

## Spring in the Tetons

by Sam Page

It was early June 1996, though it still looked like winter in the Tetons. The mountains were nestled below an undulating blanket of snow tucked snugly under chins of towering granite faces that were peaked with frosted swirly nightcaps. The blanket draped nearly to the valley floor, but was receding and shrinking every day, awakening the mountains from their winter slumber. Spring was in the air and you could hear the mountains melting. Everywhere was the sound of trickling, sometimes gushing, water. And I was in the spring of my life, and the sight of these majestic peaks inexplicably made my blood pump, my mind race, and my spirit soar. Why I did not know, nor at that time did I care. The beginning of a climbing season in the Tetons in my mid-twenties was no time for contemplative introspection: it was a time for action.

My first act was to be an attempt on Mt. Owen. During an earlier summer in the Tetons, which served as my introduction to mountaineering, I had climbed Teewinot, South Teton, Middle Teton, and the Grand Teton, so Mt. Owen seemed like a logical next step. At just under 13,000 feet, Mt. Owen is the second highest peak in the range, though it is often regarded as the most difficult to climb. Unlike the Grand, there is no herd path to the base of the technical difficulties, nor the corresponding herds. These factors made the prospect of a spring ascent all the more exciting. It felt bold to a couple of fledgling mountaineers.

My partner for the climb was Sean. We had met while working at a restaurant in Yellowstone a few summers back. At first glance, we were an unlikely pair. I was about a foot taller than Sean. But whatever Sean lacked in stature, he made up for in projected self-confidence. He may have been small, but he had a big presence. Unlike most of our co-workers who enjoyed binge drinking at the employee pub (which was our employer's means of recouping wages), we enjoyed taking twenty-mile hikes to remote wilderness peaks in addition to binge drinking. Sean also had a predilection for hiking in the buff, preferably in grizzly country, but thankfully chose to do that solo. Neither Sean nor I had any formal training in mountaineering. We had picked up what we knew from books, random partners, and trial and error. Our last outing had been a frigid winter slog up Mt. Elbert, the highest peak in Colorado, which had blackened Sean's cheeks with frostbite. He was eager for me.

Despite our limited experience, or perhaps because of it, our sights were set on Mt. Owen as we shouldered our packs at Lupine Meadows and started up. Our packs were heavy. We had, among other things, a beefy four-season tent, sleeping bags, sleeping pads, cooking equipment, crampons, ice axes, 50 meters of thick rope, assorted rock climbing gear, various articles of warm clothing, and a collapsible shovel. And we were wearing plastic mountaineering boots. As a climbing partner would later say, "one pound on the feet is like five in the pack." If correct, about ten more pounds could be added to my already obese pack weight. To make matters worse (actually much worse when we got to the technical rock climbing), my boots were about two sizes too big. Finding no boots in

my size in stock, the salesman had unctuously assured me that oversized plastics would be better. Perhaps on Denali, but not in the Tetons, I later realized.

After an hour of hiking, the trail disappeared under snow and we crunched our way uphill and through the woods to Amphitheater Lake, 3000 vertical feet above the trailhead. This marked the highpoint of my only prior attempt on Mt. Owen. Mike (another binge-drinking colleague from Yellowstone) and I had turned around there when at the moment it began snowing, a crucial, albeit tiny, screw popped out of my glasses and landed in a perfect camouflage of glistening sand and grit on the shore. Lacking the resolve for the heightened adversity to come, we retreated to the safety of the employee pub. Sean and I, however, were poised and positively eager for the adversity that was just about to begin.

From the lake, we had to descend several hundred feet into Glacier Gulch, and then climb another 1000 feet to our planned campsite on the Teton Glacier. The usual descent from the lake follows contouring ledges which minimize the elevation loss. Unfortunately, these ledges were snow-covered and appeared treacherous. We opted instead to descend a moderately steep couloir that dropped down toward the frozen Delta Lake. Slightly handicapped by my unwieldy pack, I stepped cautiously down the steep couloir, worried both about triggering an avalanche and having to self-arrest with a huge pack. Midway down, I suddenly plunged waist-deep through the surface and emitted a wail as my legs crashed painfully into rock underneath and my body lurched forward under the weight of the pack. My first concern was that I would topple over and accelerate head-first down the gully. Firmly wedged in the crevice, I then worried that an ankle had been sprained or a knee torn. To my relief, everything felt fine and I yelled up to Sean, who was monitoring my progress above with a hint of annoyance, that I was ok. After extracting myself from the hole with some difficulty, I moved even more cautiously downward, only to repeat the jarring maneuver once more. From the bottom of the couloir, we ascended a broad snowfield and crossed imperceptibly onto the Teton Glacier. There we dropped our burdens, established camp, and began reconnoitering the next day's route up the Koven Couloir, which was curiously devoid of tracks. Would ours be the first ascent of the season?

