



AAC Publications

Marc-André Leclerc, 1992 – 2018

FOR MOST EVERYONE who reads this—be it now or in the distant future—Marc-André Leclerc will be remembered the way all young alpinists who left us too soon are: as an amalgamation of their deeds in the mountains, their prowess on rock or ice, their boldness.

In this last regard, Marc-André will be lionized as one of the very best. He was an innovator. He sought knowledge in climbing lore, learned the lessons of his predecessors, and assimilated them into his own unique skill set to push the standards of his time until they could support the immensity of his vision. His approach to not just mountain climbing but to life itself was, as his friend Kieran Brownie told me, “scholarly—a path of intimate understanding.”

Marc-André’s apprenticeship in the Coast Mountains began in his early teens, under the wing of Don Serl (one of British Columbia’s most prolific and skilled alpinists of the past generation). He learned under his own tutelage as well, spending many hours on the kind of steep and vegetated slopes that make most climbers cringe, enjoying himself there, learning how to properly distribute his weight (a lesson he would later find incredibly useful for difficult mixed terrain). It was as if each day lessons were learned and neatly filed in the repository of his mind, organized in such a way that he could pull them up at will when later climbs necessitated. This slow entrance into mountain craft and his dedicated focus allowed him, in later years, to move through terrain in a manner that often toed the line of what most would consider reasonable.

From his quick success in difficult sport, trad, and speed climbs, one gets the impression that Marc-André could have been among the climbing elite in whatever specialty he pursued. But the climbing that enraptured Marc was the sort of alpine excursions (with or without partner) that are really best described as vision quests—near hallucinatory experiences that pushed the evolution of the sport beyond what previous suitors had imagined possible. He made scores of first ascents and groundbreaking free solos around the world, but his solo ascents of Cerro Torre’s Corkscrew, Torre Egger’s East Pillar (in winter), and Mt. Robson’s Emperor Face will be forever remembered as some of the most daring and impressive ascents of his generation.

It is difficult to quantify what made Marc so exceptional a climber, because he eschewed (or transcended) the commonly accepted metrics of greatness. He rated the difficulty of his first ascents in accordance with the stiffest (not softest) pitches of the grade he had ever climbed. Though he was among the fastest in the world in alpine terrain, he had no patience or interest in tracking his time. “Already I have been asked how fast I was, but I honestly cannot tell you,” he wrote on his blog following his solo of Infinite Patience on the Emperor Face. “I began when I felt ready and I reached the top at sundown. I also don’t know how long the hike back to the road took me, but I do know that descending through the changing ecosystems back into the world of green lushness and deep blue lakes I felt more peace than I would have had I been counting my rate of kilometers per hour.”

Marc’s prowess was, and I believe always will be, shrouded in the cloak of mystery that surrounds climbers who are so great they’ve managed to slip the noose of caring about their greatness. While some athletes can—and do—provide detailed breakdowns of how they pulled off their greatest

achievements, the epic climbs of Marc-André will forever reside in the realm of legend and rare alchemy. Not science, so much assorcery. What made him so unique was not his brawn but his gifted brain.

Perhaps nobody was as intimately acquainted with the unique form of alpine asceticism in which Marc participated than his friend and climbing partner Colin Haley—himself one of the great alpinists of his era. “There was no one else I knew of that had a more similar vision of climbing to mine, and especially hard, solo, alpine climbing,” Haley wrote on Facebook a few months after Marc’s death. “In the last few years it felt like Marc-André and I were the only two players in a very special game. There was without any doubt a sort of friendly competition between us.... While I think Marc and I shared equal amounts of motivation and drive, he was the stronger technical climber, and, more importantly, the younger climber, and there’s no doubt that if he stayed alive our friendly competition would’ve only lasted so long, before he left me far behind.”

Of course, all of this is beside the point to those who were closest to Marc. I was not one of them, though we were friends. But I have had the privilege to spend time or talk with the nucleus of individuals that were central to his life: his mother, Michelle Kuipers; his father, Serge Leclerc; his stepfather, Henry Kuipers; his brother, Elijah Leclerc; his sister, Bridgid-Anne; two of his closest friends, Kieran Brownie and Will Stanhope; and, of course, his life partner Brette Harrington. By and large, we talked less about Marc’s climbing achievements and more about who he was as a person: his humility, his sense of humor, his kindness and generosity, his enduring love of Brette and the other important people in his life. In a blog post, Bridgid-Anne wrote about Marc following his death that “he literally changed the world,” without alluding much to the climbs that most people would associate with that sentiment. Instead she wrote in great detail about what we tend to think of as the little things, such as how “he would work so hard to understand [me], and even though he didn’t really care about gifts, he would put in a lot of effort to find me something that I would like.”

His mother, Michelle, told me in no uncertain terms, during breakfast one morning at her home in Agassiz, British Columbia, that if I could ask Marc what was the most important thing in the world to him, he would have answered confidently and quickly: “Brette.” Not climbing, not mountains, not snow or rock or ice. The woman he loved. Marc and Brette had been nearly inseparable. They made trips to El Chaltén together, to Baffin Island, to Yosemite and the Canadian Rockies. Everywhere they went, they established challenging and impressive lines, or made free ascents of modern testpieces on rock and ice. Alone, each of them was well on their way to climbing stardom. But together they were unstoppable.

Brette was not with Marc when he passed away, along with Ryan Johnson, while descending from the 2,500-foot north face of the Main Tower in the Mendenhall Towers. She was in Tasmania, about as far from Alaska as a human can be. But she wasn’t far from Marc’s thoughts. From the summit, where he and Ryan were surprised to find cell reception, Marc sent two text messages, one to Brette and one to his mom.

Sometime in the hours that followed, only a few short rappels from their skis, something happened to Marc and Ryan. An avalanche, a collapsed serac, an anchor failure, something else—we’ll never know. Upon hearing that Marc and Ryan were overdue, Brette and Marc-André’s family made the long journey to join Juneau Mountain Rescue on the search effort. Marc and Ryan’s gear cache was found, as well as their ropes, but their bodies have not been located.

I did not know Marc nearly as well as I would have liked to. But he was a hero to me just the same. Not for his climbs but for the way he carried himself in spite of his climbs. He could have done, said, or been anything he wanted to. He could have reacted to stardom in the way that many climbers do—with arrogance, hubris, and solipsism. To most of the world, it wouldn’t have mattered. He still would have been a legend, resting firmly on the achievements of his too-short career.

But for the most part he shied from the limelight. During the few times I spent time with him—in

Bariloche, Argentina; in the home I rented in Index, Washington; on an occasional phone call or email here or there—he was thoughtful, kind, almost diffident, I thought. He had a calming effect on me. In his company, I recall feeling that all the garbage in the world didn't really need to amount to much. That you could just choose to be happy, to be at peace with the world and your place in it instead.

– Chris Kalman

Images



Marc-André Leclerc in Patagonia.

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