

# Mt. McKinley's Slovak Route

## Seeking the vision in the Alaska Range

SCOTT BACKES

During the long flight, I debated, internally and incessantly, the conundrum: Was I over it? Was I too old? Or did I need more? What was out there for me? Why go back again? Notwithstanding the planning, packing, and the dreaming, if it had not been for a particularly savage bike ride the week before, I might not have come at all. All the while I knew that it would come down to this: one more (one last?) time into the breach with the boys.

I saw them there in the Arrivals lounge before they saw me. There was no turning back. I took a deep breath and held it as I exited the jetway.

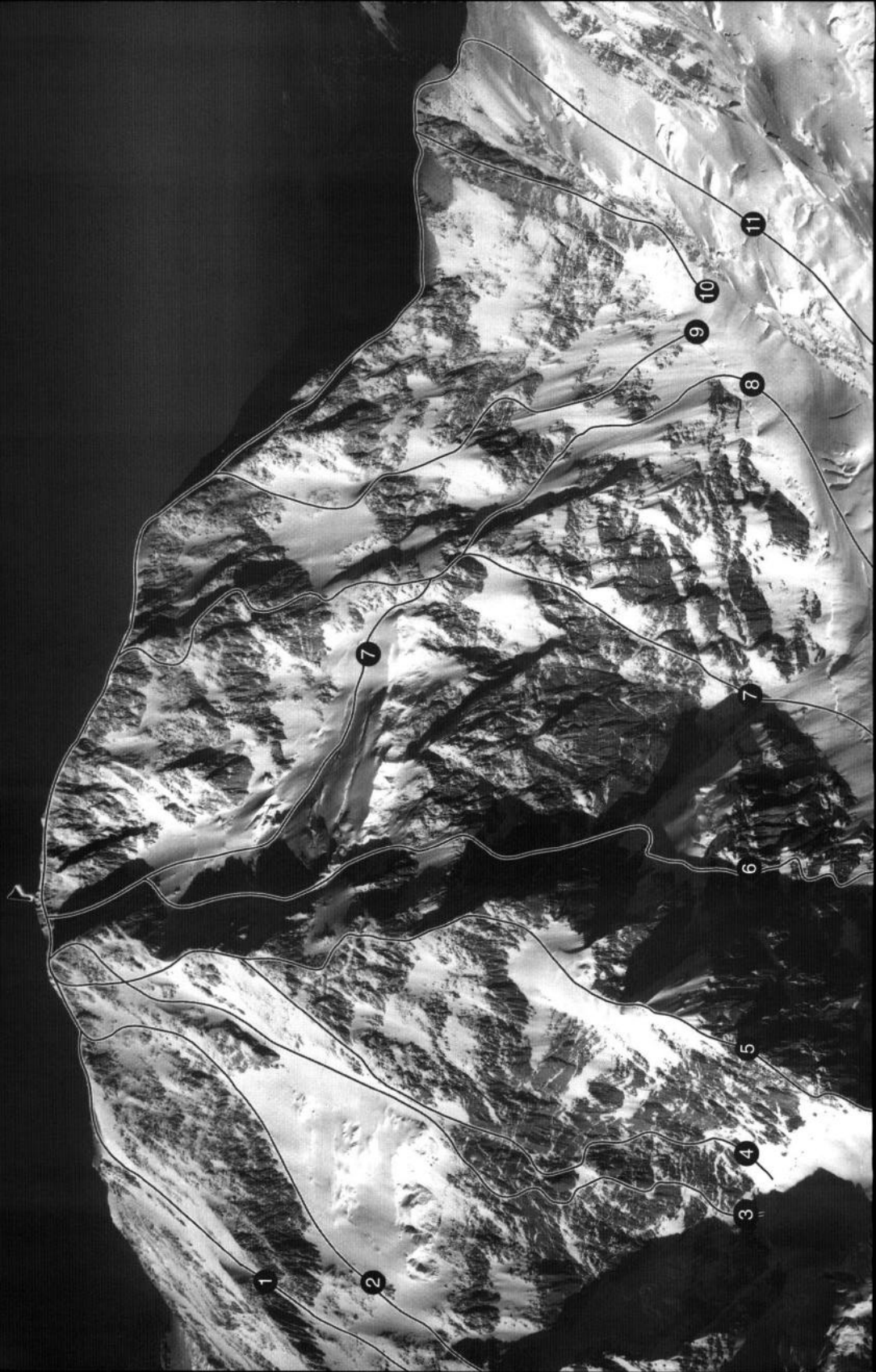
I'd returned to Alaska to climb with Twight at least once more, to try again to still the inner voices, and to put my ideals into action. Twenty years before I'd come to Alaska for the first time. I had stepped off the plane and into a new life. I came then to find the big time, to step through the looking glass into the world of alpinism. And so I did. Since that formative time, I have discovered that the forge and anvil of great mountains silence the cacophony of my deficiencies and failures. Ultimately, I proved to my unappeasable inner father that there was one thing, at least, at which I excelled.

