
KELLY CORDES

Young Guns of North America

A Dirtbag Renaissance

Last year an older friend of mine, a top alpinist in his day, bemoaned that today's young North American climbers aren't getting after it with the big alpine adventures. This wasn't the first time I'd heard that sentiment. My friend seemed to think that the days of unencumbered dirtbag



32.

Colin Haley psyched up before tackling the vertical and overhanging rime of the penultimate pitch of a new linkup up Cerro Torre in January 2007. Haley and Kelly Cordes linked the *Marsigny-Parkin* to the upper west face to the summit and down the *Compressor Route* in a 48-hour trip from the Niponino bivvi. Though previously attempted, the 1400m linkup (AI6 A2) via the upper west face had never been completed.

(Kelly Cordes)

climbers willing to scrape by, empty their piggy banks, and chase alpine-style windmills in the mountains, sans sponsorship and media circus, had passed. Of course, older people complaining about today's world are commonplace, and they're often right. I'm getting there myself at 40. But I think he's wrong. Mostly.

I told another friend about this notion. 'I agree,' he said. 'You go to Yosemite and it's not like it was 40 years ago when everyone was getting after it; instead it's full of drunks talking about what they did or could do. Not to say that no one was getting drunk 40 years ago or that no one is getting after it today. But what I really think is happening, and very quickly, is that society is 'evolving' to where safety has become number one – or at least the illusion thereof.' As we talked, however, I wondered if



33. Colin Haley leading one of several natural, wind-formed tunnels high on the upper west face of Cerro Torre. (*Kelly Cordes*)

every generation says this. His knowledge of Yosemite 40 years ago comes from what he's read, from the legends. My friend here, Kyle Dempster, is only 25.

Old joke:

Q: How many climbers does it take to screw in a light bulb?

A: Ten. One to do it, and nine to stand around and say, 'Dude, I could totally do that.'

It's probably as true as ever. Maybe it just seems worse today due to un-



34. Maxime Turgeon new routing on the north face of Mt Bradley, Alaska, in 2005. Bringing gym and crag skills to the big faces, Turgeon and fellow Quebec climber L P Menard put up *The Spice Factory* (1,310m, 5.10R M7 WI5), in a 55-hour round-trip. (L P Menard)

precedented communication channels spewing a deluge of crap from marketing and PR departments and shameless self-promoters. I suspect most of us can think of plenty of supporting examples. Is real adventure climbing a dying thing over here? Maybe. But instead of focusing on the omnipresent examples of over-hyped bullshit, I wondered about the opposite.

I thought about my trip to El Chalten, Patagonia in December 2006 and January 2007, when I was there with young gun Colin Haley (then 22). First, I know that a couple of examples don't prove a larger point. But no definitive answer exists to this question, only perceptions. In the Chalten massif – admittedly a largely climbed-out arena of good rock – about half the climbers seemed to be on their first big trip, and most of them were getting after it as best they could (regrettably, there were slacklines and bongo drums present, but I digress). Two youngsters in particular stood out:

'The Montana Boys', as we all called Ben Smith and Justin Woods, had been best friends since childhood, growing up on the outskirts of Glacier National Park. They'd just quit their jobs and figured that before anything else came along they'd better go climbing in Patagonia. Not wanting to lose momentum, they bought airline tickets immediately – to Santiago, Chile. By the time they'd figured out that they were about a million miles too far north, it didn't matter. Interminable bus rides later, they got to Chalten and promptly hiked to the Niponino bivouac. Only they hiked the wrong



35. Josh Wharton on probably the world's biggest alpine rock route, the *Azeem Ridge* on Great Trango Tower (2250m, 5.11r/x A2 M6), done over four and a half days in 2004 with Kelly Cordes. (*Kelly Cordes*)

way around the lake, missing the well-trodden track and taking a heinously steep and loose scree field along the opposite shores of the mile-long lake.

'Yeah, we're too stupid ta buy a freakin' map,' Justin said when I met him. 'Too cheap, too,' added Ben. 'But we'll get there,' Justin said with a grin. I liked them immediately. My friends and I marvelled at their attitude – smiling the whole way, even while hunkered down in bivvi bags, no tent, in the tempest at Niponino. The winds blew sleet sideways. I suppose I also liked them because they reminded me of something I saw – or hoped I had, anyway – of myself when I started climbing, 15 years ago, also in Montana. It's the place I cut my teeth, along with trips to Alaska, and everything about it was about adventure. The boys and I talked a little about the climbing in Montana and the wild, remote, huge arena of wintertime ice and massive crumbling summertime rock faces that is Glacier National Park, but they never said much about their adventures. They just kept smiling and looking forward.

