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The Slovak Direct: Single Push Ascents, 2000 and 2022

Alaska, Alaska Range, Denali

The Slovak Direct is among North America's greatest mountain climbs—unparalleled for length, sustained difficulty, quality, and beauty. After an unprecedented three ascents of the route in one year—all in single-push style—the AAJ is taking a closer look at the premier line up the 9,000-foot south face of Denali.

The following interview is adapted from a Cutting Edge podcast produced in November 2022 (play the episode at the end of this story). AAJ Editor Dougal MacDonal spoke with Steve House, who made the third ascent of the Slovak Direct in a 60-hour push in 2000 (with Scott Backes and Mark Twight), and with Matt Cornell and Rob Smith, each part of a three-person team that climbed the route in less than 24 hours in 2022.

AAJ: Let's start with the route itself. Where is the Slovak Direct on Denali, when was it first climbed, and why is it such a coveted climb?

Steve House: I first found out about what was then called the Czech Direct when I was reading Jon Waterman's book *High Alaska*. There was this big, fat line drawn up the steepest part of the south face, just right of the Cassin Ridge, and it was intriguing because it seemed by all accounts to be the most difficult route ever climbed on Denali.

The first ascent, by a group of Slovaks as it turned out, was in 1984, over 11 days. [It's] pretty hard to imagine how they were climbing such hard technical ground and in really incredibly fast time, considering they probably had double leather boots, they had [heavy] stoves and tents and sleeping bags, and everything probably barely worked. They were 100 percent committed. I mean it's a big, big, steep, steep face, and it would be really hard to retreat from, especially with that era's technology. [[Click here for the story of the 1984 ascent.](#)]

AAJ: In terms of the stature of the route, did it live up to your expectations?

Rob Smith: I thought it was incredible. Perfect rock quality. We had perfect ice conditions. I have not found it common to have such high-quality climbing on such big faces. There's usually some really gross pitches, and this was all really classic, really awesome climbing.

AAJ: Let's talk about the 2000 climb that Steve, Scott Backes, and Mark Twight did. In his AAJ article about the climb, Scott wrote, "We were attracted to the route because it was hard, beautiful, and unrepeated. But the style, not the route, was paramount. Rather than applying excess technology to guarantee success, we would leave behind everything we did not absolutely need.... No tent. No sleeping bags. No margin. It felt like science fiction." Steve, whose idea was the single-push ascent back then, and what was the inspiration?

Steve: There was a wave of interest in climbing routes [in Alaska] in single-push style that really I attribute to Mugs Stump. And throughout the '90s there was activity in what Voytek Kurtyka called "night naked" or what we called single-push style. We were of course leaning on the fact that in summer in Alaska it doesn't get dark, so we could just climb longer and then take naps during the warm parts of the days.

AAJ: Did one of you come up with the idea of the Slovak specifically and bring it to the others?

Steve: Yeah, I did. I found the original topo in the Talkeetna ranger station, and I made a copy and carried that around for years. I didn't tell anyone about it until Mark and I started climbing together. After Mark and Jon Carpenter and I climbed [The Gift] on Mt. Bradley in April 1998, I photocopied the topo, and, with no explanation, just put it in an envelope and mailed it to Mark.

AAJ: Nice. What were the things about doing this route in this style that most concerned you?

Steve: I think what concerned us was finding something that we wouldn't be able to climb, because the topo was very vague, but it also had some very intimidating numbers. Like 100° ice—we weren't sure what that meant! It also had some aid ratings on some of the pitches, and we weren't going up there with big, heavy aid racks. We were counting on being able to free or French free those sections of the route. I don't remember how many pitches were in the topo, but it was something on the order of 60 [actually 59]. We figured they probably were climbing mostly 40-meter pitches, and we were climbing 60-meter pitches by then, but we just didn't know how we could climb that many pitches.

