

# PACHINKO ON DENALI

*The Giri-Giri boys make the Big One even bigger.*

KATSUTAKA YOKOYAMA



Fumitaka Ichimura following on the upper part of the Isis Face, the first route of the trio's historic enchainment of two Alaska Grade 6 routes. *Katsutaka Yokoyama*

Pachinko is a popular Japanese game with metal balls that bounce around inside a machine and then disappear. It is like a combination of pinball and slot machines. The climbing version consists of climbing more than one route in a single push. We repeat this up, down, up, down, and call it Pachinko. In the Japanese mountains this idea began in the 1960s as training for bigger walls, especially for the Alps. It was a game to climb and descend several routes consecutively. The mountains in Japan are not so big, but they are difficult and remote in



The 7,200-foot Isis Face route, which ends on the south buttress. The route had never been climbed to the summit of Denali until Ichimura, Yusuke Sato, and Katsutaka Yokoyama's massive, imaginative enchainment. *Mark Westman*

winter, with long approaches, a lot of snow, and many storms. It is good training for us Giri-Giri Boys. We celebrated New Year's 2008 with Pachinko across the Karobe Mountains. It took us 16 days, leaving us exhausted but satisfied. We decided to play the game in the big mountains of Alaska. "That's crazy," climbers said when they heard our plan. "Crazy" sounded like praise for our bold plan.

And so it was that in April 2008 the Giri-Giri Boys—Tatsuro Yamada, Yuto Inoue, Fumitaka "Itchy" Ichimura, Yusuke Sato, and I—flew to Alaska. We use Giri-Giri mostly in parody of a TV show about sexy Japanese girls. But literally, in Japanese Giri-Giri means "at the very limit of something." We always seek to be on the edge in the mountains. This was our fourth consecutive season in the Alaska Range. Why Alaska? Simple: It has many attractive faces and offers low-budget expeditions from Japan. We have no money, because we spend everything climbing. Although the members vary from year-to-year, our most frequent trips are to Alaska, but we have also climbed together in the Andes and the Himalaya. We have little experience and are immature in our climbing technique, but we are close friends.

Our Alaska trips began in 2005, when Itchy and I flew to the Tokositna Glacier, below Mt. Huntington. The first time we saw its southwest face, we saw a beautiful line. It started from a dangerous serac-lined basin—"Death Valley"—and ascended 1,800 meters to the summit. On that trip we read a novel by Ryotaro Shiba. The hero is Ryoma Sakamoto, a visionary Samurai who worked to free Japan from its feudal trappings and created a modern government in the early 1800s. He was the ultimate Shi-Shi. The first Shi means "ambitions" or "soul," and the second Shi means "a man." A Shi-Shi must be willing to accept his death as part of his desire to



Day four of Pachinko: Ichimura descending the Ramp Route on the west side of Denali's south buttress, after climbing the Isis Face on the east side of the buttress. The Slovak Direct, perhaps Denali's hardest route and the team's next objective, rises above for 9,000' on the south face. Circles indicate bivvy sites. *Katsutaka Yokoyama*

only in our second Alaska season and didn't know about "regular conditions." All we knew was that we should try.

After summiting Mt. Hunter we descended the West Ridge route. A climber at the landing strip asked us, "Why?" Although most climbers seem to think it better to rappel the route from the top of the buttress, it felt natural to continue to the summit and to descend the West Ridge. As it turned out, the most memorable part of Mt. Hunter wasn't climbing the buttress or even the summit; it was the difficult downclimb of the ridge.

I think the true value of climbing exists not in technical difficulties and grades, but in commitment. Climbing is painting our thoughts on the big canvas of the mountains. We modern climbers are well equipped, have good technique, and detailed information. But are we facing the mountain with the same enthusiasm as the great pioneers?

In 2007 Tatsuro, Itchy, and Yusuke (I was injured and had to stay home) used the same

realize his ambitions. Death is never an acceptable ideal for a Japanese alpine climber, so we can't literally live like a Shi-Shi. But the Shi-Shi way of life and spirit are always in our dreams. It is difficult to explain. Speaking for myself, life and climbing are not only about success or enjoyment, but about living true to one's ambitions. I think that the line on Huntington was the first time I fully lived these feelings. Although our route was not so hard, it was important to us that we found the line by ourselves, not in a guidebook. We named it Shi-Shi.

