



## AAC Publications

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### **Half Dome, South Face, Free Ascent of Historic Karma Route**

California, Sierra Nevada, Yosemite National Park

Tobias Wolf tiptoes across one of the amazing dike features of Karma on Half Dome. Photo by Oliver Schmidt.

**In 2017, when I climbed Growing Up (VI 5.13a A0, Borchard-Jones-Jones-Montoya- Watson, 2007) on the south face of Half Dome, I had a look at the dike that makes up the infamous line called Karma.** I was blown away by the beauty of that line, which zigzags up the right side of the big south face. I knew one day I'd try it, and not just because of the aesthetics, but also because of its rich history.

Karma is a testament to visionary climber Dave Schultz's boldness and skill. In July 1986, Schultz, along with Jim Campbell and Ken Yager, opened the 14-pitch route in Yosemite's traditional ground-up style, drilling on lead. The meat of Karma follows a huge dike that meanders left-to-right diagonally across the wall. According to a story Ken wrote to accompany the original topo, Dave, joker that he was, convinced his friends to go up with him by telling them "that tourists often walked down the upper portions of it from the summit of Half Dome to take pictures."

Dave led all the pitches and was climbing for his life—at times, quite literally. Falling was not an option—due to the traversing character of the line, Dave feared that a pendulum fall would result in the rope cutting on the sharp dike. Nine of the route's 14 pitches required some aid, and the line was graded 5.11+ A1. The numbers do not reflect the seriousness and character of the route.

The route might have been forgotten except for a few rusty bolts and the vision of another Yosemite legend, Brooke Sandahl. When Brooke saw Ken Yager's pictures of Karma around 2010, as he told me in an email, he was "absolutely blown away by this mind-blowing dike which stretched on across the face like the writhing backbone of a dragon. It was one of the most amazing features I had ever seen in climbing." He immediately called Dave and said, "We have to try and free it." Dave emphatically said no—he was still scared of the route after the first-ascent experience.

But Brooke prevailed, finally convincing Dave to go back to Karma and try to free it with him. From 2016 to 2021, they returned six times to Half Dome. They carried loads of supplies up to their camp and labored for weeks on rebolting the route to bring it into a state that repeaters could enjoy. They added a number of bolts at the cruxes and moved the placement of many others to make things considerably safer.

For five years, Brooke and Dave toiled away, in hot sun, in freezing shade, even in rain that turned the face slick. Not even a 2020 heart attack kept Dave away. By the end of their efforts in 2021, Brooke, now 62, and Dave, now 63, realized that, strong as they were, some of the pitches were beyond them. They estimated the final pitch might be 5.14. Having freed all but three of the route's 14 pitches—and having unlocked every move except for four meters at the beginning of pitch nine—they graciously opened the project up to others.

Brooke had been telling me about Karma since 2016. It sounded desperate. But after finally seeing the line in 2017, I was in.

In October 2023, Oliver Schmidt (Germany) and I packed food and supplies for a week and started up Karma. While climbing the route, I constantly thought what it would have been like to be up there with a handful of homemade 1/4" machine bolts crudely pounded into the holes. The original bolts were so sparsely placed that just thinking of the potential falls was terrifying. The new bolts made the climb safe and a pleasure.

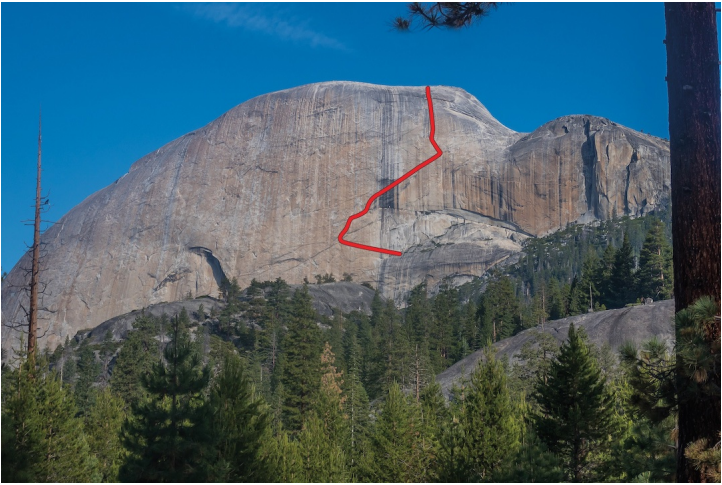
Pitch after pitch went down. The first test came at pitch six, where there is an interruption in the dike. Brooke had told me they found a solution with a long sideways reach they called the "Iron Cross." He also said that, given my five-foot-six height and shorter wingspan, I might not like it. But it went.

The last obstacle was pitch nine. We spent several hours seeking a solution—and replacing some old bolts that Dave and Brooke hadn't gotten around to—and eventually put it down. When we topped out on the third day of climbing, even before we took a summit photo, I sent a text message to Brooke: "We did it!"

Free Karma is a spectacular route surrounded by the best scenery imaginable. We graded the crux pitch 5.13d, and there are four other 5.13 leads. (We broke one of the 1986 route's pitches in two.) We based the grades on our experience on other Yosemite lines, including several we climbed in the four weeks immediately prior to making Karma's first free ascent: Wet Lycra Nightmare (5.13d A0), Nexus (IV 5.13a/b), Misty Wall (5.13a), and the Free Heart Route with the Freeblast start (5.13b). Based on all of that, 5.13d feels like it fits.

— **Tobias Wolf, Germany**

## Images



Approximate line of Karma on the south face of Half Dome. Other routes not shown.



Tobias Wolf on pitch six (5.13b) on Karma (1,700' 15 pitches, 5.13d) on the south face of Half Dome, Yosemite National Park, California.



Tobias Wolf replacing a bolt on the crux ninth pitch (5.13d) of Karma on the south face of Half Dome.



Tobias Wolf at the belay at the top of pitch eight on Karma, just before the crux pitch.

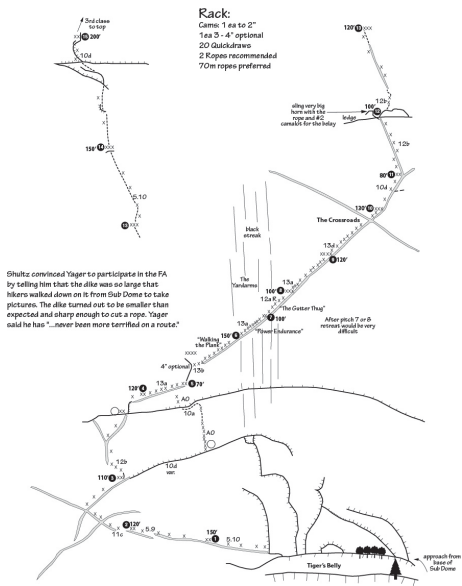


Oliver Schmidt on one of the wild dike pitches of Karma on the south face of Half Dome.



Tobias Wolf tiptoes across one of the amazing dike features of Karma on Half Dome.

**Karma V 5.12b R A0 or 5.13d**  
 FA: July 1986 - Dave Schultz, Ken Yager, Jim Campbell (5.11+ A1, 9 pitches of partial aid)  
 95% FFA: 2016-2021 Dave Schultz, Brooke Sandahl (unbolled entire route)  
 FFA: October 2023 - Tobias Wolf, Oliver Schmidt



The updated topo for Karma (15 pitches, 5.13d) on the south face of Half Dome.

## Article Details

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