Alpine style: Bonatti, Buhl, Messner. Climbing in alpine style is to me the convergence of content, style, and ethic. Today, many so-called proponents of alpine climbing are actually engaged in "Guaranteed Outcome Climbing." Guaranteed Outcome Climbing, whether a 40-day big-wall siege with internet access, or a commercial Everest climb using Sherpas and oxygen, is regressive. Naively, I thought that Messner had put Guaranteed Outcome Climbing to rest in 1971 with his essay "Murder of the Impossible." Just take enough drill bits, Hilti batteries, Sherpas, and fixed rope and you can subjugate any route. It saddens me to see talented climbers let "Hot Flashes" dictate their routes, and, even more sorrowfully, their style. I wish I wasn't so reactionary. I know that climbing is anarchy—do whatever you want. But just don't call it alpine climbing and insult those who, willing to put themselves in harm's way for an ideal, leave the drill at home.

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\*This route, climbed in 1984 by Tono Krizo, František Korl, and Blažej Adam of the Slovak Mountaineering Association, is correctly known as the Slovak route. The book *High Alaska*, by Jonathan Waterman, referred to the route as the Czech Direct, an appellation that gained further momentum with the 2000 ascents, but the name is not correct.

*The south face of Mt. McKinley, showing: 1. The Clod Face (Derbyshire-Grassman-Jones-McKeith, 1977). 2. Wickwire (Bertulis-Patterson-Raymond-Schaller-Stewart-Wickwire, 1972). 3. The Southwest Face (McCartney-Roberts, 1980). 4. Denali Diamond (Becker-Graage, 1983). 5. Cassin Ridge (Airodli-Alippi-Canali-Cassin-Perego-Zucchi, 1961). 6. Slovak route (Adam-Korl-Krizo, 1984). 7. Haston-Scott (1976). 8. American Direct (Eberl-Laba-Seidman-Thompson, 1967). 9. Milan Kriššak Memorial (Bakoš-Orolin-Johnson-Petrik, 1980). 10. Mascioli's Pillar (House-Swenson, 1997). 11. South Buttress (Kajijura-Nakamura-Nishimae, 1965). Not pictured: Japanese Direct (Kimura-Senda-Tsuneto-Watanabe-Yamaura, 1977.) BRADFORD WASHBURN # 5053*



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Mark, Steve House, and I were here to climb the Czech Direct,\* which is just right of the Cassin Ridge on the south face of Denali. It is the most direct line on the mountain and has 9,000 feet of climbing. The first 5,500 feet are a big wall; the last 3,500 feet are hiking—very steep, strenuous hiking. We were attracted to the route because it was hard, beautiful, and unrepeatable. 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. We wanted to climb one of the hardest routes on Denali in a continuous push: no tent, no sleeping bags, no margin. Just day packs, two stoves, 44 ounces of fuel, belay jackets, and our belief in ourselves and each other. It felt like science fiction.

