belt, I was horrified to see he had tied it with a square knot. “Have you been doing all those routes over the last two months with your swami tied like that?” I asked. He admitted sheepishly that he wasn’t very well schooled in knots.

Charles worked briefly for a major global construction firm in Pasadena, and every Friday evening he raced out to crags at Joshua Tree or Tahquitz, or up to Yosemite. After a year he quit and lived in Yosemite until his credit cards maxed out. He went to business school in Michigan and then took another “real” job. But the lure of the Valley was too strong, and he began living in Camp Four on a semi-permanent basis. It was during those years, in the mid-1980s, that he put up several remarkable routes on Half Dome and El Capitan, including Jolly Roger, Queen of Spades, and Space—the latter two climbed solo. [Cole also put up spicy free climbs including Run for Your Life at Joshua Tree and Autobahn on Half Dome, climbed with John Middendorf and the author of this article.]

During the early 1980s, Charles and other Joshua Tree regulars resoled running shoes with stickier “green dot” rubber, allowing them to do classic routes in a casual fashion. Always looking for the technical edge in climbing, he worked with a rubber engineer to come up with something better, which he could put onto shoes of his own making. The early made-in-Taiwan Five Tennies fell apart rapidly, but they were great fun, and what started as a fad became a market segment, the approach shoe. Soon, climbing shoe resolvers were ordering sheets of his Five Ten rubber; climbers would even have brand-new shoes resoled with it. By the late 1980s, Charles had a full line of technical climbing shoes as well as a creative line of advertisements, which he loved dreaming up.

Charles was outwardly and unapologetically competitive. (After the birth of his third child, he sent me a postcard: Cole 3, Reno 2.) Although he spent more nights sleeping on the ground than anyone I know, he had no interest in playing the bohemian. He did not drink or smoke pot. He wore polo shirts—and had, in fact, played polo in his youth. He drove a Hummer to piss off environmentalists. Were he capable of lying, he would have said he owned guns and shot bunnies. All of this irritated some in the climbing community. His great success with Five Ten made some people more cordial, and age mellows us all. But he never fit in. He never wanted to fit in.

I never spent a boring day with Charles, despite rainy days, long approaches, and tedious stretches on big walls. His mind was ever active and inventive. He made up crazy songs, debated political theories,

and wondered about the role of entropy in the origins of the universe. He had a puerile sense of humor that made my wife understand instantly why we were friends.

My life was changed when I met Charles in September 1978. He infected me with his can-do mentality and his wild ambition. He buoyed me up with his profound loyalty. We did some marvelous things. We failed more than once. We had some close calls. When I heard that Charles had suddenly died, I wept. There's nobody I've shared a rope with who knew me as well as he did.

– Rusty Reno

Images



Charles Cole during the first ascent of the Real Nose on El Capitan.



Charles Cole.



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