8000 Meters and More

Working out the moves on the routes of the new millennium

by Alexander Huber, *Germany*

As we climb into the next millennium, we might ask ourselves, where is our sport going? The end of the 20th century gives us a welcome opportunity to discuss the question, but I doubt that the answer will be found easily. It's hard to predict where climbing is going because it depends on each individual and the evolution of his or her personal style. For example, if I look at how my own mountaineering has evolved, I bet nobody could have predicted its direction.

In the early 1990s, sport climbing was my special interest, and I put 100% of my energy into it. The result was the first ascent of several routes that marked the upper end of the scale. After my first 9a (5.14d) in 1992, I managed to establish four more routes at the 8c+/9a grade over the next two years, but none of these routes was harder than the first.

To be "state of the art" in sport climbing for years is very hard work for your mind as well as your body. After years of consistent training, it's difficult to maintain motivation for goals that are more or less repetitions of things you've already achieved. Such feelings are poisonous for a climber's motivation. Thus, after ten years climbing and mountaineering in the Alps, I found myself searching for a new way—a search that, in 1995, led me out of Europe for the first time.

As a climbing mecca, Yosemite was at the top of my hit list and the first stop on the journey. The Valley is the birthplace of free climbing and, furthermore, of big wall climbing in America. The combination of these two disciplines was precisely what I was looking for when I made the free ascent of the *Salathé* in 1995.

The next stop was Asia, or more precisely, Pakistan, for "El Cap on top of Denali:" the west face of Latok II. In 1995, my attempt on the face failed due to bad weather, but in 1997, I came back with my brother Thomas, Toni Gutsch and the well-known American, Conrad Anker. After working consistently above 6000 meters for nearly two weeks on a vertical big wall, we topped out at the 7108-meter summit plateau.

Big wall climbing had never been transferred to peaks higher than the Great Trango Tower. With the ascent of the west face of Latok II, we pushed the limits, but it won't be the end of the evolution. Bagging 8000ers, sport climbing, big wall climbing on El Capitan: after a breathtaking start, the evolution of these disciplines has consistently plateaued. The same is not true for all-around mountaineering. It is just at the start of mixing the disciplines of sport climbing, mixed climbing, big walling and high-altitude alpinism together. The ascent of the west face of Latok II was simply a landmark along the path that will lead climbing into the next millennium: the combination of different disciplines at their highest levels.

A glance down the path reveals that big wall climbing will be transferred to higher altitudes and to the highest mountains of the world in the future. It's one of climbing's most interesting objectives—and, of course, a great challenge for me, too.

But, without taking too high a risk, you cannot ascend your first 8000er with a big wall; it is helpful and sensible to initially get experience with the magic 8000 meters on a normal

Georg Simair and Alex Huber (right) high on Cho Oyu. What will the new millennium bring for world climbing? HORST FANKHAUSER

route. For this reason, I focused on Cho Oyu via the Tichy route from the Tibet side. Cho Oyu is regarded as an easy 8000er, and, in fact, the technical difficulties are not greater than on the classic normal routes of 4000ers in the Alps. Nevertheless, for me, having never been higher than Latok II, the sixth highest mountain was a necessary experience. During the ascent I could feel that, even given the absence of technical difficulties, climbing at high altitude is a dangerous game that requires a high amount of good sense.

On May 18, at 12 noon, eight hours after starting from Camp II at 7000 meters, I was atop Cho Oyu with the German Barbara Hirschbichler and Austrians Georg Simair and Horst Fankhauser. The latter saw his first ascent of an 8000er at the age of 55, 27 years after surviving a bivouac under open skies at 8000 meters during Reinhold Messner's tragic 1972 Manaslu south face expedition. Five days later, I was back in Berchtesgaden, my home in the very south of Germany. And with good reason. Each day at high altitude lowers the body's resources, and I just didn't want to lose too much power to too long a stay at Cho Oyu's 5800-meter base camp.

