



AAC Publications

The Goliath Traverse

A Story of Obsession in the High Sierra

What can I say about the Goliath traverse? I spent countless hours thinking about it, losing sleep, preparing myself mentally and cardiovascularly, learning about electrolytes, wondering how often I would be able to find water, how much weight I could carry and still feel light enough to free solo so much fifth-class terrain. Something like 60 mountains—it was crazy to think about that. Thirty-two miles of technical ridge, carrying all my gear, food, and water, knowing that every day I would be more tired than the last, but if I lost my concentration for even a moment, I could die. It was a goal that evolved into an obsession. An obsession that, by August 2021, I was tired of living with. I felt I had to climb the Goliath in order to be liberated.

In 2010 I fell in love with climbing through scrambling and peakbagging in the High Sierra. At first, I would be so nervous before a simple backpacking trip that I could hardly sleep. But with time and increased exposure to progressively challenging objectives, I became more comfortable. New friends helped me realize the endless possibilities climbing can offer, from bouldering in the gym to long routes in the mountains. Long ridges in the Sierra soon became attractive to me because they offer sustained technical terrain, the opportunity to tag multiple summits, and a much more enjoyable way to prepare for climbs in the Greater Ranges than hiking five gallons of water up a big hill.

In 2013, a year after my friend Ben Horne passed away in the Cordillera Blanca, I honored his memory (his motto: “magnificent failure is better than mediocre success”) by onsighting the Evolution Traverse (VI 5.9) in the Sierra car to car, solo. For me, it was a glimpse into a future full of challenges with unknown outcomes—a 27-hour day spent way outside the comfort zone of a person who’d started his climbing career only three years prior. That was before FKTs became a widespread phenomenon, before I knew of anyone attempting routes as big as the Evo car to car.

After the bruises healed, I traced the Sierra Crest on a map while considering worthy objectives for the future. I was stunned to realize the Evolution Traverse was just a fraction of a 32-mile jagged ridgeline, covering approximately 60 summits over 13,000 feet. It was a natural objective—if you could describe traversing 32 miles of continually precipitous terrain high in the alpine as natural. I was sure other people were aware of it, but had anyone climbed it?

I came to learn the massive enchainment I envisioned was a combination of two known traverses, extending on either side of Bishop Pass. There was the Full Evolution Crest (16 miles, VI 5.9), which heads northwest from Bishop Pass, meeting up with the Evolution Traverse between the Clyde Spires (13,240 feet) and Mt. Wallace (13,377 feet), then continuing north to Mt. Darwin (13,831 feet), where the Evolution Traverse heads northwest and the Full Evolution Crest continues due north for many more miles. The Full Evolution Crest was first completed by Scott McCook and Kyle Sox in 2008 over eight days, with multiple food and fuel caches along the way.

The crenelated ridge extending south from Bishop Pass, meanwhile, had been dubbed The Full Monty (16 miles, VI 5.9), and at the time was an unclimbed extension of the Full Palisade Traverse (8 miles, VI 5.9), first climbed by Jerry Adams and John Fischer in 1979. In 2013, I read an article on The North Face website that described the Full Monty as “sixteen miles—about 84,500 feet—of non-stop climbing...[along] a razor-sharp ridge crest of unpredictable rock.” The idea had been brewed up by two legends of American mountaineering, Conrad Anker and Peter Croft, who unsuccessfully attempted the link-up in 2010.

This idea of such a huge Sierra Crest traverse blew my mind, but it wasn't until August 2016 that I had the requisite fitness and desire to tackle an objective of such magnitude. The plan was to do the Full Evolution Crest from Piute Pass to Bishop Pass, then continue south into the Palisades as far as I could, spreading the ashes of my dear friend Edward Lau along the way. With a big pack, each day felt as full and difficult as the Evolution Traverse had. As big and intimidating as that was, I made great time—finishing the Full Evolution Crest at sunset on the third day.