We arrived in Talkeetna, and no less than seven people cheerfully told us that the Czech Direct had just been climbed by a pair from NOLS. We were arrogant, and everyone loves to see the proud brought low. We moped. But our plane was leaving soon, we had a lot of work to do, and we soldiered on.

I'm a shitty skier and proved the point by biffing coming down Heartbreak Hill. I tore up my nose and re-injured my broken ribs. A great start. The broken ribs would ache the entire trip.

We had planned to avoid the West Buttress with its crowds and the possibility of being involved in a rescue or becoming entangled with a white-helmeted incident commander. After failing to figure out an alternative way to acclimatize, we loaded up the sleds and started skiing up the West Butt.

We were at the 14,000-foot camp for less than 24 hours before Ranger Roger Robinson pressed us into service. We had to drag Lev Sarkisov, a climber from Georgia in the former Soviet Union, back to camp. Lev's partners told us Lev means "lion," and that last year, at 60, Lev had been the oldest person to climb Everest. But Lev had fucked himself up good here. The curious campers gawked.

I couldn't stop myself from berating them. "Yeah, that's right, just stand there and watch. God forbid any of you help with the sled. No, really, just stand there and watch the show."

Pete Athans, who had come up to assist with the rescue, must have been horrified. I didn't care. I was irate. Rescue turned spectator sport; brotherhood morphed.

A couple of days later we summited. I felt bedraggled and weak, and lagged an hour behind Twilight. At least now we could get off the Butt and go climbing.

Steve House and Mark Twilight were the only two people with whom I'd consider doing the Czech Direct. Their skill and attitude are only a small part of the reason why. My respect and love for these two made the trip. They saw me struggling to keep up those first two weeks and did exactly the right thing: nothing. They let me suffer and dispassionately watched me try to suck it up. No solicitous advice or offers of help. They trusted I'd get there in time. Outside of my family, no one else has influenced my life so profoundly as Mark. As for Steve, he is the future; hell, I nicknamed him "The Great White Hope." Steve and I have climbed only a few times together, and although our 1999 route on Howse Peak formed a strong bond, I still felt I had something to prove. Steve's smart and funny, with a dark edge that belies his clean-cut appearance. He's my friend, and I'm a better man for it.

I wasn't sure what I brought to the mix. Six weeks of traveling the Midwest giving climbing clinics had not left me in the best of shape. I felt old and out of practice. Maybe I brought laughter, experience, and desire. I could visualize doing the route in the style we wanted.

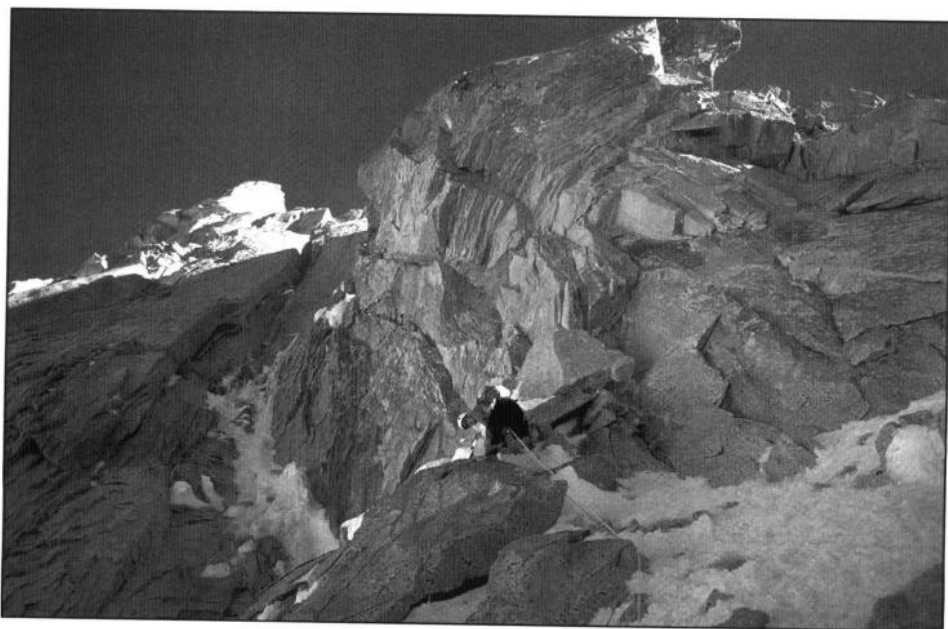
We moved fast as we swung our tools up the initial 1,000 feet of the route. We stopped at the first sign of difficulty and downclimbed the ice face even faster. Up and down took less than an hour. Since it was a rest day, this amount of active recovery seemed just right. The ski up the East Fork of the Kahiltna the day before took more out of us than we had hoped. We didn't want to "waste" a day of the current high-pressure hanging over Alaska, so we reconnoitered the lower face between brew sessions and cashews. It was perfect.