Generally, free climbing and high altitude mountaineering are very contrary. Free climbing is a sport that requires mainly explosive power, while one needs a lot of endurance to be successful at high altitude. Climbing an 8000er causes a horrendous drop in explosive power, and to return to one's previous level in free climbing requires a high amount of discipline.

Of course, with the ascent of Cho Oyu I took a big gamble of not getting back into shape quickly enough for the next goal: a free ascent of one of the major big wall routes on El Capitan. But, on the other hand, it was a great challenge to make a free ascent on the famous *North American Wall* four months after being atop an 8000er.

On September 3, I was back in the Valley, this time with my brother Thomas as partner. Our first stop was the famous El Cap Meadows. Through binoculars we inspected the possibility of a free line on the southeast face, the "right side" of El Capitan. Crazy!

The *North American Wall* had seen several free attempts in recent years, but none could find climbable features on the lower section. Then, in 1997, Conrad Anker, Kevin Thaw and others established *Continental Drift*, and in so doing found that the lower pitches, with some variations, could possibly go free. Armed with this information, Thomas and I started at the top of Footstool, a prominent 50-meter rock tower leaning against the base of El Capitan's southeast face. And, indeed, we found in *Continental Drift* a freeable solution to the lowest third of the southeast face. Three pitches were hard (5.13b, 5.13a, 5.13c), then some easier pitches led us to the Calaveras Ledges and a traverse on low-angle terrain to the original route of the *North American Wall*. Free climbing two more quite easy pitches brought us to the Big Sur, the best bivy on the entire face.

The following pendulums over an ocean of golden granite looked very hard. After the first pendulum went free at 5.13a, we came to a halt. Three rivets lead through a section of blank granite to the second pendulum. There was no chance for free climbing the original route. We inspected the entire area around the pendulums, wasting hours in the hope of finding a free solution we had not yet discovered. No way! At least three meters of blank granite remained at all the solutions. The second pendulum became the crux of our motivation. No way!

When Ray Jardine tried to free the *Nose*, he had the exact same problem. He solved it by hammering his own solution into the granite. Seven meters of blank granite received chopped holds, which were then called the "Jardine Traverse." Even today this remains the only possibility for a "free variation" to the King Swing of the *Nose*. But on the *North American Wall* we accepted the second pendulum as a natural barrier and tried to make the best of it.