We then flew to the Kahiltna Glacier to climb the Diamond on Denali's 2,500-meter southwest face. We were drawn to the line of dihedrals and ice runnels and only learned the name of the route—and that we had made its third ascent—after we returned to Talkeetna.

Following those two routes, the idea began to grow.

In 2006 we climbed a new route, Before the Dawn, on the north face of Broken Tooth, and then made the third ascent of Deprivation on Mt. Hunter's north buttress. Climbers told us that conditions were bad on Hunter. But Itchy and I were



Ichimura leading a brilliant runnel just below the first ice band on the Slovak Direct. *Katsutaka Yokoyama*



Sato leading the first crux of the Slovak Direct. *Katsutaka Yokoyama*



Ichimura entering the heart of the Slovak Direct, day six of the enchainment. *Katsutaka Yokoyama*

style for three routes in the Ruth Glacier: Season of the Sun on the south-east face of Mt. Bradley, Memorial Gate on the north face of Mt. Church, and the Ladder Tube on the north face of Mt. Johnson.

Despite our inexperience, we discovered that even Alaska Grade 6 routes were within our ability. Shi-Shi and Giri-Giri Boys came to have the same meaning in my mind. And at home we continued to expand our experience and to embody our spirits with our climbing. So what next? Our aim for Alaska in 2008 was easy to imagine: we would enchain great routes in a single alpine-style push in the same manner as our usual winter climbing in Japan: Pachinko.



Itchy, Yusuke, and I flew to the Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier on April 21, after climbing the Bear Tooth [new route: Climbing is Believing (4,100', Alaska Grade 6, 5.10a M7R A1+, Ichimura-Sato-Yokoyama), see report in Climbs & Expeditions]. Tatsuro and Yuto arrived from the Ruth Glacier the next day and started their acclimatization. We saw them off and enjoyed lazy days at the landing strip. After attempting the Moonflower Buttress on Mt. Hunter (we retreated after the Bibler Come Again Exit on day two), we joined them at Camp 3 on the West Buttress route of Denali to acclimatize. We talked about a beautiful link-up of the Kahiltna Peaks to the Cassin Ridge. Tats and Yuto considered the idea and decided to go for it. They left Ski Hill on May 10.

The weather remained unstable. We assumed 10 days for our own



Below the notorious Big Bertha serac, but above the crux on the Slovak Direct, the team spent their sixth night. The glacier below is the East Fork of the Kahiltna. *Katsutaka Yokoyama*

Pachinko, starting with the 7,200-foot Isis Face, then descending the lower 4,300 feet of the Ramp Route into the East Fork of the Kahiltna, and finally climbing the Slovak Direct on the south face of Denali. It seemed unreasonable to expect 10 days of good weather in Alaska, but we could not hesitate anymore. On May 11 we flew to the West Fork of the Ruth and started climbing.

The Isis Face looked bigger than we expected. It followed an elegant ice arête that was not terribly difficult but was so impressive. We completed the route in three days of simul-climbing, including 24 hours of sitting out snowfall. The route was straightforward and its location superb. The only mishap was my losing my sunglasses, which became serious in the strong Alaskan sunshine.

Atop the route on May 13, we followed the south buttress to the north until we intersected the Ramp Route and began our descent. It was the most worrisome part of our plan because of crevasses and avalanches. The Ramp Route was only rated Alaska Grade 3 and 55 degrees, but it felt far more serious than the other routes, especially with our heavy packs.

We arrived at the bottom of the south face early in the afternoon of May 14, with six days of food and fuel. It seemed enough. We had not seen anybody else since starting the Isis, and we were alone on the East Fork. The serac "Big Bertha" loomed over the cirque, and the 9,000-foot Slovak Direct rose overhead. Although the route was technically difficult, we would climb pitch by pitch. Our only anxieties were about weather, objective danger, and our own carelessness.