These guys, like all the climbers I met in Chalten, weren't the average Americans (most of the climbers I met while there were American). They went in search of the kind of adventure not found in shopping malls and on the Xbox ('pass the chips, will ya?'). The *New York Times* recently featured the American king of adventure climbing, Fred Beckey, now 86, who said: 'Man used to put himself on the line all the time. Nowadays we're protected by the police, fire, everything. There's not much adventure left.



36. Wharton relaxes at base camp after the Great Trango climb.
(Kelly Cordes)

Unless you look for it.'

Over here, at least, indeed we have a continual, systematic dumbing-down of our culture into Brittany Spears, reality TV, and unapologetic materialism. And while times change and cultures shift, the sofa ornaments of the middle ground populace never did much anyway, whether in the era of reality TV or in decades past. Those were never the Shipton and Tilman types, or the Herman Buhls, Voytek Kurtykas, and Mugs Stumps of this world. It's always been a few outliers that expand our collective vision. And the more I think about it, I think we've still got a healthy crew of young outliers.

In terms of the exploration aspect of adventure, there isn't much that can be done about the fact that our mountains aren't multiplying. Heading into the mountains and exploring untouched peaks or massive virgin faces used

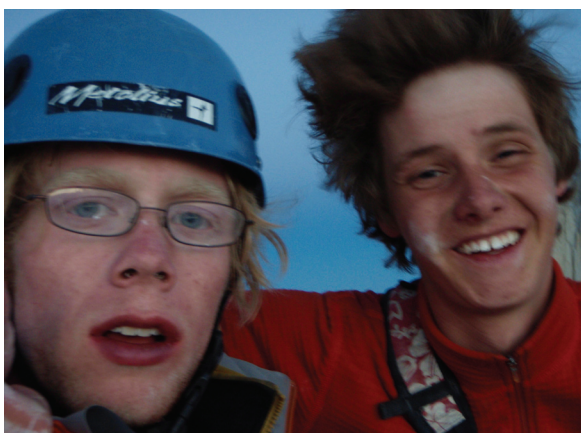
to go hand-in-hand. Sure, exploratory climbing still exists, and a noble few embrace it, but it cannot be as total in its remoteness as the Shipton-Tilman days or even the 1980s. Furthermore, the drive to remove risk has certainly extended into climbing; witness the bouldering revolution, climbing gyms, and sport climbing. It's easy to say these examples represent a dumbing-down of adventure, but that's an inherently limited argument. Let's get real, people who can't imagine anything bolder than a bolt at their waist were never destined for the high-adventure pool to begin with. Before accessible and safe climbing, they were the people bound for the golf courses, or maybe tennis or gymnastics. And that's cool.

Adventure shifts in climbing more than it disappears, I think. For an example of finding potential adventure, would it really be a greater adventure to seek out one of the remaining untouched peaks on the Patagonian icecap – meaning ones smaller and easier, since that's what remains – than the first ascent of the Torre Traverse, one of the last great prizes of Patagonian climbing, as Colin Haley and Rolando Garibotti did in 2008? Given today's standards, cruising up some mountain by its easiest route might not be much of an adventure for competent climbers. The level of a challenge certainly relates to unknown outcomes. I'm not convinced that attempting

a blank-looking section of a wall, one bordered by existing easy routes up the ridges on either side, necessarily entails less adventure than exploring a little-known area. It might just be a different kind of adventure.

When I first started working for the *American Alpine Journal*, I operated under the fantasy that we reported on all of the world's big new routes – or damn close to it. After nine years with the *Journal*, more than 15 alpine expeditions around the world and a life devoted to climbing (I know, it's pathetic that I'm not any better after all this time, but that's another issue), I realize that we miss plenty. Every year I learn of climbers I've never heard of doing big things, proud ascents from years past that went wholly unnoticed, and incredibly worthy climbs overshadowed in the media by louder climbs and louder climbers. And more than anything, despite our public and popular bemoaning of the 'damn kids these days', it's precisely the young guns that have mostly caught my eye.