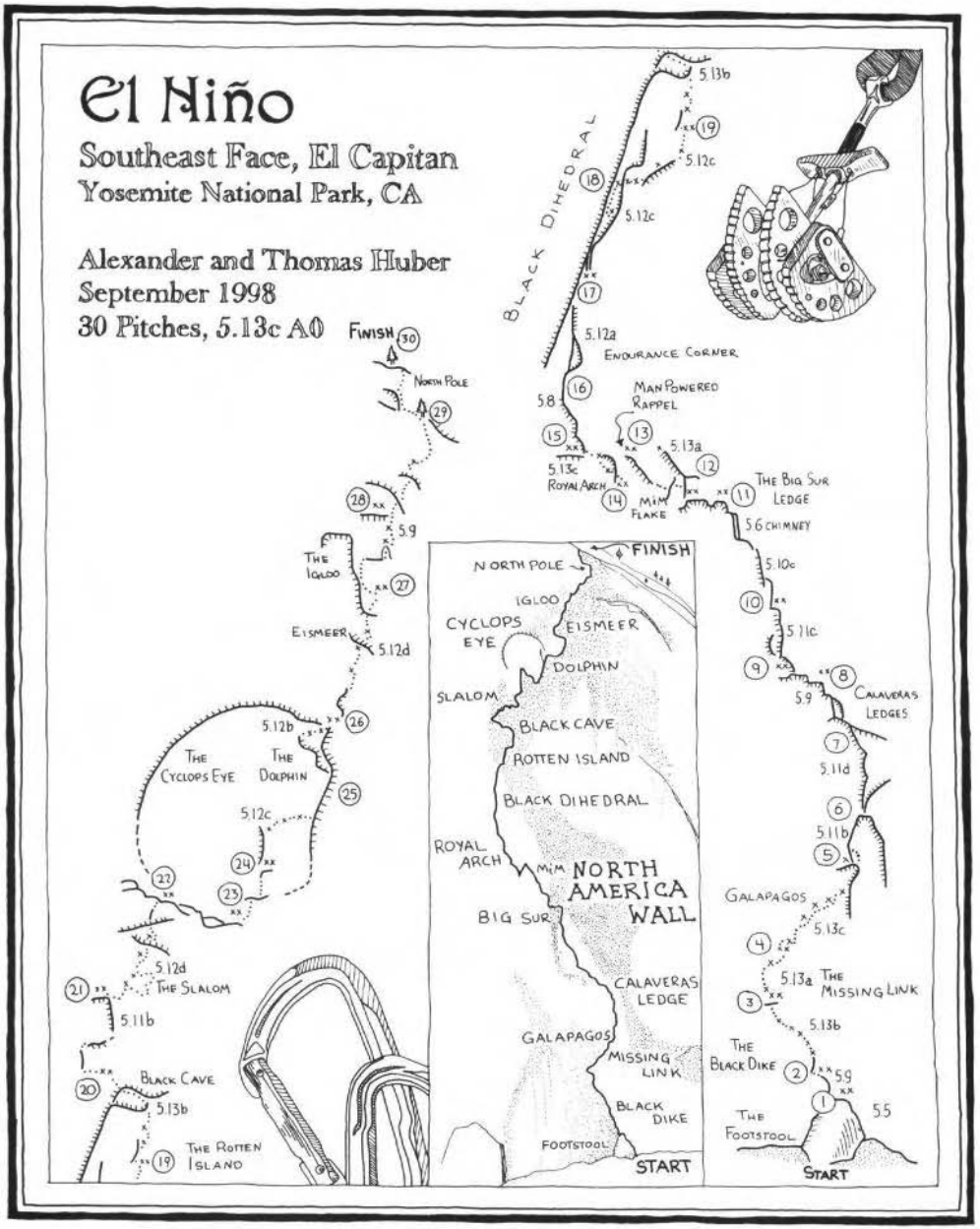
Eight meters below and a bit to the left of the no-hands rest we were on, there was another no-hands rest, from which a shallow corner arches to the left to the beginning of the "Endurance Corner." For these unfreeable eight meters I had an idea, which I called the "Man-Powered Rappel." The belayer has a slack backup to the belay and hangs with his hands on the no-hands-rest ledge. One climber down climbs from the ledge. Two meters below, his weight comes onto the rope, which is fixed to the belayer's harness. A short, four-meter rappel down to a small ledge. . . the climber unweights the rope, and the belayer can relax for a short moment. . . again the rope is weighted, and another four-meter rappel brings the climber to the belay at the next no-hands rest.

Of course, the Man-Powered Rappel cannot be referred to as having been redpointed, but it follows free climbing's guidelines: movement over rock using just the natural surface. It was an acceptable solution for us.

After having gained access to the Black Dihedral, the way to the top was open. Just one really hard pitch remained: the "Black Cave." The roof of the Black Cave looked hard and weird. A single two-centimeter sawed-off angle is the only protection for a long cross-through in an incredibly airy position. This would normally be the place for a bolt, but we didn't want to drill on an existing route. Thus, the Black Cave gained its special scary touch.

