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Chamonix Style on the Kahiltna

Three Seasons of 'Sport Alpinism' in the Central Alaska Range

Colin Haley heading into a crux passage during his record-setting run up the Cassin Ridge, notably wearing only a daypack, single boots, and no harness. Photo by Nicholas Gantz

IN JUNE 2007, MY FRIEND Mark Westman and I climbed the southwest face of Denali via the Denali Diamond. It was the fifth ascent of one of the hardest, most technical routes the mountain has to offer. We climbed the entire steep lower wall in one day, made one bivouac on the snow slopes above, and then slogged up the upper Cassin Ridge. To me it seemed obvious immediately afterward that we should have left behind the tent, sleeping pads, double sleeping bag, and extra food that the bivouac required—and that without that extra weight we could have simply climbed the route in one long day. It would have been somewhat more physically challenging, but I think a lot more fun.

That ascent of the Denali Diamond was the last time I've bivouacked on a climbing route in Alaska, but since then I've climbed the south side of Denali twice, the south side of Sultana (Mt. Foraker) three times, and the north side of Begguya (Mt. Hunter) twice. In the 1970s these faces were hard enough that to simply get up them in traditional alpine style was at the cutting edge, but modern equipment and techniques have dramatically reduced the difficulty of ascending steep alpine terrain. Following trends that began in the Alps decades ago, I have been playing different games on these big Alaskan routes, climbing them alone, for speed, or both. I call this style of climbing sport-alpinism.

Sport-alpinism is essentially the art of creatively inventing new challenges when the most natural challenge—simply ascending the face of a mountain—is no longer difficult enough to truly inspire a climber or demand all of his or her skill. Climbing solo, climbing fast, traversing multiple peaks, enchainning multiple routes, climbing everything free, avoiding the use of ascenders, or climbing in winter are all dimensions of sport-alpinism. These invented challenges are neither the new future of alpinism to which we should all aspire, nor is sport-alpinism an abomination of traditional ethics that is eroding the purity of the alpine experience. It is simply an evolution, especially in mountain ranges that already have seen a lot of traffic, where the majority of the most natural and compelling lines already have been climbed.

The actual definition of “traditional alpinism” is fairly nebulous, but perhaps the most central element is climbing virgin terrain, as opposed to repeating earlier climbs. To the most traditional of alpinists, first ascents seem to be the only climbs of significance. However, sport-alpinism has been practiced for decades and by many of the most elite alpinists, creating some of the most memorable ascents of each era. In 1952, Hermann Buhl bicycled from his home in Austria to the north face of Piz Badile in Switzerland and soloed the Cassin Route on the northeast face in under five hours. Reinhold Messner, one of the most vocal proponents for adventurous alpinism, was also an elite practitioner of sport-alpinism, with many incredible repeats of previously climbed faces: the north face of Les Droites solo in 8.5 hours (1969), the north face of the Eiger in 10 hours with Peter Habeler (1974), and the south col route on Chomolongma without oxygen with Peter Habeler (1978).

More recently, some types of climbing have been distilled into activities that involve much less adventure but a much higher level of athleticism. Indoor competition climbing is at the farthest end of the spectrum, demanding an extremely high level of athleticism but with essentially zero adventure. However, not all sport-centric versions of climbing are based on finger strength; the type of alpine climbing practiced by Kilian Jornet—mind-blowingly fast ascents of mostly well-traveled routes—also

involves relatively little adventure but an incredible level of athleticism. (Of course, ascents that involve a high level of adventure and athleticism are extremely impressive, but I think it is important to recognize there is an inherent trade-off between adventure and athletic achievement. A climber at 6,700 meters with a rack of traditional protection and haul rope hanging from the harness, climbing 10 meters above the last piece of protection, will never climb moves even remotely as difficult as the climber on a boulder problem 6,700 meters lower, with ten pads below. Likewise, speed records on mountains like Chomolungma would not be nearly as fast if not for fixed ropes and other climbers' tracks in the snow.)

Although sport-alpinism is far from new, I think it's time more climbers recognized its existence, its differences from traditional alpinism, and its inevitable future application in more and more mountain ranges around the world. It's also time to acknowledge that, just as most rock climbers have now accepted that both traditional rock climbing and sport climbing have their place and can happily coexist, sport-alpinism is neither better nor worse than traditional alpinism, simply different.

GROWING UP IN SEATTLE, the central Alaska Range was the semi-local version of Himalayan-scale climbing that my mentors often talked about. By the time I made my first trip to the Kahiltna Glacier, in 2003, nearly all the biggest faces had been climbed, and had been climbed by multiple routes. During a total of 10 trips to the Kahiltna Glacier so far, only one unclimbed line has really called to me: a wall on the southeast face of Sultana that became Dracula (Årtun-Haley, 2010). To me, repeating the three mythic routes on the three steepest faces (north buttress of Begguya, Infinite Spur on Sultana, and Cassin Ridge on Denali) seemed more inspiring than making readily available first ascents of smaller, less serious routes on the lower peaks. The question I eventually asked myself was how to create the most fun, challenging, and exciting experiences on routes that were already described in guidebooks.