For American climbers, Alaska costs exponentially less than a Himalayan expedition and offers similar challenges. It's where so many American alpinists cut their teeth, yesterday and today. In 2008, young American climbers – almost none of them 'names' – ventured off the well-worn Denali circuit and established



37. '...like two high-school kids who'd just cut class.' Young Canadians Jason Kruk and Will Stanhope summiting on Desmochada, Patagonia, January 2008. (Jason Kruk)

impressive new routes in the Chugach and Revelation mountains, the Kichatna Spires, the Arrigetch Peaks and the Coast Mountains.

Youngsters like Alaskan Clint Helander, who last year established two new routes in the Revelation Mountains – not world-class climbs, but big adventures, followed by a two-day trek out across 21 miles of the Alaskan wilderness. This year they were heading back in, because there's plenty left in the Revelations. Ryan Johnson, of Alaska, and Sam Magro, of Montana (younger brother of Whit Magro, an unheralded hardman), visited the Mendenhall Towers in the storm-blasted Coast Mountains of Alaska and put up an impressive new route. Last week I got an email from Johnson asking about Pakistan info – he was saving money, living out of his car and couch surfing. Maybe the kids aren't all just into their bling-bling after all.

Or take Quebec climbers Maxime Turgeon and LP Menard who debuted in Alaska in 2005 with a bang. Still in their 20s, they'd been climbing just a



38. Will Stanhope following on the north face of Rafael Juarez. Kruk and Stanhope free climbed the Freddie Wilkinson route *Blood on The Tracks* (600m V 5.12) right to the summit in a single push. (Jason Kruk)

couple of years and it was their first trip to any of the bigger ranges. After racing up repeats in the Ruth Gorge, they saw the north face of Mt Bradley. I'd spent two months of my life in the Ruth and never seen the line – and I don't think it's that conditions were suddenly much better. It's just that they are that much better. They brought their gym and crag generation skills with them and fired a new route, *The Spice Factory* (1310m, 5.10R M7 WI5), in a 55-hour round-trip. The following year they ran up one of the last remaining unclimbed projects on Denali's south face, establishing the *Canadian Direct* (8,000ft/4,000ft new, 5.9 M6 AI4) in 58 hours.

Another fine example of recent dirtbags in Alaska also came in 2006, when Jed Brown and Colin Haley (then 23 and 21 years old) caught a one-way flight into the remote Hayes Range (lacking funds for the flight out, they hiked out, including a sketchy river crossing in a one-man pack raft) for the massive north face of Mt Moffit. Their lightweight ascent of the 2,300m *Entropy Wall* (5.9 A2 WI4+) received disappointingly scant attention. I joked with Haley that he needed to learn how to spray. Colin's subsequent world-class ascents have garnered more attention, but he still considers the route on Moffit his finest adventure and most committing route.

Haley, Dylan Johnson, and Josh Wharton – all in their 20s – teamed up for Pakistan this summer. Though largely overlooked in the mainstream climbing media, Johnson's epic new route on Siguniang last year, with Chad Kellogg, was, according to Haley, 'the best American achievement in the Himalaya last year.' Anyone familiar with the details would be hard-pressed to argue otherwise. Wharton is no longer obscure, and climbs high-end sport and bouldering as well as cutting-edge alpine routes, emerging into likely America's finest all-around active climber. His relative fame doesn't lessen his big-adventure accomplishments. He's put up likely the world's biggest alpine rock route, the Azeem Ridge on Great Trango Tower, in 2004 (2250m, 5.11r/x A2 M6), in 4 and a half days with a single 13kg pack, and led unbelievably bold pitches well beyond the point of easy retreat (I know, my trembling hands held the other end of the rope on the hardest parts). His adventures have seen him up new routes elsewhere in Pakistan, Alaska, Canada, Patagonia, and his back yard, the big and loose Black Canyon of the Gunnison in Colorado. But he's probably most proud of his and Brian McMahon's lightweight first ascent of the Flame, also in Pakistan, in 2002, back when he was an unknown. It was the summer after 9-11 and nobody was going to Pakistan. Thinking for themselves, Josh and Brian refused to succumb to the fear, and indeed the only dangerous part of the trip was the climbing. Wharton's summit lead – a 50m runout on 5.10+ to lasso the tiny summit pinnacle – surely ranks among the boldest summit leads in history. They returned to base camp, rested a day, and put up a new route on Shipton Spire in similar style. At the time, McMahon was 25, Wharton 22.

