
Piolets d'Or 2009

April 2009 saw the return of the *Piolets d'Or* after a year's absence during which its principal organisers, the French *Group de Haute Montagne*, wrestled with the contradictions inherent in awards for alpinism. Does the new, less overtly commercial, format meet the objections of those who baulk at the notion of winners and losers in mountaineering or is the *Piolets d'Or* still, as Marko Prezelj famously charged, a circus for climbers addicted to Miss Fame? It is a question for later in this section of the *AJ*.

First, for the climbing is always more interesting than the controversy, we feature accounts from the six teams whose achievements were celebrated in Chamonix at the 17th edition of the *Piolets d'Or*.



43. Ueli Steck on the summit ridge of Teng Kangpoche.
(Simon Anthamatten)



44. The Benoist – Glairon-Rappaz line on the south face of Nuptse.

ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

PATRICE GLAIRON-RAPPAZ

11 October 2008: Here I am again at the base of the south face of Nuptse. From the snow slope just below the bergschrund, I see the superb line of gullies that highlight the bottom of the wall for more than 300 metres before fading into the unknown. Images run through my mind. Two years have passed since my first attempt in the autumn of 2006. As in my memories, the south face of Nuptse is majestic, gigantic, impressive ...

The wall rises for more than 2000 metres and huge bastions of rock cut across the face, like rose petals, flowing outward, mesmerizing. You feel reduced to nothing in front of this wall, a wall that confronts you face-to-face with yourself. You have to tame this beast that at first seems ferocious. But deep inside I know that it is possible to subdue it. It will take time, careful reflection and, without a doubt, audacity, though such an undertaking requires humility. Even though we feel ready, we know we must form a strong and tightly knit partnership to have a chance. I am happy that I am here with Stéphane. It may be the most important thing for me and I do not think it would be possible otherwise.

7pm, 15 October: After a frugal meal, we shoulder our heavy packs and leave advanced base camp. There is a full moon and we decide to take advantage of it by climbing all night, trying to get to a bivvi site at 6500m the following day, the same place where I bivvied in 2006¹. The cold is intense and the south-west wind that has been blowing since we got to base camp is hammering the face. We exchange glances; we understand each other, no need for words. We have never before experienced such brutal conditions on a climb. The tip of Stéphane's nose becomes frozen and our feet and fingertips are seriously damaged by this night of hell. After many

1. Rappaz made a solo attempt on the face in October 2006, reaching this 6500m high point.



45. Patrice Glairon-Rappaz on the lower third of the climb. (*Stéphane Benoist*)



46. Patrice at the top of the steep gully at around 6450m. (*Stéphane Benoist*)



47. Patrice at the first bivouac, 6500m (*Stéphane Benoist*)

itches of gully climbing we gain the 50-60 degree snow slopes at 6100m. Dawn illuminates the sky and the eventual sunlight feels great. However the night-long conditions have tested us and now we are moving slowly.

A barrier of steep gullies blocks our access to a snow slope that in two pitches leads to the bivouac. Stéphane emerges exhausted from a sustained pitch of 5/5+ at 6450m. Around noon (16th) we arrive at the spot where I had slept in 2006. The sun is warm and ironically, we're almost hot. Our first 'Ginat' is behind us but a second waits above².

Exhausted and dehydrated, we chop out a platform and set up the tent. I sense that something is wrong with me; I'm trembling, drained, and have stomach pains. We drink much-needed water before settling into our shelter.

18 October: Despite the cold, we sleep well and I think I'm going to be able to continue. But I haven't completely recovered and we decide to spend the day resting at our bivvi. My condition deteriorates. I have no more energy. Stéphane spends the entire day looking for a bag of clothing that I left here two years ago. He finally finds it and digs it out.

19 October: The second night at the bivvi really tests me. Sick and in bad shape, when morning finally arrives I have only one pressing desire – to go back down and recover. There is no other choice. Fifteen 70m rappels later we are on the glacier. We painstakingly pick our way down the chaos of the glacier to base camp.