Mark and I went in 1999 as a pair. We did a recon, and then by the time we got good weather again, it was like July 2 and we weren't able to travel on the glacier, even at night, and so we flew out. We talked about it over the next few months, and we thought that one of the reasons we hadn't even made an attempt was that we were just too scared to go up there as a team of two. And that's when we recruited Scott.

AAJ: In 2000, did things go more or less to plan, or were there huge surprises?

Steve: Well, like anything this complex, there was a bit of both, right? The lower part of the route...was much easier than we expected, so that was a nice surprise. Then the part that went I would say sideways was above the crux climbing, when it got really foggy, clouds came in, and we basically got way off route. That cost us a lot of time and energy and just, let's say, motivation, because it's pretty demoralizing to be 40 hours into climbing without sleep and then to get really lost.

AAJ: You spent a total of 60 hours on the route—did you stop and sleep at all or just catnaps or....?

Steve: We made four stops. I think the longest was four hours and the shortest was probably about two. All of those involved some sort of catnap, but really short.

AAJ: But no tent, right? No sleeping bags.

The 9,000-foot Slovak Direct route as it is usually climbed today. The yellow line shows The Ramp, followed on the first ascent and also climbed in 2000 during the original single-push ascent. The route finishes on the upper Cassin Ridge. Photo by Andy Houseman.

Steve: No tent, no pad. We brought two MSR XGK stoves for melting water because we were worried about one of them failing, and then being really screwed, without food and water. Most of the food we had was either in the form of gels or in some sort of sports drink mix. We had down jackets and stoves and that was it. And we were light but we weren't that light. Like, we had 150 gels and...

Rob: Wow....

Steve: ...I think we didn't even consume half of those. And we had a big rack. Like we had a double set of cams. We had, you know, 12 screws.

AAJ: So, then the route goes all these years with very sporadic ascents. Maybe every two or three years. And then suddenly there were three single-push ascents within three weeks. [The third was a

40-hour ascent by Slovakian climbers Richard Nemeč and Michal Sabovčík; see report here.] **Matt and Rob**, why don't you each talk about the genesis of your ascents and your team.

Matt Cornell: Yeah, sure. So, it was Alan Rousseau, Jackson Marvel, and me, and we acclimatized on the West Rib. We spent three or four nights at 14 [camp], during which we summited, and then went back to base camp. So we weren't super acclimatized for our attempt, but we saw that there was a good weather window pushing in, so we don't want to miss that.

We took three rest days and then skied up the East Fork [of the Kahiltna Glacier], bivied, and crossed the schrund at about 4:20 in the morning [on May 14]. We broke it up into three blocks, because when you look at the route on paper, you see that it kind of breaks up evenly at good points, like snowfields.

Alan took the first block, and he crushed—it goes quick. There's a lot of zigzagging snow ramps. I think it took Alan about five hours to do his block, and then Jackson took over from there, and his block was also about five hours, and that takes you up through a beautiful ice tube and gets you right to the base of the crux variation [discovered by Ben Gilmore and Kevin Mahoney during the route's second ascent, in 2000]. So that's where we switched and I took over.

We had wanted to try to free that variation, so we were trying to get up there when it was warm enough that you could actually hang on to your tools and take your time. I made it almost to the top of the pitch and then took a small lead fall—just clearing some snow out of the crack and popped a tool—so I wasn't able to free it. I pulled on a couple cams and finished up the pitch, and Allen and Jackson both followed the pitch clean. [This pitch was led free at M8 about 10 days later.] So, I think I took about seven hours in my block.

We joined the Cassin and found a patch of sun and brewed up. I think that was our second time we brewed for the entire route. And then continued up the Cassin and tagged the summit sometime in the middle of the night. [The trio summited around 2 a.m. on May 15, 21 hours and 35 minutes after starting up the route.]

AAJ: Had any of you guys ever done or attempted the Slovak?