Most of my recent trips to the Central Alaska Range in May and June have been preceded by a period of "training" in Chamonix. This mostly just means racking up a lot of mileage climbing and skiing in alpine terrain, day in, day out. The style of alpine climbing I practice in Chamonix is focused on fun: Nearly every day starts and ends in the comfort of town, never carrying heavy backpacks or making bivouacs. I certainly do have fond memories from some incredible bivouacs over the years, but mostly I enjoy fluid movement over mountains, while sleeping/shivering on ledges laboriously chopped from ice is, for me, usually more of a detraction from the experience than a perk. More significantly, I've never been very physically strong, and I enjoy climbing with a small backpack drastically more than with a big, heavy one. Regardless of speed records, I've realized that the most enjoyable, rewarding form of alpinism to me is climbing without bivouacs. My dream is to take the fast, fun, and bivouac-less version of alpinism that I practice in the relatively tame environment of Chamonix and export it to bigger, wilder mountain ranges. To me that is the magic mix of challenge, fun, sport, and adventure. Thus, climbing fast has become a dimension of sport-alpinism that I practice often.

Another dimension of sport alpinism that has captured me is solo climbing. I can't justify this fascination in the name of fun, because usually solo climbing involves less pure fun than climbing with a good friend. But to me there is a great draw to soloing, perhaps in part due to the maniacal purity of having to overcome every obstacle without assistance from anyone else. I enjoy having complete control over my interaction with the mountain and knowing that all successes and all failures are my own, without ever an afterthought of, "I wonder how I would have done leading that block," or "I still think we should have gone up the dihedral to the right."

As my experience and confidence in the Central Alaska Range grew, so did my vision of how to interact with the landscape, without a doubt influenced by the generation before me. When I started climbing in Alaska, sport-alpinism was already gaining momentum, with fast repeats of the Slovak Route on Denali (60 hours, Backes-House-Twight, 2000) and the Infinite Spur on Sultana (25 hours, Garibotti-House, 2001). That trend had begun in 1976 when the visionary Charlie Porter made the first solo of the Cassin Ridge in 36 hours. I started with dreams of simply repeating the Kahiltna's mythic

routes in traditional alpine style, like my mentors had done, but slowly realized that what I most wanted to do in the Central Alaska Range was make fast, solo ascents of the “Big Three.”

During the past three years I have completed that dream, one climb per season: soloing the Infinite Spur on Sultana in 12:29 bergschrund-to-summit (June 1, 2016), the north buttress of Begguya in 7:46 bergschrund-to-summit (May 12, 2017), and the Cassin Ridge in 8:07 bergschrund-to-summit (June 5, 2018). Each of these ascents was the speed record for the feature—by a large margin—and in the case of the Infinite Spur and the north buttress of Begguya, it was the first solo ascent of the feature. [Detailed reports of the Sultana and Begguya ascents can be found at the AAJ website (AAJ 2017 and AAJ 2018), and more detail on all three climbs is at www.colinhaley.com.]

The Cassin Ridge is the most famous route among the Big Three and thus the speed record that garnered the most media attention. However, it is without any doubt the least significant of these three ascents. Technically, the Cassin Ridge is by far the easiest among the three, and for that reason the one that had been climbed solo several times previously. Additionally, the descent of Denali is many times easier than of Begguya or Sultana, so the whole outing is much less serious and committing.

When starting up the Cassin Ridge I was amped to try to set an impressively fast time, but I felt none of the trepidation that hard alpine soloing usually entails—I was essentially certain that I would succeed in climbing the route, and even that it would feel pretty easy. My solo was significant because of the fast time in which I accomplished it, but for no other reason. By contrast, the north buttress of Begguya and the Infinite Spur are very serious routes to climb solo, regardless of speed. I would be very proud of those two solo ascents even if each had taken me five days.

In each of these three cases I had previously climbed nearly the entirety of the route during earlier attempts or ascents, so it should not be overlooked that I had a very clear idea of what difficulties awaited me, and thus could prepare my equipment, strategy, and mentality for maximum efficiency. It's clear that in terms of adventure, these ascents would have been greater if I weren't already familiar with the terrain, and greater yet if the same terrain had never been climbed before. However, there is only so much adventure that can be removed from a humongous, technical route in a high-altitude, semi-arctic environment.

In fact, the pursuit of sport-alpinism sometimes creates a much greater level of adventure. Being alone on a nearly 3,000-meter route, without a rope, a partner, communication equipment, or bivouac equipment, makes for an extremely committing situation, even if you're already familiar with the route. My descent off Sultana after soloing the Infinite Spur, during which I was hit by a bad storm that arrived earlier than forecast, was the biggest epic of my life. My ascent a few days earlier, with Rob Smith, was much less adventurous, even though we set a new speed record and at the time I wasn't yet familiar with the terrain. The difference in adventure between different climbing tactics, such as climbing solo versus with a partner or climbing nonstop versus with bivouacs, is usually far greater than the difference in adventure between an alpine “onsight” and “redpoint.”