At 2AM the alarm sounded, and we began the cycle of melting snow and hydrating. I was a vigilant proponent of multiple rounds of hot drinks before an alpine start, a ritual which later earned me the uncreative nickname "Hot Drinks". This was slightly more dignified than the various nicknames I had earned in college, which invariably had something to do with the cold drinks to which I had a gluttonous proclivity. In my defense, none other than Don Whillans, the legendary British alpinist, claimed that heavy drinking is superb training for mountaineering, because the ensuing hangover closely simulates what one feels at altitude – nausea, headaches, soreness, lethargy, dizziness, and ill temper. In college, I routinely "trained" until 4AM, but now at 4AM we were crunching to the base of the Koven Couloir, cold sober with nervous anticipation.

By the light of our headlamps, we began cramponing unroped up the firm snow of the couloir. About two hundred feet up, the angle bulged steeply in a section of ice interspersed with rock. Planting the pick of the axe into the ice after several hard swings,

then kicking the fangs of my crampons onto progressively higher perches, I thought something like, "wow, this is the real deal, be careful". Panning into the dark gloom above, the headlamp revealed about ten more feet of steep climbing. Suddenly, Sean, who was about fifty feet below, yelled "falling!", and through my legs I watched in horror as the light of his headlamp rapidly receded and spun down the slope with him tumbling along with it. Was Sean ok? What should I do? Balanced precariously in the middle of the crux section, I was in no position to remain stationary. An unfamiliar and quite unpleasant taste crept into the back of my mouth. Not wanting to repeat Sean's feat, I picked and kicked my way up the ice, trying to stay completely focused. Gaining easier ground above, I turned in relief to see Sean's headlamp, presumably powered by a resilient Sean, steadily progressing up the couloir. Reaching me, Sean was seemingly unphased by what had appeared to be a violent tumble. Thus, we continued up the couloir, a little more apprehensive than before.

Though moderate, the angle of the couloir was unrelenting, never allowing us to rest our burning calves. We were, with each step, counting more and more on a rest at the top of the couloir. When, after much anticipation, I finally front-pointed to the crest of the couloir and peered over, I was alarmed to find that the top of the couloir was not a wide saddle on which we could sprawl out and relax, but a knife-edge snow ridge that plummeted down the other side in a sweeping expanse of snow and rock that terminated several thousand feet below in Cascade Canyon. There would be no resting here. Disappointed, we continued up steep unconsolidated snow which covered what in summer would be a 5<sup>th</sup> class rock band. With crampons scraping for purchase on snow-concealed rock, and ice axe spikes banging jarringly into the same, we ascended to a low-angled terrace where we panted and regrouped. As day broke, we bore sole witness as two snowboarders gracefully carved their way down from the Grandstand (the prominent shoulder on the north side of the Grand Teton), glided across crevasses on the Teton Glacier, and continued out of sight down the canyon.

From there, we traversed the steep snowfields below the rocky east ridge until the snow ended in steep rock. There we shed our crampons and roped up. I had never led rock in plastic mountaineering boots, and found ample opportunity to curse the salesman who had sold me the oversized behemoths. The pitch, which would be mellow 5.2 rock climbing in late summer, was complicated by a coating of dripping snow and ice. After a lead that probably felt like eons for Sean, I hurriedly rigged an anchor, pulled in the slack, and yelled, "on belay". To my consternation, Sean yelled back, "I think I'm going to throw up. I want to go down." His earlier tumble, coupled with the altitude, not to mention growing concern about the descent, had begun to exact its toll. Damn. We were only one pitch from the summit. How disappointing to be so close and turn around. Sean had developed a fever that was conflicting with my summit fever. I thought for a moment, and then yelled, "wait ten minutes and see how you feel." Sean wearily responded "ok". I waited anxiously. After a few minutes, Sean hollered up, "climbing", and I breathed a big sigh of relief.