Matt: Jackson and Allen were in the Kahiltna the year before, just the two of them, and they were trying to climb the north buttress Mt. Hunter, the Infinite Spur on Mt. Foraker, as well as the Slovak on Denali, all in a single push and in the same season. I think they were able to climb the Moonflower Buttress to the cornice in a push, as well as they pushed the Infinite Spur. And I think they skied to the base of the Slovak multiple times, but the weather wasn't quite good enough. So, this was kind of the continuation for them, and they invited me to join.

AAJ: And, Rob, you did the Infinite Spur in a day with Colin Haley, right?

Rob: Yes, in 2016.

AAJ: Did you start thinking about the Slovak then or was this an idea from one of your partners, Sam Hennessey and Michael Gardner?

Rob: Well, yes, I did start thinking about it then. I remember reading about Steve's ascent, thinking it seemed pretty crazy. But after we climbed Foraker, I thought maybe it was not such a crazy idea. I went in 2017 with Raphael Slawinski, and we had really bad weather and never got on the route, and then I went again in 2018 with Colin Haley. Along those same years, Sam and Michael were trying it as well and similar circumstances—acclimatized but never had the weather.

We all knew each other really well, and we had gone to the Himalaya together, and I called them in the

autumn, and said, "Let's all just go together and do this." We flew in independently to acclimatize, those guys on their work trips and I with a buddy of mine. We acclimatized kind of side by side with Sam and Michael, and made sure we were on the same schedule and spent the same amount of time at altitude.

Then we all flew out together and had a pretty lovely three or four days in Talkeetna, where we just ate tons of food and slept 14 hours a night. And then we had an incredible weather forecast. Basically a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to try a route in conditions that you really couldn't dream up in your wildest imagination. So we thought, let's go as light as possible and still be safe and, yeah, it all worked out. Perfect weather, perfect conditions. A very different experience than what Steve was describing. [Their bergschrund-to-summit time was 17 hours 10 minutes.]

AAJ: I'd like to talk more about the differences between 2022 and 2000, but first just a bit more about your tactics. You have to ski a long ways in there to access the route, so how do you handle that? Do you leave the skis at the base and pick them up later?

Rob: Well, we [couldn't] fly back in when we wanted to, so we had waited around town, had a nice breakfast, and then flew in at about 11. Then we skied to the base in about three hours, as fast as we could, because we were really worried about the heat and the safety of the glacier. We chose ski mountaineering racing setups so we didn't blister our feet or get our climbing boots wet. And then, yeah, we left all that stuff at the base.

And then, after we climbed the route, we went up to the West Rib [from 14 camp], down the Seattle Ramp, up and over this little ridge, and back into the basin [below the south face], and switched back into ski boots and skied back to base camp. And then we flew out and flew home.

AAJ: Just a nice tour of the mountain.

Rob: It was quite the tour....

AAJ: Matt, did you do this same sort of thing, leaving stuff at the base?

Matt: We skied in with a real touring setup and left them at the base, and we had some friends from Kahiltna base camp ski up the East Fork and retrieve our skis, so we wouldn't have to go back.

AAJ: Can you guys each briefly describe the gear that you brought for the route in 2022, or more precisely what you didn't bring?

Rob: Well, we had a lot of knowledge and we had really good weather, so like I said we brought very minimal kit. We brought six ice screws, a single set of cams, I think six quickdraws, a few slings, and one 7.3mm half rope. And just our personal clothes. One fuel canister, one Jetboil, and like six bars each and some Gu's. We brought a giant Ziplock of Oreos as well, which I thought was kind of silly, but we did eat them.

AAJ: Was that similar, Matt, for your team or were there important differences?

Matt: We had a little more kit since we didn't know how long it would take us. We figured it would take anywhere from 40 to 60 hours, so we went a little heavier, but not nearly as heavy as Steve. We brought, I think, a rack and a half of cams, doubles in fingers, and then maybe a dozen ice screws, a dozen alpine draws. We had a small bivy kit, which consisted of two inflatable pads, the North Face AMK bivy tent, and a down quilt. And we had a single 9.1mm rope for the three of us. One stove.