I first learned of young Canadians Jason Kruk and Will Stanhope (then 20 and 21) after their 2008 season in Patagonia. (In 2009, Stanhope ventured to a remote, practically unexplored valley in Argentina with gorgeous granite walls up to 800m tall.) Both 5.13+ sport climbers, the pair had a tremendous season and turned heads with their tactics. After jumaring on second during their first route, they then insisted on climbing all free on both lead and second. 'I guess it allows us to look at old routes with fresh eyes,' Stanhope later told me. 'And the possibilities are endless.' On one of their first free ascents, after falls they lowered, pulled the rope (if leading) and went at it again until free. Mucking around? Sure. As with any climbing. Just don't tell me that 5.9 A2 is somehow more real-deal than free at 5.12. It's part of the evolution, because it wasn't just enough to do the route, they wanted to free it. Just like, for the old explorers, it wasn't enough to stay away. Like for some of us now, all in our own way, so much of life just isn't enough. Adventure evolves with those so drawn, and to scoff at such refining only shows a stuck-in-the-past mind. There aren't so many blank spots on the map anymore, but there's plenty left to do. When I got Will's report for the *AAJ*, they included a summit photo where they literally looked like two high-school kids who'd just cut class. I could only laugh, shake my head, and give them 'mad respect,' as the young kids say.

One could argue that nothing represents true adventure more than

soloing, and on that front, too, the youngsters are doing alright. In the *AAJ* 2008, we had a feature article from a climber who celebrated his 26th birthday earlier that year while making the first ascent – solo – of the east face of Cerro Escudo, in Torres del Paine. (An account of the same climb appears in the Piolets d'Or section of this *AJ*, page 68-72) Others had done some climbing on the face – routes or attempts depending on who's doing the talking – but Turner not only climbed the 1200m big wall face but continued along the ridge to the summit, another 300m of ascent. Turner climbed in extraordinarily better style than nearly any other big wall, a mix of true capsule style (that is, not the deal where you fix thousands of metres and then 'commit' to the wall) and alpine style. His route checked in at commitment grade VII – the first grade VII solo in the world – and 5.9 A4. He'd soloed three new wall routes on El Capitan, and the previous summer put



39. Kruk following Stanhope on their variation (700m V+ 5.11+ A1) to *The Sound and The Fury*, a Freddie Wilkinson-Dave Sharratt route on Desmo-chada. (Will Stanhope)

up a new alpine route on Taulliraju, in Peru. As I write this, he's packing for a two-month solo expedition to Baffin Island.

My friend Kyle Dempster, the 25-year-old I mentioned up-top, calls himself 'part of the bouldering-sport-trad-bigwall-ice-alpine evolution'. He learned to climb 5.13 at a young age, put up a grade VI new wall in Baffin, soloed the Reti-cent Wall on El Cap, then spent a winter in Canada climbing WI6 and M10, then went to

Alaska and made the true first ascent of the north face of the Mini-Moonflower – not a huge face, at 2,300 vertical feet, but a difficult new route to most of us at M7 AI6, and topping out and doing so faster than the big dogs with existing no-summit routes on the face (with a partner you've never heard of, either – and surely you've heard of the other climbers whose north face routes come close to the top: Cool-Parnell and Koch-Prezelj). That was just a warm-up for his Pakistan trip. Last July, solo and on a shoestring budget, negotiating as he went, he made his way to the Hispar region where his porters dropped him at the junction of the Hispar and Khani Basa glaciers. He had no cook, guide, or partners, and spent the next seven weeks completely alone. After six gear carries of 8 or 9 miles each way, he set off on his objective: the unclimbed west face of Tahu Rutum

40.

Kyle Dempster's solo route on the previously unclimbed west face of Tahu Rutum (6651m) in Pakistan's Hispar region. After 24 days on the 1350m wall, he retreated from high on the summit ridge and, refreshingly, still called it just 'an attempt'.
(Kyle Dempster)



(6651m, sometimes spelled Ratum). He didn't have an altimeter and the maps aren't exact, but the face rises c1350m from base to summit. Climbing in capsule style, through a storm, and extending himself nearly too far for 24 days on the wall, he retreated from high on the summit ridge – and, refreshingly, no 'moving the goalposts', he called it an attempt. I only knew about it from my personal contact with Kyle – not a word made it to the mainstream climbing media. I recruited a report from him, and we ran his harrowing account in the 'Far' department in the first issue of our e-zine/newsletter site, *The Alpine Briefs* (alpinebriefs.wordpress.com). Kyle lives with his parents in Salt Lake City to save money, works odd jobs (including his 'morally disgusting' work hanging Christmas lights on rich people's houses all December, and then taking them down in January), and sold his car to save for his coming summer's adventures. Damn kids these days!