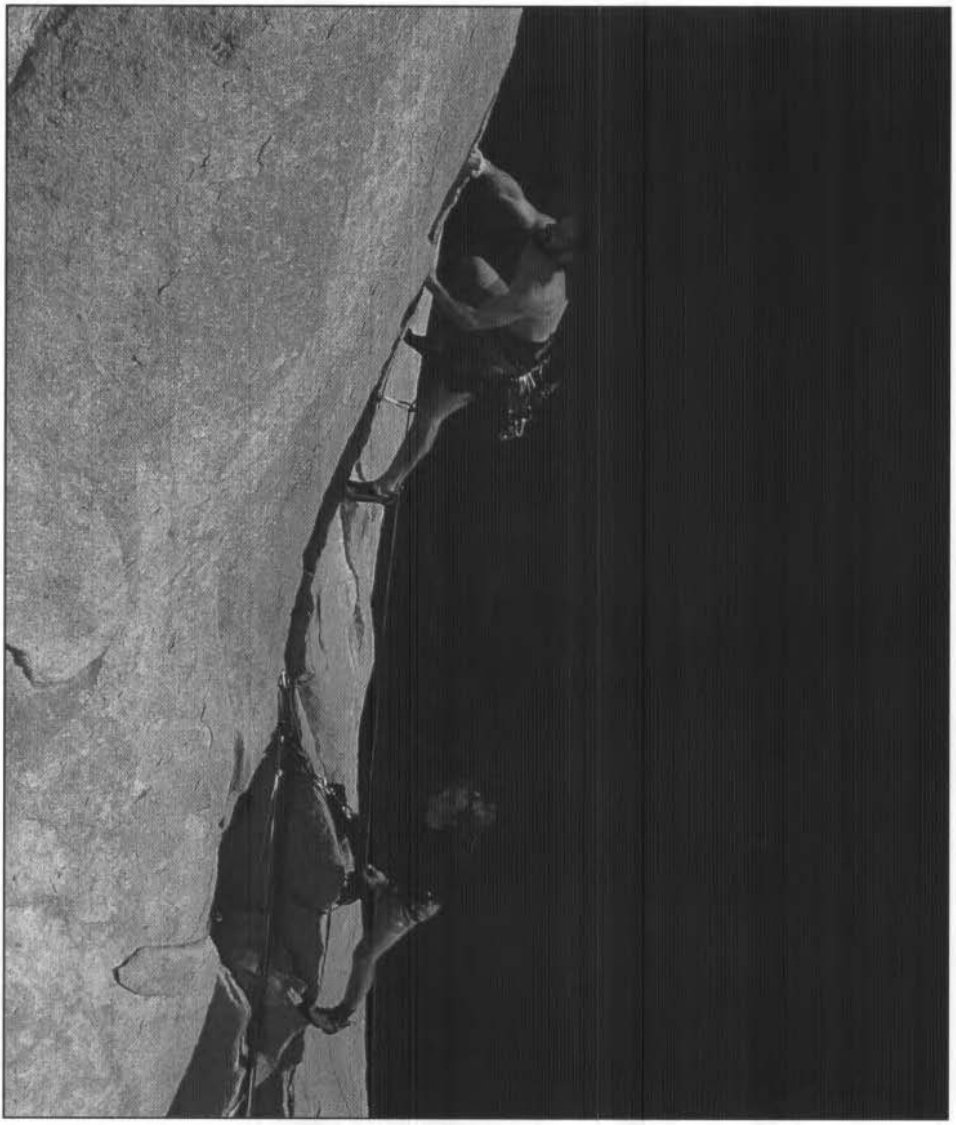
After having found the free solution, our plan was then to redpoint the entire route as a team, which is the traditional style of free climbing a multi-pitch route in the Alps. It means that each pitch has to be free climbed by both of us without falls. If the leader has redpointed a pitch, it's just half the game; only if the follower has climbed the pitch free and without falls as well has the pitch been redpointed as a team.