At sunrise the following day, instead of continuing south, I spread Edward's ashes over Bishop Pass and hiked out. I had a bad feeling about attempting to continue. I felt like another entity was telling me that if I kept going, I wouldn't make it out of the mountains alive. I am not religious, so I thought the voice I heard might be the product of my exhausted, hypoglycemic state, mixed with the heavy psychological baggage of having a friend's ashes in my pack. Or maybe I wasn't yet up to the challenge? I knew that quitting with four days of food and good health wasn't logical, but I didn't argue with the voice. Instead, I accepted the first alpine style (no caches) solo of the Full Evolution Crest, as well as a chance to live another day, as a consolation prize.

Soon after hiking out, I found out my friend Julia Mackenzie had been killed on Mt. Haeckel a day before I had traversed over the same summit. Meanwhile, Scott Adamson and Kyle Dempster were missing and presumed dead in the mountains of Pakistan. A few days later, my friend Maria Birukova had her young life cut short while ascending the seldom-climbed East Are te of Bear Creek Spire. She was a joy to be around and an incredibly strong sport climber; I had introduced her to multi-pitch trad climbing. With all these tragedies, I felt no regret about making the difficult decision to stop at Bishop Pass. For the rest of that year, the mountains didn't feel as welcoming as they once had, so out of respect and fear, I stayed clear.

The following year, in 2017, I began nursing in a short-staffed emergency department that serves one of the poorest and least privileged counties in California's Central Valley. I became a small part of a big team of health care workers who performed true miracles, literally saving lives for many badly sick or acutely injured trauma patients. I almost switched departments numerous times in the first six months of work, due to the truly gruesome, war-like scenes. I got through the initial stage by reminding myself that, if everyone else around me had gotten used to the constant stress, I could too.

I recall one patient—a 20 year-old male who had been shot in the chest an hour prior—for whom there was no miracle. He was brought into the ER with no heartbeat. In a last effort to save his life, the trauma team cracked open his chest cavity like a shell to access the heart and lungs and try to quickly fix the problems before resuming CPR. Eventually he was pronounced dead. Only minutes later, people were cleaning and packaging the body, preparing the trauma room for whatever came next. For someone like me—a neophyte who saw death as a huge tragedy—it was mind-blowing to see how everyone moved on with their day after being a part of something so traumatic. The next several years would fix that.

For better or worse, with constant exposure, dealing with deaths became as natural as going backpacking. I didn't know it then, but I was mentally preparing myself to face my Goliath. It is close to impossible to see mortality for what it really is when your only brush with death is in the movies. I don't think the ER experience was great for my long-term emotional health, but it sure took me out of the fairytale-with-a-happy-ending view of life. I developed a sense of humor that was difficult for many of my climbing partners. People don't tend to enjoy poking fun at mortality as they scramble or free solo in the mountains. For me, these jokes are reminders to stay alert and avoid getting complacent. Many climbers underestimate exposed easier climbing, and many die. People pass doing far more normal things than traversing shit rock on remote peaks. The mountains became a personal necessity to fully grasp the fragility of life, a counterbalance to constantly being exposed to the aftermath.

Over the next few years—from 2017 to 2020—I went on multiple expeditions to Patagonia, did first ascents in the Brooks Range, and continued to put up new routes in the Sierra, closer to home. Then

2020 came, and with it the COVID-19 pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of people, including several co-workers I knew personally, died. Our favorite restaurants, gyms, and even local trails were closed in order to keep people from gathering. I ended up canceling a trip to Nepal for which I would have received Cutting Edge Grant funding. It was certainly a First World problem compared with what I experienced as a health care worker, but it still affected me mentally and emotionally. That summer, I made an attempt on The Full Monty traverse (from north to south) with two partners, but we had to bail less than halfway through. Not much of a consolation prize.

