



AAC Publications

Steve Wunsch, 1947 – 2019

When I heard that Steve Wunsch had died, and how he had, until the end, kept his cancer private, an Irish song, “Johnny, I Hardly Knew Ye” came to mind, and I realized that during all the time we traveled together, the climbs, the successes, the failures we shared, I never really knew Steve.

Steve’s contribution to climbing is more than a list of free ascents, though the list is certainly important: Psycho and Jules Verne in Eldorado Canyon; Open Cockpit, Yellow Wall, and of course Super Crack in the Gunks. Steve was a quiet innovator of technique. Rather than strength, he emphasized flexibility. He was the first person I saw do a heel hook—perhaps the first ever. I was not there for his lead of Super Crack (free climbed in 1974 and now rated 5.12+), but I watched him develop the strange finger stack that ultimately proved to be the key.

Steve made things look easy. He climbed with an exceptional poise. A poise not gained naturally, but created by fierce, intense control. Never a struggle, a shake, a tremor. Focus. Intensity. There was a certain way you did things. Ground up. Always. No inspection of any kind. You fall, you come down and start over. We climbed with a small rack of RPs, Stoppers, perhaps a hex or two. Steve was a master at creating protection where it seemed none would be found.

Steve led the first ascent of Orangutan Arch in Yosemite—an awkward climb, to say the least— with a precision that made it look like a face climb. I remember him laughing as I floundered and struggled and arrived at the belay bloodied and bruised. I remember watching with horror as he freed Psycho and I realized I was going to have to try to follow it.

More memories: a rainy morning in the Plaza Diner in New Paltz, Steve reading [The Wall Street Journal](#) cover to cover; a tent on Guide’s Hill in the Tetons, Steve practicing classical guitar; in my van parked on Underhill Road, Steve explaining in detail the correct method of spreading cashew butter on a rice cake.

Memory: Steve exploring the unknown expanse of rock on Jules Verne, one move at a time. Downclimbing, returning to the ledge. Steve’s was a boldness born of the careful acquisition of knowledge.

Many years later, a Gunks reunion: I was preparing to struggle my way up Double Crack. Steve and Marcia, his wife, walked by. “You’re sure you’re going to be safe up there?” Steve said with a laugh. When I suggested he tie on, he demurred. “I’m done climbing. Too out of shape.” That too was Steve: self-deprecating, but also, when he could no longer climb to his exacting standards, he moved on. Steve devoted himself to a career in finance (he became famous as founder of the first automated stock exchange) and to the guitar, with the same discipline, the same pursuit of excellence.

Rich Romano tells this story: Segovia was 94 when Steve, 44 at the time, was working on Segovia’s transcription of a fugue by Bach. It’s a three-movement piece that begins with a prelude. Steve had that wired. Then comes the fugue. It is long and complicated, with many twists and turns, and it inspired Steve to say, “Segovia is 94—that means I have 50 years to get it right!”

When I think of Steve Wunsch, he is in the Gunks. It is autumn; it is always autumn. I can see him in his long corduroy shorts held up by suspenders, surrounded by the glorious colors of the season,

laughing, walking the carriage road on the way to another adventure.

– John Bragg

Images



Article Details

Author	John Bragg
Publication	AAJ
Volume	62
Issue	94
Page	
Copyright Date	2020
Article Type	In memoriam