



AAC Publications

Doubleheader

New routes on K7 and the Ogre in Pakistan

"The essence of a climb burns out in the moment of experience." Marko Prezelj's words smoldered in my mind as we chugged up another steep hill en route to base camp on the Choktoi Glacier. I sure wish it would burn out of my legs. Fatigue forced me to pause on the dusty path. Damn it, Kyle, why couldn't you just be content with K7? Why always more? Even after eating copious amounts of pizza, ice cream, and cake during four sedentary days in Skardu, Hayden looked skinnier than usual as he ground up the same hill. I too felt small after five weeks in Pakistan. Plug on.

Five months earlier, Hayden Kennedy and I had agreed on a preposterous plan: climb two 7,000-meter peaks, both via new routes, in one summer in the Karakoram. We dubbed our expedition the Pakistani Doubleheader—alpine gluttony at its finest.

Phase one began in the elegant Charakusa Valley. Hayden and I, along with our friend and Slovenian powerhouse Urban Novak, arrived in early July and began acclimatizing on familiar mountains. In 2011 we had come within 300 meters of the summit on the unclimbed east face of K7 (6,934 meters), before heavy snow forced our descent. We had unfinished business.

At 11 p.m. on July 17, the warmth of the nighttime air encouraged us upward as we climbed familiar terrain. Redpointing an alpine route felt less intense than being on a mountain for the first time. We knew the moves, knew which runnels provided the easiest passage, and, at least until our 2011 high point, we knew what to expect. Through the night, we simul-climbed with ropes coiled in our packs. At 5,800 meters, just as light turned our world to an eerie hue, we arrived at the start of four familiar pitches of steep blue ice. Hayden led two pitches, making good time on thin ice peppered with granite blobs. Urban quickly dispatched the top two pitches of the intimidating step, Hayden and I followed, and again we were cruising on easier terrain.

The wild card on the upper mountain was conditions. We had heard from other climbers in Skardu that deep snow, from late-spring storms, still remained at higher altitudes in the Karakoram. And at 6,200 meters, a few pitches below our previous high point, the rumors became reality. Our progress stalled as I began digging through deep, unconsolidated snow. From a distance, both our pace and the trough that remained in our wake must have resembled that of a snail. Hours evaporated and clouds formed in the sky. Above our 2011 bivy, steeper ice and rock pitches provided some relief. But it didn't last long, as more deep snow slopes waited higher on the face.

Hayden took a turn at the vertical snow-swimming and led us toward a huge granite corner that appeared to cater well to his phenomenal rock climbing ability. With some effort he scraped up a snow-covered rock slab to the base of the imposing system. After a quick discussion we determined that the daunting corner was impassable. I took the lead and did two pendulums around a corner to the left.

As I started up again, warm snot streamed through my whiskers. The heat from my face melted falling snowflakes into a cold, humid slop. I shuffled my feet on a six-inch-wide ledge, my arms starfishing a blank and imposing bulge of granite. Urban and Hayden hung at the anchor, hoping for the good word that I had found a belay and they could begin to move their cold bodies. Our secret path on K7's east face revealed nothing as I looked around the corner, trying to find a relief from the steep rock. A break from the discomfort. Anything.

"I don't know you guys, this is totally fucked!" I screamed. "It's getting late and I see no place for a bivy! I have no idea where to go, and I think this weather is concerning! Do you think we should bail?" Bail...bail...bail... Failure was again on the table. The feeling of exposure crept up my back, swirling with the uncertainty in my mind.

"No way!" Urban shouted. His conviction supreme, he yelled, "This is what we came for! We knew it would be this way! This was our choice and we must keep going!"

Discomfort, the tenuous lead, the exposure—all vanished for a moment. Against my desire, I nearly laughed. From Hayden I heard a faint chuckle. Urban waited for an answer, his face reflecting his anxiety. I searched the granite again for tiny fissures for my picks. My crampons scraped on smooth rock, and I kept moving upward.

We continued well into the night, eventually finding a patch of steep ice where we could chop a narrow seat. After nearly 24 hours on the go we brewed up and dozed against each other's shoulders. A few hours elapsed before the gray bleakness of the morning hour crept back across the sky. Light snowflakes fell as we tried to rally motivation. Urban led the final 200 meters of deep snow to K7's summit. Hayden and I followed in his footsteps.

