



## AAC Publications

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### **Call of the Sirens: A Play in Three Acts, with a Surprise Ending**

Canada, British Columbia, Squamish

**I first met Marc-André Leclerc around a campfire in the Yosemite high country. Sitting across from him in the thin, crisp evening air I could feel his energy.** He'd just come from a solo winter-climbing trip to Patagonia and his eyes burned with the fresh experiences. The way he spoke about the trip made it clear that he had an almost spiritual connection with the mountains, and the adventure and uncertainty to be found there. He'd come to California to meet Brette Harrington and they were beautiful to watch together; so clearly in love, sitting quietly holding hands and looking into the fire. Here was a unique man, living with a vision and intensity that most only dream about.

Later on that night, I lay next to my partner Bronwyn Hodgins in the tent. "What an amazing man, I feel lucky to have met him," I told her. Our sleeping bags were just warm enough to keep out the high-Sierra chill, we snuggled together. "But I'm not sure if he'll live to be old..."

A year and a half later, in January 2017, Bron and I packed our lives into our red Ford van in Ottawa and drove 4000km across the Canadian winter-scape to Squamish. Granite pilgrims from the East. Arriving in Squamish in February was a strange choice, but the air was fresh and the rock was sticky. Marc came up for a couple of days to go slab climbing. He enthusiastically showed Bronwyn and I his favourite slabs in the Smoke Bluffs, and kindly suggested I try one of his projects. I ended up making the FA a few weeks later and it became The Magician (5.13d), by far the hardest slab climb I had done. It was then that I fell in love with the unpopular style of low-percentage granite slab, an obsession that Marc shared.

I think what drew both Marc and I to hard granite slab climbing is the mental focus required. More than any physical attribute, to succeed you have to be present with the uncertainty of an unknown outcome - keep weighting the feet and hoping even though you know they will slip. That winter Marc mentioned his project, a five pitch free version of the aid route Wrist Twister on the Chief's Tantalus wall. The first three pitches would be independent free pitches, and the final two shared with his and Luke Neufeld's ground-up slab test piece, Labyrinth (4-5 pitches, 5.12c). We chatted about climbing on it together. The way he spoke made it clear that it was a step above any other slab climbing he'd done, and therefore, probably very hard indeed! Interestingly, despite talking about the route a lot, Marc never mentioned exactly what his progress had been on it so far...

Marc's purity of vision and obvious, infectious, unbridled love for what he was doing meant that even the smallest interaction with him often left a lasting impression. Marc's death in Alaska in March 2018 affected a lot of people profoundly. I was deeply saddened to have lost my slab buddy, lasting inspiration and good friend. I decided to try and finish his Wrist Twister project as a lasting testament to his unique vision.

I first went to try it with two of Marc's good friends—Kieran Brownie and Will Stanhope—a couple of months after Marc's death. Kieran mentioned he knew Marc had sent the first pitch but he didn't think he'd done any of the others. We were dismayed at how hard it felt, there were multiple sections that were deeply ambitious and potentially impossible. Defeated, we sat on the portaledge. We poured the first sip of our beers over the side of the ledge in honour of our friend.

Honestly, if I had scoped the line myself as a new route prospect, I would for sure have written it off as impossible and moved on to other things. But the fact that Marc had bolted it and clearly believed

it was climbable kept me coming back, curious, session after session, to beat my head against the wall trying impossible moves. That fall of 2018, I managed to send the first pitch. It was sustained 5.13b slab with many low percentage moves, but still by far the easiest of the three independent pitches Marc left behind.

A year later and another fall slab season, I was deep in project mode on the third pitch: A long beautiful 5.12 splitter into a desperate V10ish slab boulder, with a final 5.12 dike-walk that always felt significantly less secure than I would like. For some reason, it was hard to find partners. I was burning through belayers at almost the same rate as the edges on my climbing shoes. I caved and extended the bolt after the crux with a long sling to clip a body length earlier. I'm sure Marc would have done this pitch the bold way, and the challenge is still there if someone wants to come improve on my style. Begging and bribery finally succeeded in getting Mathew Waring up for one last belay. Part of the mystery of hard slabs is that they feel easy when they go, and borderline impossible every other time. I danced the dance and arrived at the anchor, leaving only the deeply questionable second pitch standing in the way of a new free route.

