

John M. Bachar III

March 23, 1957 - July 5, 2009

July 9, 2009

The Bachar family is deeply and profoundly saddened by John's death. His passion for climbing and respect for the mountain never ceased. He was known to say that if the mountain took him it would be the way he wanted to go. As sad as his untimely death is, we try to take some solace in that. His passion and dedication to climbing was an inspiration to all of us; we are proud of his incredible accomplishments. It is a great comfort to know that he was not only loved as a climbing legend, but also as a beloved friend to so many. Our heartfelt thanks to the many, many who have extended their sympathies and personal stories regarding their association with John.

Sincerely,

John, Jr. (father), Tyrus (son), Val (Tyrus' Mom), Dan (brother), Michele (sister), Yvonne (stepmom)

John Bachar, climbing legend.

The acclaimed rock climber and free soloist John Bachar, 52, died Sunday, July 5, in an unroped fall while climbing on the Dike Wall near his home in Mammoth Lakes, California. Bachar was one of rock climbing's greatest pioneers, a visionary, whose strict code of climbing ethics, which included free soloing and respect for the natural environment, influenced generations of climbers.

Bachar began climbing as a teenager around Los Angeles. After high school, he attended UCLA for a year studying and took classes in calculus, philosophy and other subjects in which he achieved high grades. The following June he went to Yosemite to follow his passion.

A natural on rock and highly disciplined - he could do a one-arm pull up while holding a 12.5 pound weight in his free hand - Bachar quickly rose through the ranks and began climbing ropeless in the early 1980s. His ascents included routes so difficult and dangerous-such as Yosemite's Nabisco Wall (5.11c) and New Dimensions (5.11a) - that even climbing's elite had to take pause. In 1981, Bachar issued a famous "bounty," offering \$10,000 to anyone who could keep up with him, ropeless, on the rock for a single day. There were no takers.

At the time of Bachar's boldest exploits, professional climbing didn't exist. Bachar, however, elevated the sport to the point where it gained national attention, and through spots in television commercials, product endorsements and even a feature about him in Rolling Stone, he became America's first real professional climber. During his nearly 30 years of soloing, Bachar estimated that he had climbed 1.5 million feet of rock without a rope, up to 5.13 rating in difficulty. He influenced rock climbing as much as Elvis steered modern music.

Bachar, for instance, climbed in calf-high tube socks and high-cut running shorts. Virtually overnight, climbers across the country adapted the same attire. But it was his actions and larger-than-life personality that changed how people climbed.

In the early 1980s when most climbers were caught up in the drug-inspired spiritual adventures left over from the 1970s, Bachar was way ahead of the curve to introduce training, diet and the study of mental and physical training - unheard of at the time. Crowds would gather to simply to watch him train in Yosemite's Camp 4 outdoor gym.

Although he suffered a broken neck in an auto accident in 2006, Bachar - a rock-shoe designer for the company Acopa, of which he was a part owner - trained himself back into fitness, and continued to solo at a high grade and designed rock shoes for the company Acopa, of which he was a part owner.

While the details of his fall may never be known, his death stunned the climbing community who considered him an icon, and, despite his constant flirts with danger, a responsible and safe climber. He is survived by his father, John, and son, Tyrus, 12. A petition has begun to ask President Obama to acknowledge Bachar's contributions and send a letter of condolence to the family. To participate, go to www.whitehouse.gov/contact/ For subject click "other," then write in your request.

Los Angeles Times

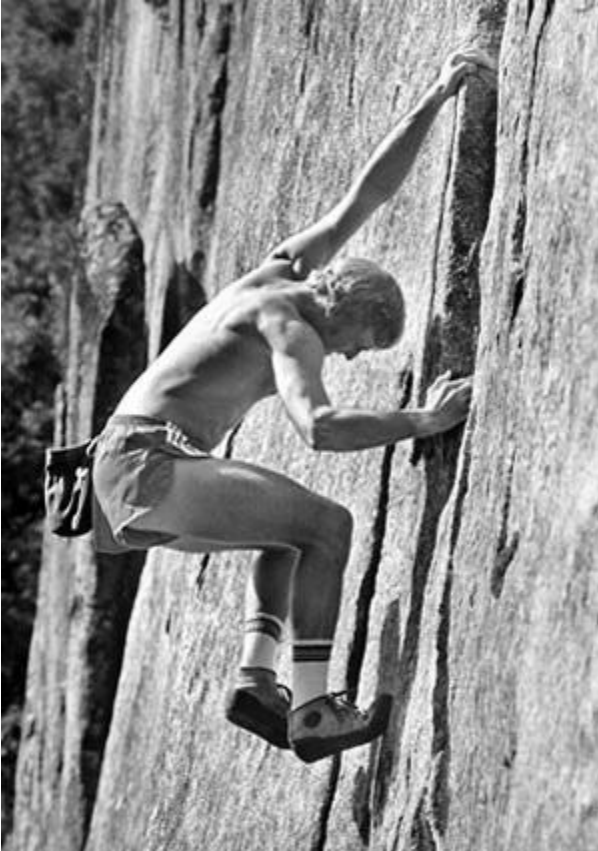
By Pete Thomas

July 8, 2009

John Bachar dies at 52; rock climber specialized in free-solo ventures

John Bachar climbs a 200-foot rock near Yosemite Valley in 1984, using no ropes.