The rappels took us long into the frigid night, through heavy spindrift. Back at base camp we relaxed in the sun, ate incredible food, and took it all in. K7 had brought us together as friends and partners. The climbing seemed secondary.

In Skardu we watched Urban walk through security at the small airport. Saying farewell to our Slovenian friend was sad, but Urban has other talents beyond climbing and had to get back to his Ph.D. work. Hayden and I returned to our hotel and took a nap in a room littered with expedition debris.

Two weeks earlier, while we were still in the Charakusa Valley, we had received a message on our satellite phone that Josh Wharton's partner had bailed, and that Josh was waiting for us at Choktoi base camp. He hoped to try Latok I again after five prior attempts over three years. Hayden and I were open to that idea, or perhaps a new route on one of the Ogre peaks. After another few days of pizza, Magnum Double Chocolate ice cream bars, and complete laziness in Skardu, we left the trailhead at Askole for phase two of our Pakistani Doubleheader. With a group of seven strong porters, we began the four-day approach to the Choktoi Glacier. It felt great to be back in the mountains, but my legs felt weak. Metallica and Iron Maiden raged in our headphones as we wound deeper into the mighty Karakoram.

At base camp we shared hugs, stories, and laughter with Josh and our friend and cook Ghafoor. Josh then gave us newcomers to the Choktoi a tour of one of the most spectacular alpine climbing areas on the planet. Hayden and I gazed up at Latok I while Josh walked us through his proposed route on the north-northwest face. He described his attempts during past years and the reasons they hadn't been successful. He pointed out nuances such as bivy sites, hazards to avoid, and subtleties of the mountain's moods—things that are only visible to climbers who have spent much time on the mountain. The quickest and most probable line of ascent was obvious to him, and he hoped we saw it too.

Unfortunately, Hayden and I saw something else: a large serac hanging high above Josh's proposed route, threatening the lower wall. We felt the route was too dangerous and invited Josh to join us on Ogre II, but he wondered if it might be unclimbable. "I don't need to chalk up another attempt here in the Choktoi," he said. "I want to climb something that we have a chance of sending."

For eight days our surroundings disappeared in thick, white cloud. Invisible, the mountains revealed their presence with thundering avalanches. After five weeks of mild skies in the Charakusa, the

storm drove Hayden and I nearly to the point of insanity. Josh, the Choktoi veteran, waited patiently for the bad weather to pass.

As the storm dissolved and thickly frosted mountain faces were revealed, decision-making became easier. The north faces of the Ogre II and the Latoks lay under a heavy blanket of snow while the peaks' southern aspects quickly shed the new snow. We decided our best option was the Ogre, following a complex line up the southeast and south faces.

On August 19, exactly one month after summiting K7, we began methodically climbing several thousand feet of 60-degree snow and ice. Kick, punch, breathe, kick, punch, breathe. Why can something so simple at times be so painful? You must meditate.

Unroped, we simul-soloed for several hours, guided by headlamp, the increasing exposure invisible but felt under our feet. At first light we gazed eastward at K2, the Shining Wall of Gasherbrum IV, Masherbrum, and the Crown towering above the Chinese Karakoram. Conditions were perfect, and the morning sun warmed us down to our base layers. By midday we had climbed above and far to the right of several large seracs, and from this safe height we began a long traverse that would unlock the way to the upper route.

Hayden led the key pitch of the traverse: a 55-meter ramp of stacked fragments with no ice or even mud to bond the rock chips together. The pitch made the worst rock in the Canadian Rockies look like dream stone. Hayden's feet skated and sent off showers of kitty litter that fell for thousands of feet to the glacier below. He ripped off microwave-sized blocks that exploded into pieces before making it off the traverse ledge. I looked on in terror as I slowly paid out rope. "I wouldn't question him for a second if he decided to bail," Josh said.

Several hours later, after Josh and I had also battled the choss, we were cruising once again, this time roped together on steeper snowfields. At the base of the overhanging granite headwall that leads to the east summit of the Ogre 1, we found a great tent site and decided to call it a day. We devoured our dehydrated dinners, enjoying the last light of an incredible day of climbing.