REGARDLESS OF HOW ONE FEELS about sport-alpinism, I think it is objectively true that athleticism is the only dimension of alpinism in which the current and future generations can improve upon past accomplishments. In the adventure dimension, no one today can outdo what was done a hundred years ago—or even 40 years ago. In fact, I personally would go so far as to say that no climb today is even equal in the adventure realm to what was done in the past. Satellite imagery and satellite communication are available essentially everywhere on Earth. Venturing into even the most difficult-to-reach, remote, and unexplored valleys today does not compare to the unknowns faced by people like George Lowe and Voytek Kurtyka, let alone Shackleton and Mallory.

Of course adventure is not dead. There are still thousands of mountain faces on which a small, lightly equipped team can have the adventure of a lifetime climbing virgin terrain. Nonetheless I think it is

undeniable that slowly, slowly the adventure aspect of alpinism is diminishing and only in the sport dimension will tomorrow's alpinists go beyond past accomplishments, whether on new routes or established climbs.

This shouldn't make you feel that you were born too late, however. For those with creativity, the mountains will always provide all the mind-blowing, ego-destroying experiences that anyone desires, no matter how few unclimbed mountains and faces are left. With the equipment and knowledge that modern alpinists enjoy, pushing the limits of the sport dimension is ever more appealing. Sixty years ago, the leading alpinists began to realize that expedition-style climbing

provided too certain an outcome of success. Now that most alpine climbing equipment is half the weight that it was in the 1960s and 1970s, and far more functional, will climbers begin to decide that on many mountains the classic alpine-style formula (two climbers, two ropes, one rack, one tent, several days of food and fuel) also provides too much certainty of a successful outcome?

For a few decades already, the most inspiring and impressive climbing accomplishments in the Alps have not been the routes that were climbed, but instead the creative *ways* in which they were climbed, whether solo, fast, in winter, all free, or part of an enormous enchainment. Likewise, during the past decade the most impressive climbing in Yosemite Valley and the Bugaboos has been in the sport dimension (first free ascents, speed ascents), rather than the conquest of virgin terrain.

I think the mountains of Chaltén in Patagonia are in the midst of this transition. I've dedicated the past decade of my life mostly to climbing there, and have climbed more than a dozen first ascents involving virgin terrain, but my *top ten* personally proudest climbing achievements in Patagonia involved no virgin terrain—they were instead solo ascents and traverses.

I suspect this same evolution will gain momentum before long in higher and more "exotic" mountains like the Trango group, the Gangotri, and the Khumbu—places where there are already many established routes and a wealth of information. The Khumbu now has more infrastructure, rescue services, and communication (including wi-fi and mobile phone networks) than any mountains in Canada or Alaska, and it would be dishonest to pretend that it is a big adventure to climb there. However, the mountain faces are as humongous and steep, and the altitude as extreme, as they ever were, and it is a ripe playground for the next generation of high-altitude sport-alpinism. Messner, Loretan, Troillet, and others saw this decades ago, and it's no secret that the Chomolongma-Lhotse-Nuptse traverse was the last objective of Ueli Steck, sport-alpinism's recent star.

As for me, I feel that I have learned well how to climb the mountains of Patagonia and Alaska in the fast, bivouac-less style that I most enjoy. I'm not sure exactly which mountains will captivate me in coming years, but I am curious if I can apply the carefree, in-a-day, Chamonix-style tactics to mountain ranges not yet stuffed with previously climbed routes. Perhaps I'll realize the extent of my naïveté and succumb to carrying a heavy backpack full of supplies for several days of traditional alpinism, or perhaps I'll have incredible experiences dashing up and down faces that have never been approached this way before.

Notes on 2018 Cassin Ridge Solo: On June 5, Colin Haley soloed the Cassin Ridge on Denali in 8 hours 7 minutes from bergschrund to summit. Cassin ascents have been timed in various ways, but this was at least 6.5 hours faster than any previous record. Haley climbed the mountain twice during acclimatization. He then approached the south face via the East Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, bivouacked, and began climbing with the original 1961 start to the Cassin Ridge. At the crest of the ridge, he downclimbed and traversed to below the bergschrund of the Japanese Couloir, from which previous speed records have been timed, and started his clock at 7:40 a.m. Haley climbed in single boots and carried no stove, protection, harness, or rope—tactics made reasonable, he said, because of extensive acclimatization, prior experience on the route, and years of experience in the Central Alaska Range. Haley discusses this climb in episode 10 of the Cutting Edge podcast ([see below](#)).

About the Author: Colin Haley was born in Seattle in 1984 and makes a meager living as a sponsored alpinist. He recently purchased a tiny apartment in Chamonix and looks forward to having big mountains outside his door to practice carefree alpinism—and perhaps to prepare himself for bigger mountains elsewhere.

Images



Ready, set, go! Colin Haley at the bergschrund on the Japanese Couloir start to the Cassin Ridge, about to start charging toward the summit of Denali.



Looking down from the Black Band on the Infinite Spur of Sultana.



View down the crux rock band on the north buttress of Begguya (Mt. Hunter).



Colin Haley moving up the Cassin Ridge during his speed solo.



Colin Haley heading into a crux passage during his record-setting run up the Cassin Ridge, notably wearing only a daypack, single boots, and no harness.

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