This first attempt was harsh to say the least. But on the bright side, the two nights at 6500m were great for our acclimatization and we cached

2. A comparison with the ED2 Ginat route on the north face of Les Droites, Mt Blanc range.



48. 'Pitch after pitch of technical climbing – superb.'
(*Stéphane Benoist*)

sleeping bags, parkas and stoves, allowing us to go much lighter on our next attempt. I had told myself exactly this after descending two years ago but bad weather never permitted another chance.

Days pass and the violent winds up high do not relent, keeping us from venturing back onto the face. At least we regain feeling in our fingers. A sort of lethargy sets in and thoughts of bailing start to creep through our heads. The tension is palpable and the air is heavy – not between us of course, but within both of us as we question ourselves and grow withdrawn. The expedition is coming to an end ... and the end justifies

the means. A small weather window appears for the following days.

27 October: It's minus 17°C and cloudy when the alarm goes off at 2am at advanced base camp. An unforecast storm has descended on Khumbu during the night and our courage is waning. But we go for it anyway, digging deep inside ourselves in order to avoid becoming discouraged and setting ourselves up for failure. The beast is lying in wait; it senses we are vulnerable and wants to deliver the final blow right away. But the avalanches it pours down on us, even though they frighten us, do not discourage us. We use our combined experience and tenacity to get over the bergschrund and climb the couloir as snow sloughs over us. Stéphane arrives out of breath at the belay that I set up out of reach of the avalanches, feeling slightly unnerved by the situation we are living through. He admits that he doubted we would make it.

The avalanches ease as we climb up through the cold and wind to bivvi, as planned, at 6500m where the tent, sleeping bags, and stoves are waiting for us. Fine weather returns and the winds die down. Maybe the beast had relinquished its throne? I think we've earned some respite.

28 October: An amazing day! Pitch after pitch of technical climbing. The climbing is superb and the ambiance insane. We bivvi at 6800m after an incredible sunset.

29 October: While climbing out of the summit couloir at around 7100m

after two final difficult mixed pitches, I say to myself that success has become possible³. But don't try to sell the skin of the beast before you have killed it.

At 7500m the cold becomes intense, darkness descends, and the wind picks up again. The sunset is dramatic and during the small breaks we take every 15 steps to catch our breath I savour this privileged view. I have a sensation of being detached from time. Only the present matters, we are completely focused on our movements, we have to use the minimum amount of energy possible to advance and achieve our goal. Stéphane is a few minutes ahead of me and at around 7pm I join him on the summit ridge. I am groggy and freezing cold, but profoundly happy. We don't have time to fully appreciate this moment; we need to descend before we freeze on the spot. We snap a few photos, glance into Everest's Western Cwm, then start down-climbing, paying careful attention to our extremities to keep them from freezing. Only critical things matter, it's survival. I sense the animal instinct within me functioning, almost on autopilot. We are on the edge and I believe that at this moment we may have gone beyond our limits.



49. Stéphane Benoist
(Patrice Glairon-Rappaz)

After several hours where everything could have been lost, we are back in our tent, finally in shelter. We immediately examine our feet – signs of frostbite are visible. How bad is it? We don't know yet.

30 October: It's 3am and the wind is gusting hard, keeping us tent-bound. I quickly fall asleep. I no longer have the energy to dream. Around 8am the sun illuminates our tent and it is time to descend. V-thread after v-thread, we arrive, 20 rappels later, at the bergschrund as night falls. With the help of our cook, who has come up to meet us, we break down ABC and immediately continue to base camp.

From the trail, I take one last look at the face. Tears fall down my cheeks and my eyes tremble with emotion. A page has been turned. For my part, today I see our success on Nuptse as the culmination of a journey by Stéphane and myself and I am a happy man, a 'satisfied' alpinist. Trying to do something even greater wouldn't make any sense to me. But I know that the beast is still in me, sleeping. Will it re-awake one day?

Summary: An account of a new route, alpine-style, on the south face of Nuptse by French climbers Stéphane Benoist and Patrice Glairon-Rappaz, 27-30 October 2008. *Are You Experienced*, 2000m, M5, ice 90 degrees. The pair reached the summit ridge at c7700m but were unable to continue to the actual summit (7864m).