



## AAC Publications

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### **Mt. Hooker, The Optimist**

Wyoming, Wind River Range

**The plan to do a new route on the northeast face of Mt. Hooker first formed in August 2019.** That month, my closest friend, Nolan Smythe, and I hiked out from Hooker having done the second free ascent of Original Sin (Birdwell-Huey, 2017; see AAJ 2018). We realized the potential for quality free climbing through the face's blank sections, and we agreed to return in 2020 to attempt a new line.

Sadly, Nolan would never return to Hooker. On March 6, 2020, he passed away while we were climbing together on El Gigante in Basaseachic Falls National Park in Chihuahua, Mexico. A large chunk of rock came out from under his feet while he was on lead, severing his rope. The world lost an incredible human and the best man I knew.

I was determined to follow through with the vision Nolan and I had to put up a new route on one of the finest alpine walls in the country. I rounded up Jackson Marvell as a partner and, since I didn't want to be out on a remote wall again without a third, we called up Drew Smith. On August 5, Nolan's birthday, the three of us hiked into the Wind Rivers.

After a day of scouting, we decided that a route on the left side looked promising. There were some obvious cracks, with the only real question marks being a blank shield of granite in the middle of the wall and a large roof a little lower.

The Optimist starts on the same right trending ramp as Cache Pirates (Kimbrough-Mestre, 2019; see AAJ 2020), but continues up the ramp where Cache Pirates break left. We utilized two anchors on that route's rappel line and added a belay atop our third pitch. The fourth pitch, a feature we dubbed the Razor Roof, met up with the end of the pitch-five traverse on Cache Pirates and shared that belay. We began by climbing Cache Pirates to the top of its fifth pitch and fixing to the ground to make sure the roof would go free, and to clean a visible truckload of loose rock from the third pitch. From there we continued ground-up, climbing about 15' up the sixth pitch of Cache Pirates before breaking left on independent terrain for good.

The big question mark was the sixth pitch, dubbed the Optimist Slab, which offered incredible stone but few options to hook or aid, and it seemed like we might get shut down there. We didn't want to drill a bolt ladder or use bat-hook holes if it wouldn't go free. Jackson had tried, Drew had tried. Now I was up. I had to harness every bit of the optimism for which Nolan was so well known. I free climbed the 5.12 slab, stopping at stances and equalizing hooks that I could drill from. After several hours on lead I was at the next belay and the most intimidating obstacle of the route was behind us.

Atop pitch six and out of rope for fixing, we would need to climb to the summit in a push. We all agreed we wanted a direct finish as opposed to the long walk up Der Major Ledge, where many Hooker routes finish. Mostly moderate climbing took us three pitches above Der Major, but another question mark—a steep wall with no obvious crack systems—loomed above and weather was coming in. We made a hasty retreat.

Drew and I took two rest days lounging around camp. Jackson's version of "resting" was to run 16

miles to the trailhead and drive to Lander so he could buy bacon, quesadilla supplies, a new belay device, and fresh rope. Legendary.

On August 13, Drew's birthday, we made a push for the summit. Jackson was able to aid through the steep terrain on pitch 10 that had perplexed us a few days earlier. We added two bolts to this pitch on top-rope after verifying that it would go free. Then Drew took us up through the birthday corner and Jackson led the final 5.10 terrain to the summit. Our route was ready for a free attempt.

After another rest day, we came back on August 15 to free the full route in perfect weather. We swapped leads throughout the day. I managed to free every pitch, leading both crux pitches, with preplaced gear on the pitch 10 crux. Jackson and Drew came a few moves short on the full send, but we had a complete free climb.

I miss Nolan with all of my heart. We carried him on the wall with us every day. I used his hammer, Grigri, and his Mini Traxion. Throughout the trip we dug deep to summon his infectious optimism. He had a special way of believing in people, even if they didn't believe in themselves.

The Optimist, a.k.a. The Nolan Smythe Memorial Route (1,500', 12 pitches, 5.12), is the proudest accomplishment of my career thus far. I'm so grateful to Drew and Jackson for being incredible partners, and I'm beyond thankful that we could dedicate a route to Nolan that he would have been psyched on.

– Aaron Livingston

## Images



Aaron Livingston on pitch 10 (5.12) during the team's free ascent of The Optimist, a.k.a. The Nolan Smythe Memorial Route (1,500', 12 pitches, 5.12), on the northeast face of Mt. Hooker in Wyoming's Wind River Range.



Aaron Livingston airs it out through the 5.11 roof on pitch four of The Optimist, a.k.a. The Nolan Smythe Memorial Route (1,500', 12 pitches, 5.12), on the northeast face of Mt. Hooker in Wyoming's Wind River Range.



Jackson Marvell heading up pitch 10 (5.12) during the first ascent of The Optimist, a.k.a. The Nolan Smythe Memorial Route (1,500', 12 pitches, 5.12), on the northeast face of Mt. Hooker in Wyoming's Wind River Range.



A journal entry from Nolan Smythe at the Mt. Hooker base camp.



The northeast face of Mt. Hooker in Wyoming's Wind River Range, showing the line of The Optimist,



a.k.a. The Nolan Smythe Memorial Route (1,500', 12 pitches, 5.12), climbed by Aaron Livingston, Jackson Marvell, and Drew Smith in August 2020.



Aaron Livingston on the Optimist Slab, the first 5.12 pitch of the route. A few days prior, Livingston had bolted the difficult slab on lead, unlocking one of the keys to the free ascent.



Aaron Livingston, Jackson Marvell, and Drew Smith on top of Mt. Hooker after topping out The Optimist, a.k.a. The Nolan Smythe Memorial Route (1,500', 12 pitches, 5.12), on the northeast face of Mt. Hooker in Wyoming's Wind River Range.



Topo for The Optimist, a.k.a. The Nolan Smythe Memorial Route (1,500', 12 pitches, 5.12), on the northeast face of Mt. Hooker in Wyoming's Wind River Range.

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