

California Mountaineering Club

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Trip Report: Middle Palisade

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By Sam Page

Solid alpine granite, perfect névé, and a casual descent. None of this would describe the conditions encountered on the Northeast Face of Middle Palisade over Memorial Day weekend. But we had just the right cast of characters to lift six out of seven onto the 14,040 foot summit.

In approximate order of appearance on the summit:

Matt Haynes – the disillusioned molecular biologist with a penchant for bold climbing at altitude;

Jack Cronk – the seasoned trip leader who is known to deflect falling rocks with his kneecaps;

Tom Ritchie – a man who puts the "old" in "old school," and who once bet a friend that he couldn't eat ten pounds of potatoes in one sitting, and lost;

Alex Wright – our own Dr. Jekyll (the polite pastor by week) and Mr. Hyde (who sets the trail ablaze at week end, and whose area code, by the way, is 666, which in this case is literally the number of the priest);

Jan Lorenzen – overheard singing "happy birthday" into a cell phone at 13,000 feet, she has been described as having "the best axe you'll ever see on a grandma" (I think that's how I heard it);

Greg Gerlach – who added yet another peak to his list of over 200 climbed in the high Sierra, but who tragically lost his victory dinner to an unknown beneficiary, possibly a marmot. On the bright side, at least the furry fiend didn't add insult to injury by urinating in the victim's sleeping bag, which, amusing as it may sound to the uninitiated, once happened to the last person on our list;

Sam Page – who balked at the final 50 feet of 5th class climbing just to make everyone else feel that much better about their accomplishment.

Act 1: The Uhaul

The seven of us awoke in or around our respective vehicles at the North Fork trailhead parking lot at 6am on Saturday. To the initial bewilderment of us all, Alex had arrived in a Uhaul, perhaps the most underestimated and overlooked of mountaineering accouterments. After saying farewell to Chris Jain (who always seems to be in the parking lot, regardless of where you are), Alex shuttled us over to the South Fork trailhead, re-parked, and then ran back.

Act 2: The Stream Crossing

Our first obstacle was the stream crossing at about one mile in. Solving the problem required several committing moves on at least one partially submerged rock and a

tenuously stuck tree trunk, with a nasty landing in swiftly flowing, knee-deep ice water. I resorted to aiding it with two long ski poles and a desperate lunge onto a tree branch, along with lots of stalling and whimpering. Jan, being a bit bolder and consequently colder, free-soled it (that is, she went barefoot). Greg stealthily opted for a line further upstream, which he managed to keep secret. [The potential for new route development in the area seems vast, with anything from totally submerged swimming (bring your pack cover) to full on aid-crossing with "bridging".]

Act 3: The Frozen Finger

Shortly after the stream crossing we began zig-zagging uphill, on and off the partially snow-covered trail. We soon left the trail entirely and followed snow to ledges above Brainerd Lake and ultimately to our base camp at the almost completely frozen Finger Lake. After arriving at approximately two o'clock, we spent the afternoon napping, chatting, and slowly preparing for Sunday. The only other people in the area were two backpackers who, to our slight horror, were wandering around, dropping their packs, and standing right next to each other in the middle of the frozen lake.

Act 4: The Climb

We awoke at 4:30am and were off in our crampons by 5:45am. We followed snow to a frozen tarn several hundred feet above, and then contoured around and up, entirely on snow, to the bergschrund just below the main couloir on the Northeast Face. In order to access the couloir directly, it is necessary to cross the schrund and ascend a steep, icy chimney. While Alex was leading over the schrund, Jan, Greg, and I, waiting 20 feet below, heard and felt an alarming "whoomp" somewhere underfoot. Without delay, the three of us bolted down the slope and left Alex, Jack, Tom, and Matt to the direct start. Jack lead the twenty-foot cascading ice chimney and belayed the others up with a 40 meter, 8mm rope that Tom had presciently packed (no harnesses). While they were navigating this bottleneck and starting up the wide couloir, Jan, Greg, and I descended to below the buttress (climber's) left of the direct start, then climbed steep snow in between the buttress and the glacial moraine. We passed an alluring ramp on the right, but kept going in search of a lower-angled ramp above (thanks for the advice, Chris). Approximately 300 feet above the first ramp and 200 feet above the top of the moraine ridge, we discovered the low angled ramp leading gently up to the right, allowing access to the buttress. We followed the easy ramp for about 100 feet, where it ended in a moderately steep, snow-filled gully. We crossed deep, unconsolidated (and scary) snow with a poor runout below, then ascended loose ledges on the right side of the gully. After approximately 200 feet we exited right to a narrow saddle between a prominent gendarme and the slope, thereby merging with the main, wide couloir (~13,000 feet, ~9:00am). Looking into this adjacent couloir to the right I was surprised to see the four others just a few yards below.