The reality check that COVID brought us in 2020 sent me into a mini midlife crisis. I didn't buy a fast car. Instead, I began ticking off a number of long-deferred dreams. I went to Bozeman and onsighted the Nutcracker (5 pitches, M8/9 WI5+), a mixed climbing testpiece. Shortly after, I did a solo ascent of El Capitan's Shortest Straw (VI A4). Then I did two weeks of climbing in the High Sierra, completing some obscure traverses and long car-to-car climbs, in order to prepare for a trip to Alaska. Nick Mestre and I did most of Mt. Hunter's Bibler-Klewin Route a day after arriving. We then climbed the Denali Diamond (AK grade 6, M7+ WI5+), which I climbed free—only the second free ascent of the route. On Denali I also made sure to work on cardio, with two fast ascents to the summit from 14K Camp. All along, the Goliath Traverse was in my mind and plans.

When I returned from Denali, I made a priority of big cardio days of scrambling in the Sierra: link-ups of easy routes and long car-to-car running and climbing outings. After all that, I was finally feeling primed mentally and psychologically for my Goliath.

The monsoon season seemed never-ending. Would I have to postpone the traverse for another year? I thought of it daily for many months, continuously anxious about the uncertain outcome. Deaths of competent climbers on similar terrain gave me pause. Unlike an ultra-runner stumbling through a long race, I wouldn't have the luxury of making a single slip while scrambling. A "Did Not Finish" could have a far different meaning. But all these questions and doubts only made the objective that much more meaningful, and if I bailed before trying, I knew I would regret it for the rest of my life.

Finally the monsoon cycle broke, and the forecast promised a week of sun in early August. It would be my last opportunity of the year, as nighttime lows would soon be too cold for my sub-one-pound down quilt, the days would be too short to cover the necessary distance, and finding snow to melt high on the ridgeline would be too difficult. On August 2, I set off.

Although I had previously attempted this traverse north to south, this time I went south to north. It wasn't just that I wanted to tackle the sketchy rock and terrain of the Palisades at the beginning instead of the end. I also didn't want to simply repeat what I'd done before. I wanted to maintain some adventure.

My first day started with 6,000 feet of elevation gain to Taboose Pass, then 2,000 more to the top of Cardinal Mountain (13,397 feet), and then I began climbing the long ridge connecting Cardinal to Split Mountain (14,064 feet). Plenty of scrambling on loose 3rd- and 4th-class allowed passage into the notch with Split, where the rock quality improved. An airy arete gained access to a long series of notches and towers, with difficulties up to 5.8. I made Split's summit by sunset, tired and thirsty, with only about two and a half liters of water left for dinner and the next day. I had expected to find snow by the summit, but the extremely dry winter, paired with a warm summer, had left nothing.

On the second day, I traversed over Mt. Prater (13,471 feet) and found a cool 5.8 splitter to downclimb on the crest, before traversing a loose ridgeline toward Mt. Bolton Brown (13,491 feet). It would have been much easier to follow the peakbagger traverse route, 400 feet below the west side of the crest, but I tried to stay near the crest as long as the climbing seemed reasonable. Past Bolton Brown, I found a big snow patch, which allowed me to finally slake my thirst and fill up another liter of water.

Traversing to an unnamed 13er, I ran into towers that were difficult to downclimb and required me to rappel. (For climbing gear, I carried 60 meters of 6mm static cord, a double-length Dyneema sling for

a makeshift harness, two small carabiners, an Edelrid Microjule belay/rappel device, and four nuts.) I paused momentarily to watch a herd of bighorn sheep on a brief plateau. Then came the big surprise of the day: the south ridge of Ed Lane Peak (13,576 feet), a route that had been marked on a map by a prolific local scrambler, but later turned out to have been an attempt aborted due to technical difficulties and loose rock. After a heinously loose 5th-class downclimb—impossible to avoid due to a lack of anchor options—and a short 5.8 face climbing crux, I got past the unexpected roadblock and continued up the ridge to tag the Thumb (13,356 feet) before finding a way down to Southfork Pass, where I had a couple of hours to relax and stretch before the sun set.