LEFT: *Alex Huber in the "Galapagos," pitch 5 (5.13c),* El Niño. HEINZ ZAK



Gardner Heaton

LEFT: *Alex and Thomas Huber on "The Missing Link" (5.13a),* El Niño. HEINZ ZAK



The Huber brothers on pitch 34 (5.10d) of Free Rider. HEINZ ZAK

It took us three days to free the route, with both of us climbing all the pitches without any falls. The right side of El Capitan now had 30 pitches of free climbing at 5.13c, plus the Man-Powered Rappel. In fact, this free climb is not an independent route, but a combination of existing routes (*New Jersey Turnpike*, *Continental Drift*, *Heavy Metal and Tinker Toys*, *North American Wall* and *Sea of Dreams*) and new variations that are never more than six meters away from existing routes and which cannot be called independent. Nevertheless, the route gained a name, just to emphasize that it is not the *North American Wall* that has been freed,

but a particular combination of existing routes and variations. In naming the route we followed the suggestion of Conrad Anker and Kevin Thaw, which gave the project the working name *El Niño*.

It could have been enough for 1998 to have such a route under our belts, but I still had other plans. During my attempts at free climbing the *Salathé* in 1995, I made the first ascent of the *Free Rider*, which is now the easiest free climb on El Capitan. Belaying myself with a Grigri, I solo free climbed a four-pitch variation to the headwall of the *Salathé*—a first-class option to free climb El Capitan in a day. Heinz Zak, though, was tired after belaying me on my redpoint ascent of the *Salathé*, and I couldn't find any belayers for the project. Since it would have been an easy prize, the only people who knew about it—Mark Chapman, Heinz Zak and Jeff Achey—were sworn to secrecy, and I had to wait until 1998 for a one-day ascent of the route.

The days became very short in October, and a redpoint ascent by a single person naturally requires less time than one by a team, but I couldn't find anyone willing to belay and jumar the whole day. After a first attempt with Dean Potter, which we abandoned due to slowness, I decided at last, but not least, to climb the route with Thomas. Because of the lack of daylight in October, we started at 3:31 a.m. and climbed the entire *Freeblast* in the dark. Fifteen hours and 25 minutes after starting, having redpointed all 37 pitches, we topped out just as darkness came to Yosemite Valley.

We had free climbed El Capitan in a day—37 pitches with difficulties up to 5.12d! *Free Rider* offers very typical granite climbing with 60 meters of chimneys, 100 meters of offwidth, 100 meters of layback, 100 meters of "no-feature" slabs and more than 100 meters of finger-, hand- and fist-sized cracks. The 5.12 pitches don't require any special granite techniques, but, despite modest difficulties, many meters of pure crack climbing and much desperately "good" offwidth require advanced crack climbing skills. For example, the two offwidth pitches between The Ear and El Cap Spire demonstrate mercilessly to every inexperienced offwidth climber who tries them that there are 5.10d pitches that refuse to be on-sighted.

Thomas and I spent another day in the Valley. The sun set on our trip one last time, bathing the huge walls of Yosemite in the magnificent light we love so much. It's the right time to leave a place—it's the right time to leave Yosemite!

Where is it all going next? Well, I think that I won't ascend another trade route on an 8000er again. Bagging an 8000er via a trade route is still very sustaining and great, but when you are together with so many other climbers, you can't feel the exposure of these magnificent mountains. The real challenge awaits us where nobody else is going. Therefore, I hope that the next trip will be one to an impressive place with good friends and the great exposure of climbing at the cutting edge.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: El Capitan, Yosemite Valley, California

NEW ROUTES: *El Niño* (VI, 5.13c, 30 pitches), a free climb that links parts of established routes with some new variations on the southeast face of El Capitan, September 4-19, Alexander and Thomas Huber; first redpoint ascent, September 23-25, 1998, Alexander and Thomas Huber. *Free Rider* (VI, 5.12d, 37 pitches), a four-pitch variation to the *Free Salathé*, May, 1995, Alexander Huber, solo; first redpoint ascent and first one-day-ascent: October 13, 1998, in 15 hours 25 minutes, Alexander and Thomas Huber