After reuniting, we followed ledges around the back of the summit block, and I began leading up the final rock pitch to the summit. Pulling over a ledge onto what was

presumably the summit, I was dismayed to find myself on a slender pinnacle that was separated from the actual summit by several feet. I briefly considered jumping the span, but reason prevailed and I grudgingly downclimbed to regain the normal route. We summited at 11AM. There we gazed in wide wonder at the spectacular alpine playground surrounding us. The jagged summit of Teewinot, which seems so ethereal from the valley, was far below our feet to the east, while the dark north face of the Grand confronted us ominously to the south. As I scoped out north face routes on the Grand, Sean took stock of his body and shot me a glance that jolted me back to this tiny summit which had to be vacated and fast. The reason we had started up at 4AM was so we could retrace our steps before all of the steep snow softened in the sun and became avalanche prone. But I had taken far too long leading the final rock pitches, while the sun had wasted no time. A couple of rappels from the summit deposited us onto the snow of the upper snowfields and confirmed our fears: the snow was as soft as cotton candy.

With each traversing step, we sent small avalanches sliding down the snowfield until they vanished abruptly over the abyss one hundred feet below. This was dangerous. I procrastinated by meditating on something I had read to the effect that most mountaineering accidents occur during the learning phase. Sean and I were presently positioned smack dab in the middle of the learning phase. "Sam!", interrupted Sean, "let's rope up and simul-climb across the snowfields." Sean took the lead and placed gear in the rocks to our left. After a few rope-lengths, we came to the end of the rocks and were left staring down a steep, blank snowfield, which a few hundred feet below was cleaved by the unaccommodating knife-edge snow ridge. With the simplicity of Occam's Razor, two possibilities stared back at us. Either we would descend to the right of the razor and find ourselves on the Teton Glacier, or we would unintentionally be swept to the left of the razor and lose ourselves in Cascade Canyon. We were hoping for the former.

Lacking proper snow anchors, we established dubious belay stances by digging a bucket for one's rump and stamping out a platform for the feet. The belayer would then clip into his ice axe which was buried to the hilt behind him. Sitting there belaying Sean as he waded down the steep section above Occam's Razor, I dreaded at every moment hearing a "whoosh" as the surrounding slope slid away with me in tow. But it never happened. Gaining the knife-edge ridge, Sean straddled it and prepared to belay me down. Once I got into the steepest and least consolidated section, I realized that a slip would send me sliding down to the left of Occam's Razor. Concerned that this was a very real possibility, I dramatically yelled instructions to Sean recollected from some mountaineering book: "If I fall to the left of the crest, jump down the other side." Pause. "Are you crazy!?", Sean screamed in reply. "No way, just don't fall!" I didn't. Soon we were both straddling the knife-edge and nervously contemplating our descent of the Koven Couloir. We decided that I would lead down, placing protection along the way. About twenty feet down, I reached high to place two pieces in a crack on the couloir's side, forgetting that Sean, being one foot shorter, would have great difficulty retrieving them.

When the rope ran out, I set up an anchor and began belaying Sean down. Arriving at the first placement, Sean realized it was far out of reach and barked a reproach in my general direction. When, after ten minutes, he had exhausted all civilized means of fetching the protection, he resorted to loudly cursing me while furiously clawing and desperately lunging at the gear. Somehow he got it out and continued down. After retrieving the remainder of the gear, Sean, who was now totally fed up with our tedious and treacherous descent, angrily untied from the rope while muttering something and began plodding down to face his nemesis: the steep bottom of the couloir down which he had tumbled twelve hours prior.

Sean disappeared down the (skier's) left side of the couloir, which was not the way we had come up. I was very worried about downclimbing the steep lower section, and contemplated my fate as I coiled the sopping wet rope. I followed Sean's tracks apprehensively. Though the downclimbing was steep, I took it step by step, kicking firm, albeit shallow, platforms into the surprisingly well-consolidated slush of the crux section. Below the crux, I breathed a deep sigh of relief, and turned to see the tent some two hundred feet below. Gaiters, gloves, boots, crampons and other gear lay in unattended disarray outside the tent. Sean was inside slurping something from the pot. He was exhausted, and we would be staying another night, contrary to plan. Sean was grateful as I tidied up his gear, and invited me to finish the ramen noodle soup. In his haste, Sean had not cleaned the morning's lingering oatmeal from the pot, so I was presented with an unappetizing stew made all the less appealing by several strands of floating hair which had obviously not bothered Sean in his dissipated state.

I do not remember the rest of that night, which suggests that it was uneventful. But I clearly and distinctly remember Sean's first steps out of the tent the following morning. Sean's ankle was badly injured and could not be weighted with impunity. With him standing there like a flamingo, we grimly surveyed the two heavy backpacks worth of gear that needed to be hauled 4000 vertical feet down to Lupine Meadows. We were to have a very long day on our hands. Literally.