The third day was a beast. I carefully made my way from Balcony Peak to Disappointment, Excitement, and Middle Palisade (14,012 feet). There were plenty of loose 4th- and 5th-class sections, and because traversing over so many mountains every day requires you to make quick work of route-finding, inevitably you fail to find the easiest terrain at times.

On top of Middle Palisade, I took a break and decided to slow down, as it had taken me less than three hours to get there from Balcony, and the following section was believed to be one of the loosest of the traverse. (At least it seemed full-on to Alex Honnold, Sean Leary, and Cedar Wright, who traversed this section while filming *The Sufferfest*.) I took my time getting down from Middle Palisade, and didn't find it to be bad. Then I traversed to a pinnacle dubbed Dent du Dent. The rock was horrible, and the terrain was steep—I wished I were tied in with a partner. From the top of Dent du Dent, a sharp ridge led down to the notch with Bivouac Peak's (13,660 feet) steep headwall. Fortunately, the climbing to Bivouac's summit wasn't as crazy as it looked—or as others had made it sound.

On top of Norman Clyde Peak (13,920 feet), where I'd been aiming to sleep, it was only 2:15 p.m. and I decided to continue to Mt. Williams (13,622 feet), despite the midday heat and fatigue from climbing seven mountains already that day. Downclimbing from Williams, I looked for a well-protected bivy, as the following day was forecasted to have wind gusts up to 35 mph. I found a slanting spot that did the trick.

Day four brought the best climbing of the traverse—a dozen pinnacles along the Palisade Crest. Yet the gusts of wind made the sustained and exposed 5th-class scrambling feel very exciting. At one point, in a huge stem over an exposed gap, waiting for the wind to calm so I could perform a dynamic step-across, a gust hit me so hard that my left foot came off and I barn-doored. Thankfully a positive handhold kept me from finding out if there is a heaven (or hell). At Potluck Pass I refilled my water supply from a tiny tarn, then climbed over Mt. Jepsen (13,390 feet) and continued on to Mt. Sill (14,153 feet), where the western winds intensified so much that I was forced to stop early and bivy on the eastern side of the crest.

On the fifth day, I climbed from Sill to Thunderbolt Peak (14,003 feet) in about three hours. Then came the meltdown. Descending a loose gully from Thunderbolt, I took a tumble and badly bruised a bicep, hurt my hip, and a couple of minutes later badly sprained an ankle. As Mike Tyson said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." After a brief minute to calm down, I talked myself into continuing: You have many hours before it will be dark and are close to two hours ahead of schedule. Slow down and prevent your body from being injured further. After that, the day went smoother. I had a hard time descending from Mt. Winchell (13,768 feet), although I knew the way up well, but finally I topped out Agassiz—the last peak of *The Full Monty*—with a couple hours of daylight left to descend to Bishop Pass.

At the pass, I was hit with thoughts of quitting: You just completed the extension to the Full Palisade traverse, your body is beat, why bother risking your life on the Full Evolution Crest, which you've already done? And yet, the complete link-up had been a dream for so long that I couldn't justify bailing. To help keep my mind away from negative thoughts during the traverse, I listened to ultra-running podcasts, music, and audiobooks of *Can't Hurt Me: Master Your Mind and Defy the Odds*, by David Goggins, and *The Third Pole*, Mark Synnott's Everest book. With not much more battery left in my headphones, and my own fuel low, I resorted to praying more often. I am not religious, but at that

moment I was very much feeling like a small part of a vast universe that humans can't fully explain. I was hoping for any support, even if it was nothing more than placebo effect.

As I stretched and made dinner at Bishop Pass, I began to feel a little sad that my odyssey was getting closer to the end. After five difficult days, hopefully only three more remained. Three more days and I wouldn't have to feel anxious about Goliath ever again.