As we sat in the tent talking, eating, and reading, I knew that the recon had proved to all of us that we were ready. The last weather report before bed gave us what we needed: "Continued high pressure for at least the next three and a half days."

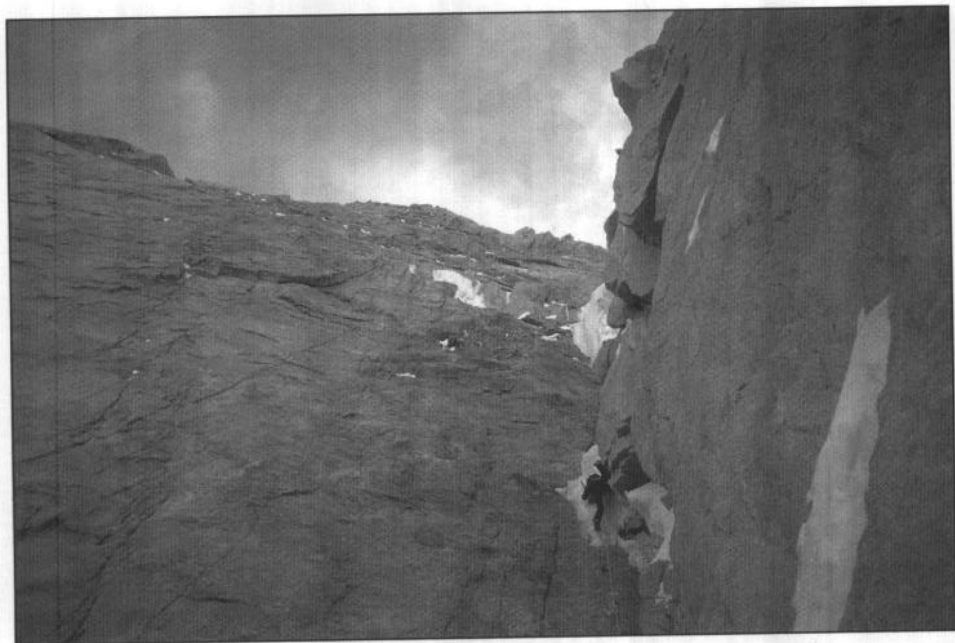
Five years before, Mark and I had stood beneath the *Infinite Spur* with the same weather report, the same idea of a continuous push. We had been fit and ready, yet we had bad vibes and flew home without doing a single pitch. Thirty-six hours after we packed up camp and left, the biggest storm of the season hit. Had we ignored the inner voices, we probably would have been too high to retreat when the storm arrived. But we listened then and, because we did, we were back now.

Now, although we felt trepidation over the route, the inner voices were quiet—no ominous warnings. We slept little, but finally, toward morning, the rustling ceased, and we rested a few fitful hours.

