



AAC Publications

Mt. Breitenbach, North Face, First Ski Descent

Idaho, Lost River Range

I became interested in the north face of Mt. Breitenbach (12,140') in the early 2000s as an alpine climbing objective. There had been several attempts over the years, but only one route, the Grand Chockstone Couloir (III 5.8 A2, Boyles-Olson-Weber, AAJ 1983), had found a way through the complex and steep terrain.

After many years of climbing and skiing in the range, I wondered if a skiable line existed on the cliff-riddled face. In 2017, conditions looked favorable for an attempt, but when my partner bailed at the last minute, I settled for a climb and ski of the north face of Mt. Borah, Idaho's tallest peak. In the wet spring of 2019, things were lining up to produce favorable conditions. That June, I climbed a new alpine route up the north face of Breitenbach with friend and fellow adventurer Paddy McIlvoy. We named the route Cowboy Poetry (2,800', IV 5.7 R AI2 50° snow; AAJ 2020). In the spring of 2023, conditions were once again looking promising for a potential ski descent.

I reached out to fellow guide Jon "JP" Preuss to see if he was available for an adventure. With access to the east side of the Lost River Range still blocked by snow, I chose Jones Creek for our approach and exit. This meant we'd be approaching the north face top-down; I'd have to rely on photos and my prior experience on the mountain for reference. On April 26, we brought the whole kit—sharp points, rope, harnesses—but I had picked out a line that I thought would go free of the rope.

And it did. The Last Cowboy is a steep-skiing adventure through one of the most complex alpine faces in Idaho. From the first turns to the last, it's a no-fall zone where stability and conditions are critical. The route lulls you in with some casual turns off the summit and along the shoulder before dropping into the 40° Central Couloir. The Walk the Line traverse that followed looked scary and improbable, but with an axe in hand and the stable conditions we had, it felt quite secure. The traverse ended in a hanging bowl above the Long-Legged Couloirs, some of the steepest terrain on the route. A cornice had collapsed far to skier's left, wiping all the good snow clear of the lower part of the bowl and the Left Leg Couloir; consequently, we aimed for the Right Leg. (We named these features according to a skier's perspective.) An exceptionally steep traverse above a 50' cliff got us to the Right Leg's entrance. Once in the couloir, we linked turns through a spectacular narrow hallway.

The complete descent took us 1.5 hours. The Last Cowboy covers 2,500' of vertical, has slopes up to 55°, and wends through couloirs as narrow as 8' wide.

— Marc Hanselman

Images



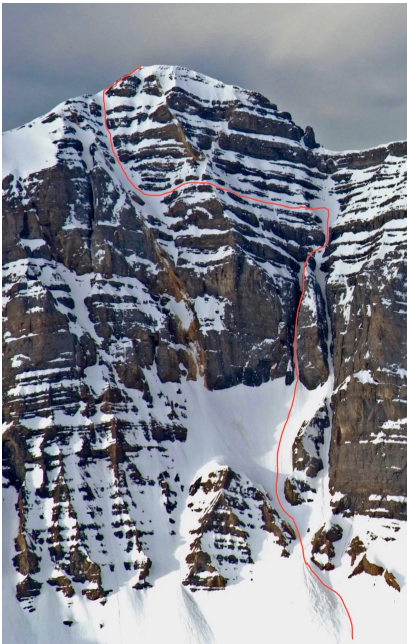
Jon "JP" Pruess in the Central Couloir feature on the north face of Mt. Breitenbach, during the first ski descent of the face.



Jon "JP" Pruess on the Walk the Line traverse of The Last Cowboy on the north face of Mt. Breitenbach.



Marc Hanselman and Jon “JP” Pruess never used a rope on the first ski descent of the north face of Mt. Breitenbach. Here, Pruess makes the exposed traverse into the Right Leg couloir, one of the steepest sections.



The line of The Last Cowboy, the first ski descent of Mt. Breitenbach’s north face, Lost River Range, Idaho. Marc Hanselman and Jon “JP” Pruess made the descent on April 26, 2023.

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