We woke to another cloudless day. Josh had been a bit sluggish the previous day and now said he had a headache, but he wanted to continue. Talk ceased and we crawled out of the tent, did a few sun salutations, and were on our way, again climbing unroped on 60-degree ice and snowfields. At about 6,500 meters Hayden and I swapped leads on some tricky leftward mixed pitches. The rock was significantly better than the previous day, but gear remained sparse, and the snow and ice between the rock steps became deeper and less consolidated as we climbed higher.

After a much shorter day, we chopped a narrow tent platform in a small snowfield at about 6,900 meters, and crammed into our tiny tent. Watching Josh climb had left me feeling uneasy, and as he lay in the tent his face appeared swollen and he strained to breathe. Through the night he coughed, even spitting blood at one point. His condition seemed to be stable, but it was obvious he had some level of pulmonary or cerebral edema, and as he snoozed Hayden and I looked at each and wondered what the morning would bring.

When I peered out the tent door, wispy clouds swirled below and around us, while blue skies shined on the southern Karakoram. I had seen this weather before in Pakistan and knew it could go either way. Heavy snowfall would put us in a very serious situation, I thought. Hayden said, "We need to decide what we're doing and go for it." Groggily, Josh opened his eyes and said, "I'm worked," and then rolled over in his bag.

I'd like to say our decision to blast to the summit while Josh rested at the tent was difficult. We all understood that life at 7,000 meters is fragile. Maybe Josh's condition would turn severe; maybe Hayden and I wouldn't return from our summit push, leaving Josh stranded; maybe the mountain

would take us all. But there was very little discussion of the devastating possibilities.

Perhaps Hayden and I were blinded by the summit and it was dumb for Josh to say, "Go." Surely our decision deserves some level of scrutiny. I know for sure that if Josh had said he needed to go down, Hayden and I would have gone down with him. If either Hayden or I had felt a strong enough conviction that leaving Josh was a bad idea, or that the terrain above was too dangerous, we would have descended. If any of us had felt differently about the circumstances, we would not have made the collective decision that we did. Each moment in the mountains is different, every decision unique, and this one, at that moment, felt appropriate. Josh would stay in the

tent; we left him with the stove, extra food, and an extra sleeping bag. Hayden and I would climb the final 350 meters or so to the 7,285-meter summit of the Ogre and get back to Josh as quickly as possible.

In a beautiful red-granite corner, Hayden and I exchanged leads on several mixed pitches. Eventually we gained a corniced ridgeline that led to another mixed pitch, which accessed the final snowfield. I took the lead and wallowed through waist-deep, very steep snow, remembering Urban's words: This is what we came for, we must keep going!

On the pointy summit of the Ogre, Hayden and I stood in warm sunshine and shared an enormous hug. We had nearly completed our Pakistani Doubleheader, and all that remained was a long descent, shepherding a sick friend. Hayden and I had shared everything during our summer in Pakistan: sickness, pain, food, encouragement, fear, a sleeping bag, fatigue, laughter, and joy. K7 and the Ogre seemed irrelevant; the Doubleheader was about friendship.

Summary

New routes on K7 (6,934m) and the Ogre (Baintha Brakk, 7,285m). On K7, Kyle Dempster (U.S.), Hayden Kennedy (U.S.), and Urban Novak (Slovenia) climbed the east face in a 49-hour round trip, summiting in the morning of July 19; they descended by the same route. On the Ogre, Dempster, Kennedy, and Josh Wharton (U.S.) climbed the southeast face above the head of the Choktoi Glacier, and then traversed left to the upper south face. Wharton stayed at their second bivouac while Dempster and Kennedy went to the summit on August 21. During the descent, the team bivied once more. This expedition was funded in part by an AAC Lyman Spitzer Cutting Edge Climbing Award.

About the Author

Kyle Dempster, 30, lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he co-owns and manages the Higher Ground Coffee shop.

A version of this story originally appeared, in Spanish, in **Desnivel**.

Images



The east face of K7 (6,934 meters) from Link Sar. The climb went at AI5 M6 and took 49 hours round-trip.



The Ogre II (left) and the Ogre, with the new route marked (5.9X AI5 M6R). This was only the third ascent of the 7,285-meter peak in 35 years.



Hayden Kennedy negotiates the delicate, chossy 5.9 X traverse the unlocked the way to the upper face of the Ogre.



Urban Novak in the lead on the steep ice step of K7's east face.

Article Details

Author	Kyle Dempster
Publication	AAJ
Volume	55
Issue	87
Page	38
Copyright Date	2013
Article Type	Feature article