The welcome warm sun hit us as Steve wrestled with a rocky traverse. It was 10 a.m. We were 1,800 feet up the face. Steve led through beautiful rock climbing to an overhanging waterfall section that we hoped would lead to an easy, hidden gully. Our energy was palpable; our collective consciousness was melded together and pulling us up. There



Steve House approaching the first WI6 pitch, on the fourth or fifth technical pitch the team belayed. The team soloed the beginning ca. 1,500 feet. SCOTT BACKES



*Steve House leading below the Great Rock Triangle at 15,000 feet. MARK TWIGHT*

was a certain nervousness within us, a sense of not believing we might get away with this, and, at the same time, knowing that this was our moment. Changeovers were quick. Two climbers seconded simultaneously. We hoped that we could keep the pace for at least another 36 hours. The rock, although compact in places, was solid pink granite. Gear placements were good—when you could find them. We kept climbing.

At 2 p.m. I made a mistake: I passed a prechopped ledge left graciously by the NOLS team, Messrs. Gilmore and Mahoney, and the boys called me back. Instead of acknowledging my error and traversing back to the ledge, I exploded. I was a small man on a very big face, yelling and cursing before regaining control and returning to my partners. My sheepish apologies were accepted in silence as we settled in for the brew. Hubris led to my outburst. Finally, I was leading well. To be summoned back was a blow to my ego. After three weeks of lagging, I didn't want to admit I was wrong. As we brewed, I had more than sufficient time to mull over whether what will forever be called "the incident on the first ice field" would affect the rest of the climb. When we finished brewing and I picked up the rack, it felt a little heavier, somehow tarnished.

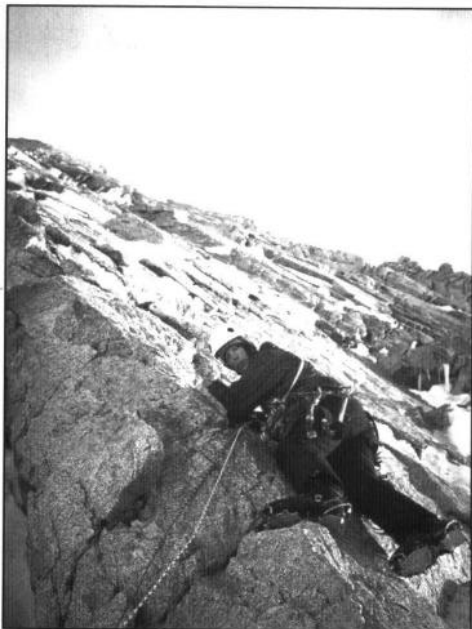
It was 3 a.m.; we were at our second brew stop and 21 hours into the route. I had been lying in a semicomatose state for two hours. Falling asleep while talking or drinking felt luxurious, decadent. But now it was time for me to start the momentum up again. It wasn't supposed to be my block of pitches, but it certainly was my time to lead. At 4 a.m., in the sinking dull gray of the early morning sky, the cold penetrated deeper than the temperature suggested. Dread for me in the mountains isn't the unscalable ropelength. It's when I know that although I may lose control, I still might be able to sketch by. In the moments before I started the next pitch, I filled with dark cold. After my lead, I was thankful to hand the sweet and bitter end of the rope to Steve.



Everyone who has seen Steve in action wishes they climbed as well; no one does. For the next six hours, Mark and I were treated to some of Steve's greatest hits: 5.9 X; M6; WI6+. A man in full. But numbers add up to nothing; what matters is that he doesn't fall, and the rope always moved up. Solid belays. No worries.

I fell asleep at each belay, but when climbing, there was a terrible clarity to my vision. The mountain itself was now in control; we were merely trying to interpret what it presented and to somehow remain ambulatory. There was a reckless freedom here. Gentle aural hallucinations would follow later, entertaining me for the rest of the climb. From the abyss, I heard Karl Golikow: "This is the life, no?"