I realize these examples, possibly isolated exceptions, don't prove an overall theory. Depending on what we count as 'climbers', no doubt the proportion of climbers chasing adventure is lower than back when it was all about adventure. I suppose my point is that, though we can't say for sure if it's any better or worse than those good-old-knickerbocker days, when climbers were all real men and our parents all walked uphill both ways to school for 10km each way through deep snow, I actually think we're doing pretty well.



41.
Dempster's aerial
view down Tahu
Rutum's west face.
(Kyle Dempster)

Last year while working on the 2008 *AAJ*, I heard about a 2006 new route on the north face of Mt Siyeh, in Glacier National Park, Montana, by a couple of low-key hardmen, my friends Chris Gibisch and Ryan Hokanson. Forget Yosemite (aside from rock quality), the north face of Siyeh is bigger than El Cap. It gains 3,500 vertical feet from base to summit – and a pile of choss the whole way. Depending on how you measure, it's the first or second biggest technical rock face in Glacier, making it the first or second biggest in the Lower 48. Steeped in lore, the massive face had one known route, an epic over three days (completed on the fourth try) by old-school badasses Jim Kanzler and Terry Kennedy, unrepeated for 25 years. When I heard about Chris and Ryan's climb, I contacted them. They'd set off light, got shut down up high, endured horrific rock and a frigid unplanned bivvi – 'a night of agony' – and escaped off to the north-east ridge and scrambled to the summit for the face's third ascent.

Third ascent, I asked? Who did the second? Turns out that the Kanzler-Kennedy line up the plum central rib was repeated in 2005, in typical no-fanfare Montana style by Ben Smith and Justin Woods - the 'Montana Boys' I'd met in Chalten. They'd said nothing of it.

I emailed Justin. He and Ben had started up one day without bivvi gear,

42. Kyle Dempster: 'At approximately 6500m I reached the steep snow and ice ridgeline leading to the summit...and I had had enough. It was snowing with 40 mph winds, the Earth had rotated the expanse of the Karakoram into complete darkness, and my headlamp was near dead. I was dehydrated and malnourished, but stoked on my effort. The decision was easy. I bailed.'

(*Kyle Dempster*)



got slowed by still-unmelted snow from the previous week's storm up high, got benighted, shivered on a ledge until daybreak, then finished the route. 'Interesting climb,' Justin wrote. 'Can't say I'd recommend doing it. But on the other hand, I've been thinking of going back. Guess when the memory fades you can talk yourself into just about anything.'

Last August I returned to Montana for a couple of weeks. I met up with Justin and we put his short-memory to use. From a bivvi below the face, we climbed a 3,000-foot new route (3,000 feet on the face, plus 500 feet of ridge scrambling to summit), all-free in 11 hours – the first one day ascent of likely the biggest face in the Lower 48. Not much to spray about, though, because it wasn't 'hard', just a good adventure.

What? Mt. Siyeh? Where's that? Justin Woods? Never heard of him.

Exactly.

And the route wasn't 'hard'?

Exactly.

Perhaps the difference is perception, which often comes from presentation. We do indeed live in an age of unparalleled bullshit. But sometimes there's a backlash, too. I caught word of a valley in South America with 800m–1000m untouched walls, where an Argentine climber had pioneered some routes. Rumour had it he'd been keeping it low key, but I tracked him down and asked for a report on his explorations and climbs there. Here's where I add that the *AAJ* is a non-profit publication that has never broken even and tries to avoid the hype. I can count on one hand the number of people who've not wanted their info in the *AAJ*, while I know of scores who've deliberately avoided mainstream publication. When I asked this Argentine fellow for an *AAJ* report, he politely declined. 'I'm not interested in advertising myself or the place,' he said.

Just because we don't hear about it – or just because it's drowned out sometimes – doesn't mean it isn't happening.