



AAC Publications

Ammon McNeely, 1970–2023

"I would rather live 40 years of excitement and fun and exhilarating and just WOO full volume than 80 years of la-di-da-di-da. You know...boring," Ammon McNeely said in 2006 while filming El Cap Pirate. "Why not get out there and live it?"

Loved by many for being rowdy, charming, encouraging, and a modern pirate, Ammon passed away on February 18, 2023, in Moab, Utah. With over 75 ascents of El Capitan, nearly two dozen speed records on big-wall routes in Yosemite Valley and in Zion National Park, and first ascents of hard aid climbs across the United States, Ammon made a huge impact on wall climbing. In addition to his innate boldness—and an extensive BASE jumping résumé—Ammon's friends and family remember the nearly six-foot man with the earrings, the narrow face, and the wide grin for his kindness, his support, and his ability to authentically and unapologetically be himself. Ammon lived a life of volume.

Ammon was the third of five kids and grew up in Saint George, Utah. "He almost killed himself every year of his life," said his older brother, Gabe. He started climbing young, scrambling up 5.6 routes in nearby Snow Canyon. Ammon's parents divorced when he was in high school, and he moved with his mother to Huntington Beach, California. He explored the climbing at Tahquitz, Suicide, and other crags of Southern California, largely teaching himself using John Long's how-to books. He bought a rope and shoes in 1995 and decided to become fully invested in the sport.

"He went up on the NA with nothing," Ammon's friend Kurt Arend said of Ammon's ten-day solo ascent of the North America Wall (VI 5.8 A2) in 1996. "I think he just had a couple sets of cams and a ton of pins. He didn't have a clue. He was just going for it." After summiting El Capitan, Ammon met the big-wall guru Chongo Chuck, who, in exchange for some Olde English and indica, taught him about hauling systems. Ammon moved into a tent in the woods behind Camp 4 and began raging the granite seas of Yosemite. He quickly became known as the El Cap Pirate, climbing routes that others had bailed on and flying his skull and crossbones on the side of El Cap.

"I wanted to hit El Capitan with all the force I could muster," Ammon wrote in *Alpinist* of an unmatched season of Yosemite wall climbing in 2004. "In all, I climbed 11 El Cap routes in five months, nine of them in record time, five as first one-day ascents."

"I can't say I ever saw him get scared," says Chris McNamara, one of Ammon's big-wall partners. "He's also just one of the biggest-hearted, nicest people." On Rodeo Queen (5.10 A4), Chris had a meltdown in the middle of the night, wanting to bail on a pitch. "You're going to feel a lot better if you finish this," Ammon said, aiming to help his friend make it through the difficulties.

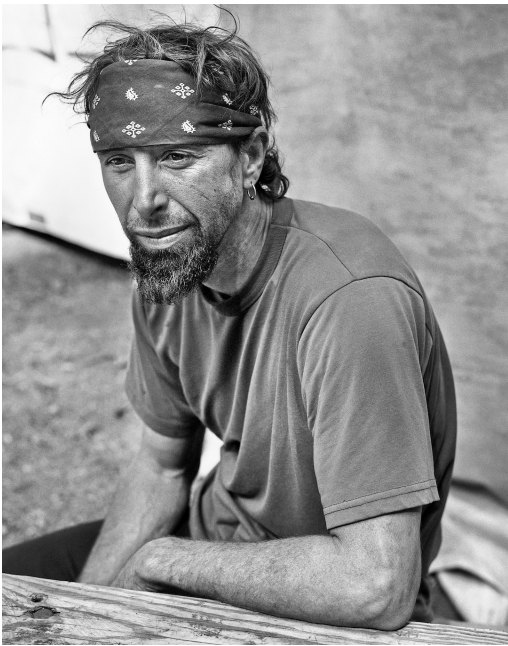
Ammon started BASE jumping in January 2007, and he jumped many times off El Capitan, often narrowly escaping the rangers upon landing in the meadow below. Once, he got tased by rangers after jumping. Unfortunately, Ammon suffered a few accidents while BASE jumping, most seriously in September 2017, when he struck a wall in Moab. Among many injuries, Ammon severely damaged his right leg, resulting in amputation below the knee and a prosthetic leg. He continued to jump with a crew in Moab, climbing towers and jumping off.

Ammon worked many jobs over the years, including rigging, tandem BASE guiding, and working for Moab-area ballooning and zip-line companies. He continued to climb and put up new routes.

On February 18, Ammon, his partner, Sarah Watson, and a friend hiked to Hurrah Pass near Moab to watch the sunset. Watson stepped down onto a stone diving board, which had a 200-foot drop. As the sun dipped toward the horizon, Ammon tried to join her. Weighting his prosthetic incorrectly, Ammon lost his balance and fell to his death. He was 52.

— **James Lucas**

Images



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