



Dick Jackson, 1950–2025

Dick Jackson in September 2003, working as lead guide in the Khumbu, Nepal, on a paragliding-mountaineering expedition. Photo courtesy of Jackson–Vander Noordaa Family

In the old Aspen days, Dick Jackson was easy to find, at his Rocky Mountain Climbing School “office,” an unheated trolley car plopped in the center of town. That’s where, on arriving in town in 1983, I met him: feet propped up at a makeshift desk, his shorts displaying powerful runner’s legs. A mountain-tanned face was highlighted by sparkling blue eyes and an immediate smile, and topped off by a white, wool flat cap. Dick, who died on November 26, 2025, at age 75, after collapsing at home, was to become a close friend and influential figure to me, as he was to multitudes of other mountain folks around the world. Walking into the trolley car that day got me a job—teaching ski touring and climbing—and a mentor.

Dick embodied the original ski-town spirit, with an irreverent sense of humor, verve for core mountain sports, and his love for simply moving in the hills at practically any opportunity. And, on any outing, he would tote some sort of camera, cataloguing thousands of high-quality photos: some documentary and many that are works of art. The walls of his home are adorned with images of mountains, prayer flags, faces, and more from Nepal to the Alps to his Colorado backyard.

Aspen in the 1980s was low-key, and Dick lived in a tiny log cabin near Difficult Creek, east of town. Many local friends attended his raucous Potato Fests there, hosted in the height of summer, where all potluck dishes and cocktails contained spuds. At the center of the event was the potato toss, with contestants hucking potatoes at a red Solo cup placed 40 or 50 yards away. One year, after explaining the rules (not any, really), Dick took the first toss, winding up and heaving the potato skyward, and we watched in astonishment as it arced down and landed dead center in the cup. The crowd went nuts, and celebrants hoisted Dick onto their shoulders, kicking off one great party. I doubt anyone ever succeeded in the potato toss again.

A versatile athlete, Dick was an accomplished rock and ice climber, telemarker, ski mountaineer, paraglider, and alpinist. In 1976, with Kevin Beardsley, Brad Johnson, and Cleve McCarty, Dick made the first American ascent of the Cassin Ridge on Denali, and in 1978, he and Steve Shea climbed a new route, La Voie Jackson, up the north face of Les Droites, near Chamonix. In 1984, Dick, Pema Dorje, Dan Langmade, and Michael Yager climbed the southwest ridge Himalchuli (7,893m), a new route in Nepal.

An early adopter of paragliding—in the same era as alpinist John Bouchard—Dick flew some of the initial, treacherous wings off Aspen Mountain in the mid-1980s. I was invited once, and after an easy takeoff thought it would be smooth sailing. Seconds later, I dropped 200 feet in an instant—that would be my only flight. Along with running Aspen Expeditions (the name had changed from Rocky Mountain Climbing School), which guided clients on rock, ice, big mountains, and ski tours locally and across the globe, Dick, in 1989, would launch Aspen Paragliding, a successful business that taught aspirants and regularly ran tandem flights from atop Aspen Mountain and elsewhere.

In 1998, Dick became the 15th American to achieve IFMGA certification, and would go on to become seminal in the progression of the American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA), serving as president for three terms, from 2000 to 2005. In 2011, he was awarded the AMGA’s Lifetime Achievement award.

Back in the day, we were both hired as telemark instructors for the Aspen Skiing Company (we vied for who could amass the smallest number of hours and still maintain our free ski pass), and Dick would go on to influence the early development of ski mountaineering. Then “state of the art” equipment included Salomon SX91 rear-entry alpine boots (retro-fitted with Vibram soles), Petzl bindings, and Rossignol 4S 203-centimeter slalom skis. In the 1990s, Dick began importing the early Petzl bindings and contributed to R&D of other gear for various companies. In the Alps, he was one of the first Americans to guide the famous Haute Route, which, along with other ski traverses, he did numerous times.

