



AAC Publications

Jeff Lowe, 1950 – 2018

Editor's Note: In 2017, Jeff Lowe received a Piolet d'Or Lifetime Achievement Award, only the second American (after John Roskelley) to gain this honor. His many accomplishments have been well documented. In lieu of repeating that long list here, we have adapted remarks given by two close friends at Lowe's memorial celebration in Colorado.

JEFF LOWE'S father Ralph and my father George were brothers and best friends. They were the source of the adventure gene in our family, imbuing a sense of how to deal with new situations and unexpected events into both branches of the Lowe family. When I watched "Metanoia" [the 2014 film about Lowe's life, his 1991 solo new route on the Eiger, and his degenerative illness], the photos of my family and the "other Lowes" filled me with nostalgia. We grew up in houses that were only about a mile apart in Ogden, Utah. Our families skied together at Snow Basin. My sister Alta recalls Ralph taking his van up the unplowed Wheeler Canyon shortcut trying to beat other skiers to fresh powder. When he got stuck, he put 10-year-old Jeff in the driver's seat, since he was lightest, and the remainder of the kids and Ralph pushed the van out of the snowdrift. Our families tended to ski like Ralph drove, resulting in Jeff getting a ski scholarship for college.

I started rock climbing when my family joined Uncle Ralph a couple of times as he was teaching his sons Mike, Greg, and Jeff how to climb. Each of his sons successively set age records for climbing the Grand Teton, at ages 9, 8, and finally Jeff at age 7. Looking back, I think all the Lowes are deeply grateful for the adventures we enjoyed with our families—and the sense it gave us that we could do more than we could imagine.

Jeff and I started climbing together when I had finished college and near the time he was completing high school. We probably did the seventh ascent of the Salathé Wall on El Capitan, in 1969, when Jeff was 18, a kid straight out of high school. Of all the climbs we did together, I think the most memorable was the attempt on the north ridge of Latok I in 1978, during which Jeff became seriously ill just below the top of the unclimbed, 7,145-meter peak. I feared he might die in an open bivouac partway down, but his mental toughness carried him through. I think it was the best climb we never did together. [In July 2018, when Russian climber Alexander Gukov was stranded on Latok's north ridge, Jeff Lowe sent a note via a friend saying, "I am sure Alexander will be safely lifted off." Gukov attributed his survival in part to this message of hope.]

Jeff has been my finest climbing partner. His vision of the future, combined with his incredible technical skills in all the climbing disciplines, plus the stamina to make that vision come true, made him quite unique in the climbing world. But, personally, I admire even more the grace with which he endured the wasting neurological disease, similar to multiple sclerosis, that took away his physical ability to climb. It was so difficult to reconcile his disabled self with the high-energy kid I remember running around our grandmother's yard. Nonetheless, his spirit shined through. He continued to love life and showed yet more mental toughness in dealing with his illness and overwhelming financial stress. He continued to be productive, writing most of a new book. It was wonderful to visit him, enjoy his jokes, and see his beaming smile.

I was fortunate to be with Jeff on the day he passed away. He and his daughter Sonja had decided that it was time that "he move on from this material plane to the next." He camped outside the hospice facility surrounded by grass, flowers, and trees. Despite being in what appeared to be a comatose state, he was responsive to the conversations around him. He did not appear to be in pain.

We all loved him and the example he provided as he approached the end, with the same grace, vision, and determination that allowed him to love doing the hardest climbs in the world of his era.

– George Lowe

OUR LIVES are filled with choices. We can choose to do absurd things like climb frozen waterfalls or solo a difficult line on the Eiger. What we don't get to choose is whether we die. Given the implacable certainty of our own mortality, and unless we get to enjoy the much-sought massive stroke in the middle of the night, we have the opportunity to give something to those around us, and that something is in how we shape and deal with the approach of our own demise. It's the final illumination of who we are.

Jeff and I climbed together for a few years when our unemployment was a badge of honor, we had nothing but our gear and shit-box cars, and life was simply about climbing and friends. [Among other climbs, the two made the first ascents of Bridal Veil Falls in Colorado and Moonlight Buttress in Zion National Park.] Jeff's climbing resumé is remarkable, but knowing the man was far more rewarding than knowing the resumé. Jeff left me and many others with some remarkable gifts.

First of all, Jeff left me with indelible memories of shared laughter and alpine suffering, the partnership of the rope and time spent in wild places full of life, power, and indescribable beauty. Jeff especially loved first ascents. He had a ruthless yet childlike desire to see what was around the corner or at the top of the next pitch. Together we drank in the warmth of desert sandstone and the bitter cold of frozen ice. In the spaces between climbs we celebrated life with the other eccentric, unbalanced, antisocial, and bizarre members of our climbing tribe. It was a magical time of life.

Second and most importantly, Jeff gave us a lesson on how to leave this world with dignity and grace. He embraced his own end in the same way he embraced the rest of his life, with joy, humor, and bright, childlike anticipation. He understood that while he couldn't change the past, he could work to make amends and better his future self. Under incredibly difficult circumstances, he chose to abandon self-pity in favor of feasting on the life left to him and leaving this world a better man.

As his body betrayed him and fell away, he filled those spaces with love and self awareness. He also came to understand how much more climbing had given him than he had given climbing.

Lastly and above all else, in the love he held for his daughter Sonja and his grand-daughter Valentina, he illustrated that the bond of family was a far greater legacy than the sum of his climbing resumé.

Jeff's body was in ruins the last few years. He was in constant pain, couldn't walk or speak, had a hard time sleeping and suffered a multitude of indignities each and every day. At one point I asked him why he didn't put an end to it and he slowly tapped out on his iPad that all of it was worth it when he saw the smile on his grand-daughter's face.

Ovder the last few year's of Jeff's life he was both lionized and demonized. In both cases I felt that Jeff, my friend, often went unseen for the person he was. Jeff, I am humbled by your strength, friendship, and your transcendent exit, and as always I can only hope to follow your lead.

– Mike Weis

Images



Jeff Lowe in Boulder, Colorado.

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