Since lowering our gear at  $9.8 \text{ m/s}^2$ , our preference, was out of the question, we divided the gear according to fitness. Sean took the sleeping pads and extra clothing – basically everything that was soft and light. I took the wet rope, both sleeping bags, both pairs of crampons, all of the climbing gear, the cooking gear, the shovel, and the tent – basically everything that was either heavy or made of metal. It took over an hour to get everything in and on my pack. Our next task was to descend the moderately angled snow slope just below the Teton Glacier. I decided to glissade it. Not wanting to go into an uncontrolled slide with eighty pounds on my back, I self-arrested frequently. Each time I rolled over to do so, the crampons would flop in between the slope and my shoulder, stabbing the latter painfully.

When we gazed up the couloir we had descended into Glacier Gulch two days prior, we were faced with a decision. Either climb up the couloir and head back the way we came, or continue down the trail-less Glacier Gulch until it intersected the trail far below. The short-term advantage of continuing down Glacier Gulch was that about 500 vertical feet

of climbing up the couloir could be avoided, not to mention the hidden crevices that had plagued me. The disadvantage was that we had no idea what would be encountered in Glacier Gulch. We gambled and began plodding down Glacier Gulch into the unknown.

As we limped and grunted down Glacier Gulch, we found ourselves walking across a remarkably flat section. "So far, so good", I thought. Somewhere off in the distance of my mind alarm bells were ringing. They suddenly became deafening as Sean asked, "Isn't there a lake around here somewhere?" We were walking straight across the frozen Delta Lake – not a safe place to venture during the spring thaw. After a few heart-pounding moments, we were off the lake and shaking our heads at our stupidity.

Further down we confronted an unavoidable talus field that was covered by a thin veneer of snow. Every step sent my foot plunging awkwardly and painfully through the snow and into spaces between the talus, as I flailed wildly to keep my top-heavy frame in balance. After a few such steps, I resorted to sitting on my butt and creeping crablike over the talus. I don't know how Sean managed. After what seemed like an age, we reached the edge of the forest and the end of that damned talus field. Our regained composure was quickly lost as we encountered a new obstacle: deadfall. Battered by volleys of rock and snow avalanches over the years, the forest was a densely tangled lattice of fallen, splintered trees. The going was extremely slow. Every fifteen feet or so, I had to muscle off the monstrous pack and push it over a log, sending it crashing into the brush on the other side. After climbing over or under the obstruction, I would heave the pack on with a moan, only to repeat the process shortly thereafter. This went on for hours. Occasionally, Sean would wail and tip over into the underbrush, massaging his ankle for a few moments. I would ask if he was ok, offer some optimistic words, and he would haul himself back up, wincing in pain.

Our plan was to follow a particular bearing until we intersected the trail. Executing our plan required frequent use of map and compass and involved language that would have made Andrew Dice Clay blush. Our plan worked, and after a few hours of thrashing and cursing, we found ourselves stepping onto the trail. We immediately collapsed and laid there for at least thirty minutes. We were thoroughly disheveled and any exposed skin was raked with bloody scratches. One hiker passed us in silence without making eye contact, as if we were a couple of drunks panhandling on the sidewalk. From there, we stumbled down the trail to Sean's car at Lupine Meadows.

We had started the climbing season off with a bang. If this was to set the tone for the rest of the season, we were in for it. Sean deposited me at the Grand Teton Climber's Ranch, where we bid farewell and stepped into our own futures, whose courses had not been unaltered by our experience. Instead of driving back to his cabin in Yellowstone, Sean drove to the hospital where he learned that he had broken his ankle and badly bruised two ribs. I, on the other hand, had plenty to talk about with my new acquaintances at the Climber's Ranch, including Paul, the caretaker whose snowboard descent from the Grandstand had not gone unnoticed.

Sean and I would do two more climbs together that summer. One was an unsuccessful attempt on the remote Mt. Wister. We got caught in a hailstorm high on the mountain and had to do some dangerous downclimbing over wet slabs to get off. The descent down the trail-less Avalanche Canyon found us bushwhacking with heavy packs once again, this time in a downpour. Once we discovered that Mt. Wister was named after Owen Wister, we jokingly vowed thereafter to avoid any mountain whose name had the vaguest association with the word "Owen". We also vowed to avoid bushwhacking.

Our next and final climb together was the Petzoldt Ridge on the Grand. Sean took two short lead falls on the second pitch, with me nervously eyeing my single-sling belay anchor. That settled it for Sean. After the climb he announced that he was done with mountaineering, and would focus on flyfishing, with the occasional nude ramble in grizzly country thrown in for good measure. But for me, these peaks still made my blood pump, my mind race, and my spirit soar, and I was determined to spend every moment that remained in that glorious window of freedom upping the ante in the Tetons.