It took only 24 hours to climb the first 4,000 feet of the route, but now, with Steve's hard pitches, and our "other problem," we had slowed to a snail's pace. The "other problem" was this state we were in. The serious part was that we didn't "get it." As we struggled to keep moving, we examined the problem and ourselves almost indifferently. There wasn't much we could do about it; the fatigue and stress vied to control us. We slept and shuddered at belays. Time was lost, and our souls had flown with it. There was just this mountain, these partners, and the struggle to keep moving, keep moving. The last 1,500 feet of hard climbing would take nearly 30 hours.



*It's only 5.9 (X): Steve House finding the focus.*  
SCOTT BACKES

At six p.m., 36 hours into it, the clouds moved in and we were lost. Was the high pressure over? We were brewing again. We talked about retreat, as if it were an option. But we were beyond that now: 5,000 feet up; even if we wanted to, there was not enough gear to descend. There was only 700 feet of hard climbing left. Even if the weather continued to deteriorate, survival required continuing up. The brew helped. All of us looked inside and got to see what was there. There was no defining moment, no crystalline epiphany, just a slow hardening of will. There would be no failing upward; we would remain, however tenuously, in control.

Two diagonal rappels put us back on route, and we heaved a collective sigh of relief. The clouds cleared as we started up the last hard pitches of the route.

I was sitting on half of the tiny pad from Steve's pack. Three hours before, we had listened to the mournful sound of the stoves sputtering out. Wicked spindrift had poured from the summit snow fields a mere pitch above. Unable to face the terrible business in the predawn cold, we had waited for the sun.

Now I was freezing to death. I didn't care. The sun would touch me soon. I could see



*Steve House and the Ramp.* MARK TWIGHT

from Steve's face that it would revive me. He was ten feet from me and bathed in light. Mark was next to me, half in light, half in shadow.

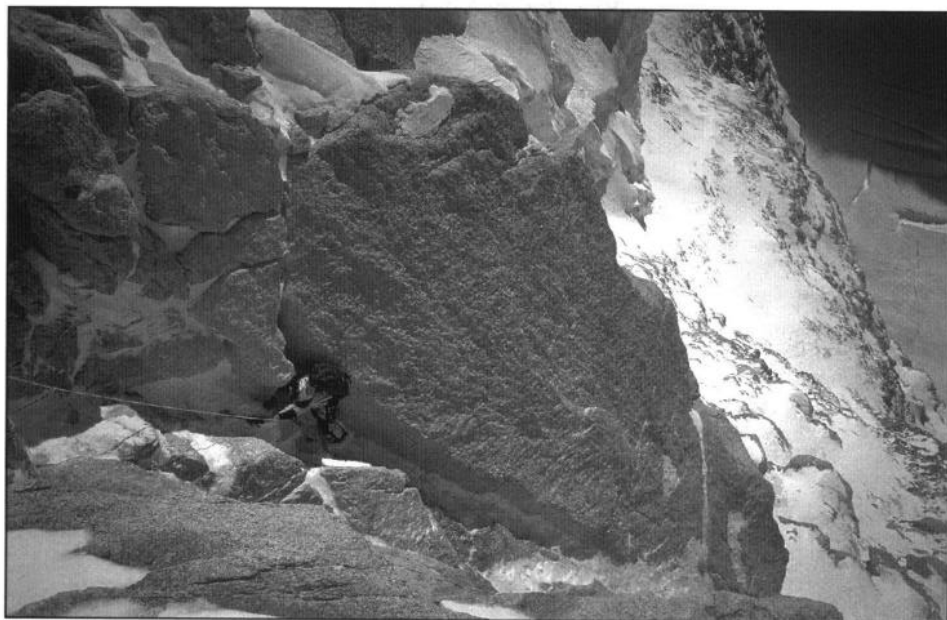
The sun was on me now. It was time for the final act. It had been 50-some hours, and I wanted off this face. But I wasn't, so I made the final adjustments, tightened my boots, and stood up.