From this *brèche* (as they say in the French Alps) between the gendarme and the mountain proper, we ascended a 45° rock rib on the left for several hundred feet until the rocks disappeared under an unaccommodating snow slope. From here we traversed right on miserable snow, just above a disquieting bare ice step, to the rocks on the right side of the couloir. We followed these steeper and looser rocks for several hundred feet to where

the couloir split. Though a few of us were drawn into the right-hand couloir, we eventually all traversed into the left-hand couloir, again over disconcertingly unconsolidated snow in which our spike-banging self-belays provided no more than a true sense of insecurity. We climbed the dangerously loose 3rd class rock on the right side of this (left-hand) couloir for several hundred feet to the saddle on the narrow, exposed summit ridge (~14,000 feet, ~12:00pm). From here, Matt and Jack soloed south for twenty feet on either side of a huge block on the ridge to the base of the final summit tower. Jan, Alex, Greg, and Tom were belayed to the base of the tower, all opting for the less exposed left side of the ridge. From their perch, Matt took the sharp end, fastened it into a snug bowline-on-a-coil, and heroically sailed up the twenty feet of low 5th class rock while Jack provided a hip-belay. After setting one of Tom's ancient nuts (far above the crux moves below of course), Matt meandered up on 4th class terrain to the summit. With upper body clad only in a T-shirt, Matt proceeded to hip-belay Tom, Alex, Jan, and Greg, one after the other. While Tom was relishing these retro-techniques necessitated by the surprisingly steep summit pitch, Jack took it one step further (back) and simply soloed up and down.

Act 5: The Descent

While all of this was going on, I was reminiscing about the rock-fall that had bonked my helmet and grazed my back on the final stretch, and decided the experience wasn't worth repeating. Thus I started picking my way back down the couloir well ahead of the others. Upon reaching the first prolonged snow field, I decided that instead of traversing the nasty snow into more loose, steep rock, I would just go for it. Going for it, in this case, meant stepping out onto the unconsolidated snow in the middle of the couloir and committing to several hundred feet of plunge-stepping. To my relief, the snow held, and I descended to just above (what I previously called) the disquieting bare ice step in a matter of minutes. After some tricky downclimbing around the step, I again made the committing steps out onto the snow field below and began power plunging down. This time I slipped a few times, once sliding for about forty feet before self-arresting. In no time I was back at the *brèche*, where I waited anxiously for the others to pick, plunge-step, and slide their way down. From the *brèche*, we opted to descend the way Jan, Greg, and I had ascended (skier's right), which was thought to be easier and safer than the direct start (skier's left). The final major obstacle was the dicey traverse across the lower couloir through waist deep, unconsolidated snow, just twenty feet above steep chutes and ledges, to the safety of the ramp. From the bottom of the ramp we glissaded and retraced our steps through the snow all the way back to camp, where we arrived at approximately 6pm.

Act 6: The Hike Out

Aside from the stream crossing, there is only one other part of the hike out worth mentioning, which will bring us full circle. Alex, after disappearing ahead on the trail, was waiting for us at the trailhead with the Uhaul, with which he shuttled our weary group back to the North Fork parking lot. From there we dispersed, each back into his/her respective life, from the wonderfully cohesive and congenial team that we were on Middle Palisade.