Dick amassed a wide cadre of friends in places ranging from his beloved Chamonix (where he spent hundreds of days over the decades) to Nepal, where he embraced Sherpa culture and Buddhism, as well as all over North America. He was a magnetic person, with an easy, soothing voice, calm presence, and confident yet welcoming manner.

“I’ll miss ‘Action Jackson,’” said another longtime Aspen guide, Bob “Sloman” Sloezen, 71, who has achieved three Everest ascents among many other Himalayan and Alaskan climbs. He credited Jackson with running a business in Aspen for over 30 years, and said that in climbing, paragliding, and ski touring, “he always made it an adventure.”

On a personal level, Sloezen said, “He stuck with me all that time through [my] cancer and back surgeries. Big heart!”

In 1997, Dick married Paulina Vander Noordaa, today a strategic and systems consultant and 30-year Aspen ski instructor, on top of Aspen Mountain. In 2005, the couple adopted a daughter, Tashi, from Nepal. From that day, Dick’s life would never be the same. Whenever he talked of Tashi, he lit up, and his friends joked that Dick had gone round the bend. Tashi, 22, was a senior at the University of Washington, majoring in environmental studies, at the time of Dick’s death. Among the sorrows of his passing is that he could not see her graduate.

“Our relationship was quite rare and profound,” Tashi wrote in a text. “I think his legacy was not only the mountains he climbed, but the love he gave, the gentleness he displayed, and the way he continued guiding me toward compassion, courage and presence.”

Dick experienced much tragedy, with the losses of his then partner, Kirsten Mahler, age 25, on an Alps ski traverse together in 1987, as well as a longtime friend, Raoul Wille, age 45, who was with him on an expedition to Baruntse in Nepal in 1998. His close friend and partner in Aspen Paragliding, Dave Bridges, 29, died a year later on Shishapangma, in the same avalanche that took the life of Alex Lowe.

Another life-changing event occurred in October 2010, when Dick crashed while descending by paraglider from Mt. Sopris, just down-valley from his home in Basalt. Dick’s many injuries included a broken back, punctured lung, and broken ankle, all which would profoundly affect his physical future. During his year-long hospitalizations, with many surgeries, Dick contracted a staph infection that was nearly fatal. His injuries left him with long-term nerve pain, numbness, and mobility issues.

“The crash really sobered him up,” says one of Aspen Expeditions’ longtime guides, Amos Whiting. “He was always a strong personality, but there was a shift at that point. Also, Tashi really softened him.”

In 2017, Dick sold Aspen Expeditions and Paragliding to Whiting and Britt Ruegger, taking on a consultant role for a time.

“He helped a lot with the personnel stuff,” says Whiting, citing Dick’s skillful personal touch. “He was a ‘caller,’ and preferred to chat on the phone or in person.”

In his later years, in 2024, already quietly enduring chronic pain, Dick had the bad luck of being hit by a snowboarder on a family ski day, requiring another knee surgery. At the time of his death, he was planning a knee replacement. But he could still ski, and his primary activities included skinning up the local hills, downhilling, and even some backcountry skis up Independence Pass near Aspen. In warmer temps, he transitioned to “all things wheels,” including biking and motorcycling. He, Tashi, and Paulina traveled extensively, including to Tashi’s home country of Nepal.

“Even with chronic physical pain, he never fell into resentment or became hardened,” says Tashi. “Instead, he grew softer, more spiritual and wise.”

—Michael Benge

Images



A family day: Paulina Vander Noordaa, Tashi Jackson (daughter of Dick and Paulina), and Dick Jackson in the Swiss Alps near Grand Combin Glacier, August 2018.



Dick Jackson as lead guide in the Khumbu, Nepal, on a paragliding-mountaineering expedition, September 2003.



Dick Jackson, summit day on Himal Chuli (7,893 meters). Dick was first of his team to summit, becoming the first American to climb the peak.



Dick Jackson ski touring, late 80s or early 90s.



Dick Jackson and his wife, Paulina Vander Noordaa, on Mt. Hayden, Aspen, Colorado, in March 1996 or 1997.



Dick Jackson at age 70 e-bikes up to Independence Pass to ski, May 2020.

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