On the morning of May 15 we crossed the bergschrund and simul-climbed the opening slopes and ramps toward the first crux (WI6). The wall grew steeper as we climbed higher, but



Ichimura leading the last crux on the Slovak Direct. *Katsutaka Yokoyama*

the ice was stable, and we alternated leading. While the followers were troubled by jumaring with heavy packs, the leader fully enjoyed his climbing on excellent ice pitches. We found a peg left by the first ascensionists. Although they employed a heavy style with fixed ropes, it would have been enough simply to touch the unknown terrain. We consoled ourselves by climbing in better style.

My snow-blinded eyes took a turn for the worse on the second day of the Slovak Direct. I had to give up leading after two pitches and was forced to follow as a third man. We discussed the situation and decided to continue, climbing toward the crux, though we could not retreat if we pushed higher. Itchy led a WI6 pitch with only two ice screws and Yusuke smoothly led a 5.9X rock pitch. Their fine leading proved decisive to our success. We slipped out of the crux before sunset.

The next day, May 17, the wall suddenly eased in steepness above the mixed section beside Big Bertha, near the intersection with the Cassin Ridge. There we found fresh footsteps on a snowpatch. The steps detoured around rock and continued to the upper slopes. We thought they might be Tatsuro's and Yuto's. They had completed the traverse of the Kahiltna Peaks, continued through here along the Cassin, and then toward the summit. "We must follow them," we

said. The next morning we headed for the top, gasping for breath. We summited at 12:30 p.m. on May 18 in whiteout conditions, then headed down the West Buttress.

On the upper Cassin we had followed the traces of our friends Tatsuro and Yuto. Their line was beautiful, "too beautiful," according to one climber. I wanted to tell them, "Great job!" But Tatsuro and Yuto never returned.



Five months later in Nepal, I walked down the glacier below the north face of Kangtega, looking back up at the face where we had been defeated. There were many reasons for our defeat, but to tell the truth, I had feared the wall. Tatsuro and Yuto had intended to be with me. I couldn't stop feeling uneasy on Kangtega, and I worried about Itchy and Yusuke on Kalanka's north face [see p. 32]. They had departed for India a month earlier, and I didn't know how they were. My feelings prove that I'm in a process of maturing. I have climbed rather rashly, and I cannot avoid thinking about the death of my friends or myself.

In the 2008 American Alpine Journal, Tatsuro wrote, "To carry on in my climbing life, I need to find a meaning for death in the mountains. It's a part of climbing, also a part of life." I still have many such problems to solve. It is surely the same for my friends in the Giri-Giri Boys.

#### SUMMARY:

AREA: Denali National Park, Central Alaska Range

ASCENTS: Pachinko on Denali (20,320', Alaska Grade 7, 5.9 AI5+ M6+), enchainment of two Alaska Grade 6 routes: Isis Face (7,200', Alaska Grade 6, M4 5.8 A1 60°, Stutzman-Tackle, 1982) to the south buttress; descent via the lower 4,300' of the Ramp Route (9,300', Alaska Grade 3, 55°, Kajiura-Nakamura-Nishimura, 1965); and ascent of the Slovak Direct (9,000', Alaska Grade 6, 5.9X WI6, Adam-Korl-Krivo, 1984) on the south face of Denali. May 11–18, 2008, Fumitaka Ichimura, Yusuke Sato, and Katsutaka Yokoyama.

Attempted enchainment: West (12,835') and East (13,440') Kahiltna Peaks to the Cassin Ridge on Denali, May 2008, Yuto Inoue and Tatsuro Yamada. They got high on the Cassin, perhaps completing the route after traversing the Kahiltna Peaks. In May 2009 their bodies were discovered at 19,800 feet, between the upper West Buttress and Cassin Ridge.

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Katsutaka Yokoyama, 30, was born in Kanagawa, Japan. In recent years his expeditions have taken him to Alaska, the Andes, and the Himalaya, but he especially loves the mountains of Japan.*

*Translated by Tsunemichi Ikeda.*



The Giri-Giri Boys, from left to right: Yokoyama, Ichimura, Inoue, Yamada, and Sato. *Katsutaka Yokoyama*