AAJ: And did both of you simul-climb most of the ground?

Rob: Yeah, we moved together quite a lot. Sometimes with a Petzl Nano Traxion between us to make the leader a little bit safer, sometimes without. We had one person on each end of the rope, and then one guy would just tie in on a bight, like five meters above the end of the rope. Just far enough so they wouldn't hit their crampons on the other guys' tools or hands. But as far back as possible, just to have more gear between the leader and the followers while simul-climbing.

AAJ: And did you ever stop and belay and second any pitches in the traditional sense?

Rob: Yes, when I was leading, I [was] belayed on the steep rock pitch and just after it. There's kind of some loose rock pitches, and I belayed one of those, and maybe there was another one somewhere along the way. It was mostly simul-climbing, but there was definitely some pitched climbing as well.

Matt: We used the same rope systems with the Nano Trax and tying one into the end and one about five meters up, and I think we belayed only three pitches on the route.

AAJ: Steve were the two seconds [following] simultaneously or were you sort of doing it in the traditional slow style, one at a time?

Steve: We definitely belayed more. Like, anything fifth class we belayed, because we were exhausted, for one. We didn't trust ourselves. And the ice was really hard—that super-hard, cold, ancient Alaskan ice.

AAJ: Are there other things that, listening to these guys talking about the 2022 ascents, jump out at you as reasons why they were able to go so much faster?

Steve: I think they're just way better climbers, and I mean they're just crushing it. Sure, they have more information, but they're just way more confident on that kind of hard mixed ground. You know, it's funny to live through this, but we were climbing with leashes. I had prototype carbon fiber Black Prophets that had curved handles at the bottom, and I was the only one with ice tools that weren't completely straight. It was a totally different set of circumstances.

Just the weight of everything was different. I mean, we were all wearing plastic boots. We were wearing helmets that probably weigh four or five times what helmets weigh now you know. And for sure I think the biggest difference is the ice tools—the tools and the picks are so much better than they were then. And just climbing with leashes was just so—like it's hard to imagine that we did that now.

AAJ: Members of all three of your teams have said at various times that this wasn't about trying to set speed records. Maybe you could each address what the goal was, if it wasn't a specific number. What were you each trying to accomplish?

Steve: Yeah, well, I think it was what all hard alpinism is, where it was really a metaphysical quest to find out who we were as individuals, who we could become as a team. You know, the route was a challenge that would fit our skill sets and our experiences, but the real purpose of it was to go deeper into our relationships with each other, into our relationships with ourselves, our understanding of one another, our understanding of ourselves, our knowledge of our limits. This kind of climbing offers a window to that world that is not easily found anymore, and, you know, maybe in our heart of hearts we're still cavemen and buffalo hunters after all, and we just sometimes need to go out and experience something really primal and have a good old-fashioned fight to the death, and that's kind of what it felt like.

AAJ: Matt, you said there were a lot of unknowns about how long it was going to take you, but was it important to try to hit that 24-hour target, or was it more just the idea of going single-push that was really important?

Matt: It was more the idea of the single push. We figured going under 24 meant less suffering, so that was kind of our motivation to get below that time. But we weren't, like, trying to set a record. For us it was kind of a test of our systems to see if they will work on these bigger alpine faces, as well as getting to know each other better. This was the only the second time the three of us had climbed together. So, yeah, it was more about building the team and testing these systems before we go into the greater ranges.

AAJ: You were just in Nepal: Did you feel like it was applicable? The things that you learned on Denali?

Matt: Absolutely, yeah, 100 percent. Unfortunately, one of our teammates had to bail out of the trip, so we were just party of two, and we never got a chance to reuse these same tactics that we used as a party three. But I think, looking at it in the future, it is possible.

AAJ: Rob, having seen Matt and his crew go three weeks before you, did you feel it was important to try to go faster? Not necessarily to break a record but because there was sort of a new benchmark?