My memory of the Full Evolution Crest, and particularly a few difficult and extremely loose sections with deadly exposure, must have faded since I climbed it in 2016. Now it felt like a slap in the face. I was humbled, but also hit by the realization that, over the past half-decade, I had matured. I was no longer climbing without a helmet. In my pack was an inReach Mini, which would help dramatically with a rescue (or, in the worst case, a body recovery). Being a responsible outdoor enthusiast had become more important to me than turning up the metal and going all in. One thing that was the same as it had been in 2016 was the air quality. The West Coast was on fire again, and I had been inhaling smoke for the past three days.

As I reached terrain shared with the regular Evolution Traverse on day seven, I thought surely the traverse would start to feel easy. But when I took two and a half hours traversing to the top of Mt. Darwin in midday heat, I was feeling more like a zombie than the excited climber I'd been on day one. I was drinking less water than I wanted, feeling more battered than expected. My left knee was swollen, both ankles sprained and re-sprained. My left bicep and hip were still badly bruised. Though I have a passion for mountain climbing that I don't often see matched, by the end of the seventh day, my psyche was at a low point. I wrote a very honest entry in Darwin's summit register, in which I said that I'd had enough. After finding a great water source at the base of Darwin's northwest ridge, I decided to stop early, spend the night there, and regroup.

When I saw people on the Keyhole Plateau the next day, after traversing over three more 13ers, I nearly cried. They were the first humans I had seen since leaving the Taboose Pass trailhead eight days prior.

All I had left was a traverse to Peak 12,804. I was tempted to bypass the heinously loose garbage on the crest by climbing a gully instead, but this was the final hurdle and I was so close! I kept traversing the exposed trash of broken dikes, loose blocks, and weird pillars. Soon enough, I faced the last obstacle. Again, I felt humbled and sandbagged by my 2016 self as I stood below a steep 5.9 crack with less than stellar rock—a crack I had downclimbed five years earlier but since forgotten.

On top of Peak 12,804, instead of triumphantly screaming or feeling the sense of deflated emptiness often described in mountaineering literature following a massive achievement, I cried for what must have been more than ten minutes. Surrounded by beautiful clouds and lakes, I could see the gentle slopes that would lead me down to the hiking trail at Piute Pass, to the safety of simple existence that is taken for granted. It didn't feel like I had conquered Goliath. I had merely survived him. But conquering these mountains had never been my goal. Liberated from my obsession, I knew soon I would see my family, friends, and cats again. I felt fortunate to be alive, and to take a moment to cry—plain and unheroic as that simple act seems.

Summary: South-to-north link-up of “The Full Monty” traverse in California's High Sierra, from Taboose Pass to Bishop Pass, followed by the Full Evolution Crest, from Bishop Pass to Piute Pass, by Vitaliy Musiyenko, August 2–9, 2021. The traverse of approximately 32 miles and 60 summits, called Goliath, was completed with no support or preplaced caches.

About the Author: Vitaliy Musiyenko is a 35-year-old registered nurse, living in Visalia, California. He is about to release a comprehensive guidebook to the High Sierra, co-authored with Roger Putnam, which he believes will be his greatest contribution to the climbing community.

This climb was featured in an interview with Musiyenko in episode 43 of the AAJ's Cutting Edge podcast:

The Cutting Edge · Vitaliy Musiyenko: The Goliath Traverse

Images



The Goliath traverse and notable past traverses of the High Sierra crest.



Looking west across the spiny Palisades.



A good stretch of the Full Palisade Traverse.



First rays of sun hitting North Palisade, Starlight, and Thunderbolt, as seen from the fourth bivy on the Goliath traverse, directly below Mt. Sill. The Thunderbolt to Sill traverse is a Sierra classic.



The first of seven bivouacs, on top of Split Mountain (14,064 feet), looking toward Split's south summit.



Day eight and nearing the end. Looking southwest from Mt. Tom Ross toward Mt. Darwin.

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