



AAC Publications

Mt. Whitney, Hairline Free

California, Sierra Nevada, Whitney Massif

Standing beneath Hairline (12 pitches, IV 5.10d C2+) for the first time in 2018, looking up at Mt. Whitney's imposing east face, I could hardly imagine the vision and audacity it had taken Bruce Bindner and Alex Schmauss to attempt this route back in 1987. An obvious line, yes, but mind-boggling to contemplate: The route's blank, overhanging headwall, situated above 13,000', was split by what seemed the thinnest of cracks, stretching upward for several hundred feet.

I returned for a reconnaissance mission, and it seemed clear that Hairline could go free—albeit with a lot of blue-collar cleaning. I applied for and received a Live Your Dream Grant from the AAC to help fund the project.

In 2018 and 2019, I made two more trips to clean the rock and try to climb pitch three, the obvious crux. A monster pitch of nearly 60m that overhangs by 15° to 20°, it starts with an insecure, pumpy layback and becomes progressively more bouldery. The hardest sequence guards the anchor. On my final trip in the summer of 2019, I surprised myself by redpointing this crux pitch, with Ronnie (my girlfriend at the time) on belay.

COVID-19, wildfires, and a lack of partners forced me to keep Hairline on the back burner. But in the summer of 2023, I met Connor Herson in Tuolumne Meadows. We got to chatting about Hairline, and it was clear he would be a perfect partner. A week later, we were both giddy as kids as we packed on my front porch in Bishop and drove up to the Portal that afternoon.

Connor—who, among other mind-blowing feats, freed The Nose of El Capitan at age 15, in 2018, and in 2023 repeated Beth Rodden's masterpiece Meltdown (5.14+) in Yosemite—is just as much of a hard worker as he is a phenomenal rock climber. We hiked up to Iceberg Lake laden with 65-plus-pound packs on the afternoon of Tuesday, September 19. For the next two days, we scrubbed, hand-drilled, and juggled up and down the crux pitches to rehearse the moves. At night we endured 40–50 mph gusts and single-digit windchill in our pitiful two-person tent.

Most of the bolts on Hairline are old 1/4-inchers, but all of the bolts on pitch one and most anchor bolts were upgraded to 3/8" in an ASCA rebolting effort in 2004, led by Bindner himself, along with Elmar Stefke and their respective wives, Em Holland and Lisa Stefke. In our first two days together on the route, Connor and I hand-drilled six new bolts to make the route a sensible free climb, including one to protect a 5.12 slab section that climbs around three bolts of A0. Aside from that last bolt, the entire route is protected by cams, wires, and in situ gear (including old bolts, pitons, and copperheads). Bindner and Schmauss had placed their original anchors every 50m (the length of their ropes), but this resulted in heinous hanging belays and poor holds for clipping the anchors; we placed five bolts for anchors at better free climbing stances, making minimal changes to the nature of the aid climb.

On Friday, September 22, Connor and I were worn out from two days of hard work, but there was no time to rest—he had to be at a meeting at Stanford University on Sunday morning! Our planned tactics were simple: We would take turns leading each crux pitch until one of us freed it, then push on to the next pitch.

After two 5.10 pitches at the base, we sat on a big ledge to wait for shade to hit the three hardest pitches—three, four, and five—which wouldn't happen until 1 p.m. However, Connor got impatient and decided he'd take a run at the crux pitch in full sun. I could see he was nervous, but I wasn't worried for him, knowing he had enough fitness and grit for multiple good tries; rather, I was concerned for myself—if he fell, I'd be up next!

As I fed rope through the Grigri, Connor dispatched boulder problem after boulder problem. At the very end, he grunted through the technical V7ish sequence to the chains. I felt at once relieved that I wouldn't have to lead this pitch again, and also slightly vindicated that even the wunderkind Connor Herson had to try really hard on the pitch. To my surprise, I followed the crux cleanly. Later, we agreed to grade this pitch 5.13d.

We both sent the next two pitches, a 5.12 and 5.13-, making it a no-fall day. However, by the time we reached the top of the ninth pitch, it was already 5 p.m. There were only three moderate pitches and some 4th class to reach Whitney's summit, but the 3rd-class Mountaineer's Route—our way down—was particularly icy and snowy that summer; without crampons, it would have been dangerous to descend it at night.

We decided to save the summit for the next day and scrambled down the East Face route (5.7) to return to our bivy. The next morning, we reversed the previous night's descent and swung leads on Hairline's remaining pitches, topping out around 11 a.m. in glorious sunshine, along with dozens of hikers. After a brief celebration, we practically skipped down to Iceberg Lake in the highest of spirits, but once there the respite was brief: We still had to break camp, hike out, and get Connor to school.

The rock on Hairline Free (1,000', 13 pitches, V 5.13d) is generally very good for the Whitney zone, but there are sections that, while not quite R-rated, are certainly fragile. Those looking to repeat the route should tread lightly—but above all enjoy the spectacular climbing and setting.

— Fan Yang

The Cutting Edge · Connor Herson and Fan Yang: 5.13+ on Mt. Whitney

Images



Connor Herson and Fan Yang's 65-plus-pound packs at Whitney Portal before hiking up to Mt. Whitney.



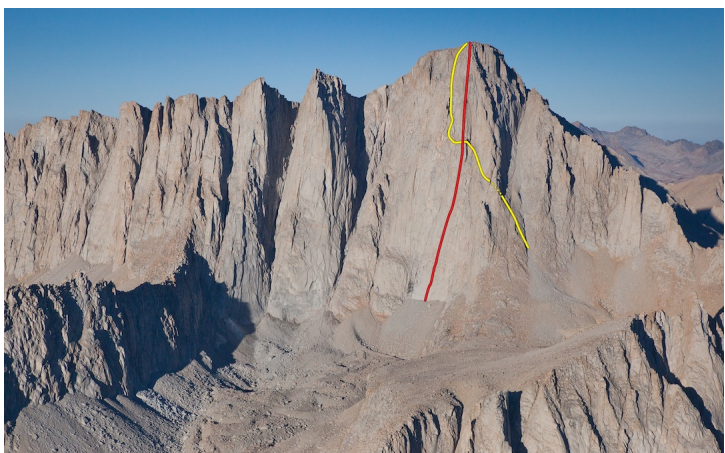
Connor Herson after redpointing pitch three (5.13d), the crux on Hairline Free on the east face of Mt. Whitney.



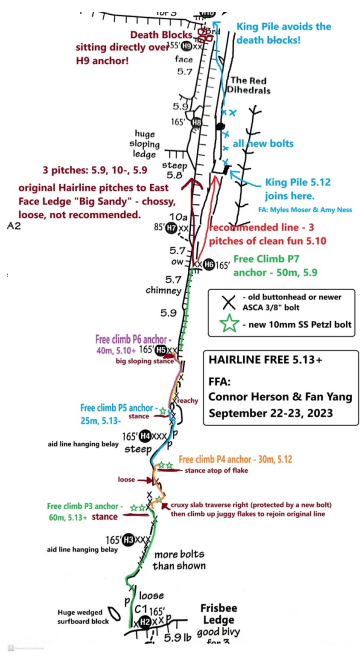
Connor Herson and Fan Yang in high spirits after having sent all three of the hardest pitches with no falls during their first free ascent of Hairline on the east face of Mt. Whitney.



Connor Herson and Fan Yang pose for a selfie before heading back to civilization from the foot of Mt. Whitney.



The east face of Mt. Whitney (14,505') showing the approximate routes of Hairline (red line) and the East Face route (yellow line). Many other climbs are not shown.



Topo for the free version of Hairline on the east face of Mt. Whitney.

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