Rob: Um, no I don't think so. The thing is, this was my 14th Alaska Range trip, and Sam and Michael have each spent like the last ten years doing the entire season there, and one thing that we notice time and again is that the weather forecast is always wrong, and the weather is really bad, and being on a big mountain in that type of weather is terrifying. I think that our need for speed was born out of being scared of the weather and scared of the mountain, and the less time you spend up there, the higher likelihood it is that you can stick to the forecast you were given.

Trying to go faster and beat somebody's time—that was never really part of our itinerary. We all just really wanted to climb the route, and we never imagined that we would get an opportunity to do it in such perfect weather and conditions. Somebody might not ever have that opportunity again, who knows?

AAJ: Is it ridiculous to even talk about speed records in a big mountain environment? So much depends on the conditions and whether somebody's broken trail ahead of you. Is there any point in talking about records?

Rob: I think it's different for every person. Every person gets out of climbing something different. For me personally, that sort of thing [can be fun] here in the Alps, where, you know, you've done the route 20 times and you're just trying to kind of get a rise out of your friends by doing it ten minutes faster than they did last week. But in the big, big mountains, for me personally, there's a lot of risk, and if it doesn't go right the consequences are really big. So I don't like to use these kind of track and field analogies. I think if your intentions are pure and you just want to do what you want to do, that's great. But trying to beat somebody else's time, you know, it could lead to decision-making that one might regret someday.

Matt: Yeah, I don't think it's necessarily worth chasing speed records because, like Rob said, something is going to go wrong if you're out there trying to go as fast as you can. But I think as far as testing your own limits—not necessarily to beat someone else's, but just see where you stand—I mean, that's generally why we go climbing. To have these profound experiences and, you know, see where you are. You learn a lot about yourself in the experience.

AAJ: Steve, any thoughts?

Steve: Yeah I would reflect a couple things that both Rob and Matt said and take it one step further. I would actually say that the idea of applying a competition mentality to big mountains goes against the actual spirit of climbing big mountains in the first place. We're not there to compete against a person. We're not there to set a record. I think you heard both of them say it: We're going up there to have an experience for ourselves and to find out who we are, and I think that frankly climbing, and mountain sports generally, is heading down a dead end if it tries to take the competition blueprint from other sports and apply it to what we do.

And I would go further and say that it's a huge missed opportunity to try to take that path, because actually the path that we're talking about is far more beautiful, and the individual human stories that come out of these climbs, whether it's my climb or Rob's climb or Matt's climb, are all beautiful stories in and of themselves. They don't need to be compared to one another. I can't think of too many better days in my now 52 years of living than those couple of days on the Slovak with Mark and Scott. Those are going to be on the short list. That's why we do it.

Rob: I think that's really well said, Steve, and I would just add to that if you take away the world of podcasts and Instagram and sponsors and the Internet, there is really nobody to tell [about such climbs]. You know, we never came up with the words "speed record," but all these different media outlets asked us in those words. It's something that others came up with, not the people who actually did the climbing.

AAJ: One thing I observed in reading about all of these ascents: It seemed like the climbers in 2000 talked a lot about pushing themselves right to the limit. Going into battle, in a sense. In contrast, after reading about the climbs this year, many of you talked about keeping within a safety margin. Rob, you posted: "I'm very proud of our ascent in that we climbed quickly but also safely." It's interesting because no climb like this is ever truly safe. But what do you think you guys did this year to make it safer?

Rob: I went with the right two guys who make really good decisions, and they're super strong, and I know that no matter what would happen, they could deal with the situation and help me deal. Just their belief in me was all that I needed to feel like we were being safe and doing things the right way.

AAJ: Matt, anything on that?

Matt: As we climbed up, we assessed the terrain that we were going through, and I think we all kind of felt confident that we could retreat at any point. So, I feel like that gave us a little safety net. Knowing that we could get down.