Six hours later, once my breath had calmed, I looked out into a perfect world. It was 4 p.m. and the altimeter read 19,200 feet. Not a breath of wind or cloud. Although I was hammered beyond comprehension, I knew we had it in the bag. I could relax for the few minutes of our GU break and gaze over some of the most beautiful scenery on earth. My brain worked differently now, and I consciously tasted the sublime place to which we had come. The colors were hypervivid and the auditory hallucinations pleasant. I looked over at my companions' haggard faces. I wouldn't have traded this for anything in the world.

Mark was up now, pulling on his pack. He had been in front since we left that god-forsaken snow ledge several hours earlier. We each silently thanked those who came before us for the fresh tracks we were following. And we thanked the climbing gods for all the other breaks we had been given on this route, and for each other's strength.

Gratitude and elation were short-lived. Now I was fighting to keep the small man from resurfacing. At Steve's insistence, we had left the tracks and were traversing snow-covered rock at 20,000 feet to eliminate climbing the last few feet to the summit. I was angry that Steve had led us out of the brainless track, and I didn't understand his logic. I stewed and then boiled. The inner turmoil made me slow down. I would not lose it here. I traversed around and over the last impediments, finding myself almost on top of Pig Hill.

We were done. I saw Steve and Mark plunge-stepping down toward the Football Field and tried to keep up. When I caught them, my anger dissolved. Their sunburnt noses almost disappeared behind ear-to-ear grins. We sat quietly, trying to absorb what we had



*Scott Backes following the last hard pitch at 16,800 feet. STEVE HOUSE*

just done. We basked in the sun and the warm glow of our accomplishment.

It had been 60 hours and three lifetimes since we started this journey, and we rejoiced at going downhill. We stopped right before the last little uphill section and I downed six chocolate espresso beans. It made all the difference as we turned on the after-burners and jetted down to the 14,000-foot camp in two and a half hours.

**W**e sat on the plastic action packers that we had substituted for duffels on this trip, with Mark DJ-ing at four in the morning. We were satisfied and at peace. The best part of an alpine route is sitting in Base Camp piecing together what actually happened. There was no logic or order to it; the route, the experience created in each of us, was unbidden. In our exhaustion and travail we were no longer able to separate memory from dream. Yet, somehow, we were sated—by the mountain and the love that carried us through. Mark's music alternated between theme music and counterpoint for our animated exchanges. The lantern battery still powered the speakers after four weeks on the glacier. Vignette after vignette poured out until, finally, and at last, there was no more to say. Mark's selections mellowed as we sat for another half an hour winding down. I wished the feeling would continue forever, but I knew it wouldn't. Too soon, that "other," less real life would intrude, as it had to. For now, though, it was enough to just be there and alive, with Steve and Mark.

**I**t was a strange homecoming. Arrogance and shame. It took a week of processing before I could call Mark. As always, his voice cheered me as we talked about the route. He too had been struggling. We got a peek at perfection on the route, but we needed to be better than we were to grasp it. We each had made mistakes. Although we had come closer than ever before, still we had missed the mark, and it left each of us a little hollow. Perhaps



the most accurate way to sum it all up was provided by Steve when he said, "It was my first world-class route, but I'm not sure I've got another one in me."

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Alaska Range

ASCENT: The Slovak route (5.9 X M6 WI6+, 9,000') on the south face of Mt. McKinley (20,320'), June 24-26, Scott Backes, Steve House, Mark Twight



Scott Backes, 44, who is married to Jill Heaberlin and has two children, Grace (3) and Griffin (1), has been climbing since 1975. From his home base of St. Paul, Minnesota, he has traveled extensively in search of all manner of climbing. Although best known for his alpine climbing, he has pursued almost all types of climbing, and has traveled to the places that best exemplify the various sub-sports of climbing to just go climbing.

*Scott Backes at 14,000 feet after the climb.*

MARK TWIGHT