Or so I thought.

Another year later and I decided to commit the fall 2020 season to the last remaining pitch. Unfortunately it seemed more on the impossible side of the spectrum. Many extremely low percentage moves stacked one on top of the other. A Tomb Raider style tunnel of lasers. The pitch required so much precision and a wonderful combination of focus, try-hard and acceptance. Even if I tracked perfectly, to send would still require a subtle mixture of conditions, sticky rubber and luck. I had to be right there. Floating. On the foothold, light, moving. Not thinking about the moment before or the one after.

On Sunday October 4, I fell on the last hard move. On Tuesday I fell on the move after the last hard move, rocking onto the first good foothold after a long string of time-bomb smears. I couldn't believe it! I very rarely get frustrated with climbing, but this time I let out a real yell. On Wednesday afternoon I sat looking at the forecast in dismay. The weather was rolling in that night. Rain forever. Frantic texts ensued. Duncan O'Regan rallied to support a last ditch headlamp attempt that night!

We got up there and it all felt pretty hopeless, very humid, my arms were tired, my skin was a train wreck. But I gave it just one more go, hitting that magical flow state that makes climbing so special.

I lowered down to the portaledge quietly, hardly daring to believe that it had happened. We sat on the ledge and watched the mist roll into Squamish below us. Within 20 minutes we were in a thick cloud of moisture. I had sent the pitch in the last possible moments before the storm. Sitting up there with Duncan and watching the clouds whip past in our headlamp beams was the perfect reward.

This was far from a continuous ascent. In fact I sent one pitch a year for three consecutive years! At this point I believed I had just made the first free ascent of the last remaining pitch on Marc-Andre's Call of the Sirens project and my suggested grades were 13b, 14a, 13c/d, 11c, 12c. I believed Marc had made the first ascent of pitches one, four, and five and I of pitches two and three.

Several months later, I was talking with Marc's long-time partner before he passed, Brette Harrington. After looking back through some old Instagram messages, it became clear that Marc had sent not only pitch one, but also pitch two in November 2015. Not only that, but he had graded that pitch 5.13c, believing the third pitch to be the 5.14 crux!

It's kind of funny how this one played out in the end: Marc managed to send and downgrade my project from the grave! I'm sure he'd find it funny too. After that fall of 2015, Marc's passion took him higher towards bigger, alpine objectives, and he left the third pitch of Call of the Sirens unfinished, hoping to go back one day and finish it off. Nothing about this new information changes my

experience on the route. I feel lucky to have been able to share the subtle dance required to climb pitch two with Marc.

This also goes to show how much guesswork goes into grading hard slab climbing. Almost blank, sub-vertical granite has this strange quality where when the answer is hidden it appears impossible, but when the sequences come together and it flows, the climbing feels almost effortless. Since physical effort is not an effective measure, I usually base my slab grades on the number of attempts it takes to send something—especially since everything above 5.12 feels highly tenuous! Based on our two independent data points, I'll revise my grade suggestions to 5.13d for both pitches two and three. Perhaps someone else will repeat them and get some more data.

A continuous ascent of this route would be a true masterpiece of slab wizardry. I'm thrilled to have finished off the route and left a challenge for future slab pilgrims to try, and maybe improve on my style. Climb on, Marc-André.

— Jacob Cook, Canada

## Images



Jacob Cook eyeing the first ascent—or was it the second?—of pitch two (5.13d) on Call of the Sirens.



The line of Call of the Sirens (5 pitches, 5.13d) on the Tantalus Wall.



Jacob Cook on the second pitch of Call of the Sirens.

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