AAJ: Hang on, I'm going to stop you there, because people talk a lot about this—and Steve has talked about this for the Slovak—that above a certain point, retreat would be impossible or very, very difficult. And in 2022, you're carrying a lot less gear than they were in 2000. So, how possible is it to retreat if you get into difficulty, say halfway up the climb?

Matt: It would be very time consuming, [but] you could rappel almost entirely on threads. The most difficult part of descending would be being having to reverse a couple traverses, but other than that I think it would be fairly reasonable to downclimb a lot of snow and rappel the steeper sections on threads.

Steve: I want to point something out there that is really key, and that is in 2000 we didn't know about V-threads yet. So that's why that's we couldn't imagine coming down, you know, 60 pitches. [We had], whatever, 15 cams, some nuts, and 12 ice screws. It wasn't enough to get down.

AAJ: You know, hearing Steve talk about the climb, it seemed like it was really a life-changing moment for that team, almost like a path to enlightenment. And I'm wondering for you guys, did it

generate those same kinds of feelings that Steve described, or do you think it actually takes, you know, 60-plus hours out there to have that almost mystical experience?

Matt: I don't think we can compare the experiences because each one is unique. We definitely felt a strong sense of connection and trust with each other, and, you know, being able to cover that much terrain is something truly special and fairly profound.

But as far as having to go bigger to have a more profound experience? I mean, it's hard because you do one thing and then, if that wasn't enough, then you want to go try a bigger climb, and if that's not enough then you keep going until you find something that shuts you down. I think it's in the natural progression of climbing to want to go a little bigger than you previously did, assuming you had success. Until you find your limits or have that truly out of this world experience.

AAJ: Any last words?

Steve: I think we're a little bit remiss in excluding some of the other great efforts that were put in on that route over the years. I mean obviously, Kevin Mahoney and Ben Gilmore climbed the route for the second ascent about a month before Mark and Scott and I did. It was May, it was cold, and they didn't have a topo at all—they basically just figured out where the route went by using good old-fashioned climber intuition.

Jumbo Katsutaka and his partners [Fumitaka Ichimura, and Yusuke Sato] climbed the Isis Face and descended the Ramp off the South Buttress and then climbed the Slovak—I mean that's got to be one of the coolest linkups ever. The all-female ascent with Anne Gilbert Chase and Chantel Astorga, done in a really proud style. There's just a bunch of great stories that we're sort of passing over, simply based on the fact that these three parties climbed it, you know, without a tent.

But I do want to say this about the Slovak. I've always said it would be one route I would absolutely go back and do again if I had the opportunity and the good conditions and the right partners. I would love to do it again, knowing what we all know now, and have fun and not feel like I was, you know, going to a fight to the death. It would have a totally different flavor and experience, but it was just so good. It's every bit as good as everybody says.

ABOUT THE CLIMBERS: Matt Cornell is a professional climber based outside Yosemite Valley for much of the year. Steve House is the co-founder of Uphill Athlete and lives in Lienz, Austria, with his wife and two sons. Rob Smith is an IFMGA guide who lives in Chamonix, France.

CUTTING EDGE PODCAST: The full one-hour interview about the Slovak Direct was recorded on episode 53 of the Cutting Edge podcast.

The Cutting Edge · Steve House, Matt Cornell and Rob Smith: Single Push on Denali's Slovak Direct

Images



The 9,000-foot Slovak Direct route as it is usually climbed today. The yellow line shows The Ramp, followed on the first ascent and also climbed in 2000 during the original single-push ascent. The route finishes on the upper Cassin Ridge.



Sam Hennessey leading the wild icy corner in the heart of the Slovak Direct route.



Scott Backes (left) and Mark Twight during the 60-hour push on the Slovak Direct in the year 2000.



An exhausted Scott Backes rests his eyes during the 60-hour climb of the Slovak Direct in 2000.



Fast and light: The Gardner-Hennessey-Smith team's kit for their sub-18-hour ascent.

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