Bachar climbed without ropes or nets and conquered dangerous routes in Yosemite and elsewhere.



John Bachar climbs a 200-foot rock near Yosemite Valley in 1984, using no ropes.

John Bachar, a legendary figure in the obscure and close-knit world of rock climbing, died Sunday after a fall near his home in Mammoth Lakes, Calif. He was 52.

Bachar perished after falling while climbing alone on Dike Wall outside Mammoth Lakes. Nearby climbers heard the fall and quickly reached Bachar, who was rushed to Mammoth Hospital, where he died shortly afterward from severe injuries.

Bachar, who was born in Los Angeles in 1957 and attended UCLA, became famous largely for his exploits as a free-soloist. The form of climbing he practiced was considered the most dangerous because it does not involve ropes or safety equipment.

That precarious chapter of Bachar's life began in the early 1970s when -- as part of a hotshot group of "stonemasters" frequenting Joshua Tree National Monument in the Southern California desert -- he was introduced to John Long, himself destined for superstardom.

Long persuaded Bachar to free-solo a 95-foot route called Double Cross, which had a degree of difficulty of 5.7-plus.

(Class 5.0 to 5.14 is for serious climbers. Bachar, in his prime, stopped scaling anything less than 5.10. Climbs are further delineated by letters, as in 5.11a, 5.11b and 5.11c, the latter being most difficult.)

Bachar scampered spider-like up Double Cross and soon became part of a seasonal pilgrimage to the Yosemite Valley and Camp 4, the historic center of the climbing universe.

There the climbers enjoyed a spartan existence but relished every moment of togetherness and the beacon call of sheer surroundings. They challenged themselves and shared stories around the campfire.

Bachar often was the subject of those stories. In 1976, after he free-soloed a 5.11a route in Yosemite called New Dimensions, news resonated throughout the climbing universe.

"People looked at me like I was very weird for a couple of months," Bachar recalled in April for an article in Colorado's Daily Camera newspaper. "They thought I was crazy or something."

Bachar is perhaps best known for his first ascent of the Bachar-Yerian (5.11c) route in Yosemite's Tuolumne Meadows, which he conquered with Dave Yerian in 1981.

That same year Bachar posted a note in Yosemite offering a "\$10,000 reward for anyone who can follow me for one full day." Nobody accepted the challenge.

Phil Bard, a friend of Bachar's and a renowned climbing photographer, recalled the days in the early 1980s when Bachar routinely scaled 5.10- and 5.11-rated routes.

"It was always breathtaking to see John gliding effortlessly upward on tiny knobs or with only the first knuckles of his fingers in a crack 100 feet off the ground.

"It took superior training and complete control over his mind-set to accomplish what he did, and in a way it is only a climber that can truly understand what he represented to the sport."

Bachar repeatedly acknowledged the danger of climbing without ropes. But he once described the feeling as addictive and like that of flying or being on another planet.

Bachar's most serious injury occurred during an automobile accident in 2006, while driving home from the Outdoor Retailer show in Salt Lake City. He suffered five fractured vertebrae and did not recover full mobility.

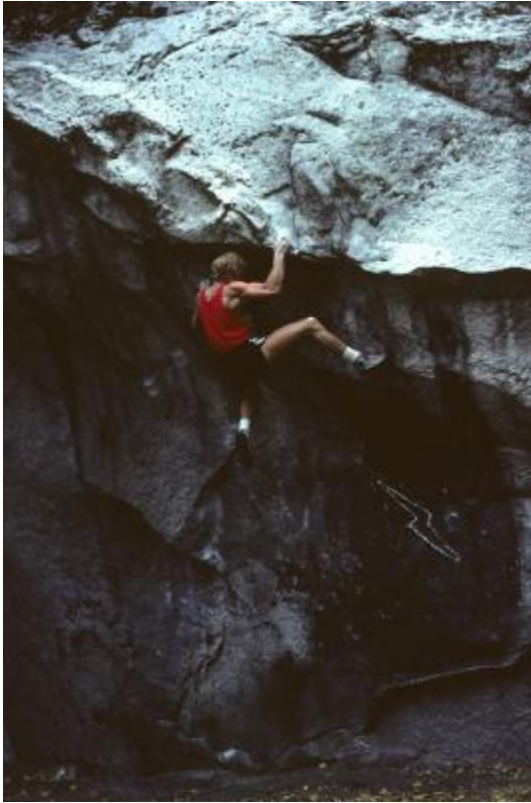
Bachar was single, and his survivors include a son, Tyrus. Services are still being planned, Bard said.

OUTPOSTS

GETTING THE MOST FROM THE GREAT OUTDOORS

[Climbing icon John Bachar dies after apparent Mammoth Lakes fall](#)

1:18 PM, July 6, 2009 --Pete Thomas



The climbing community mourns the death of free-soloing legend John Bachar, who died Sunday afternoon after an apparent fall at Dike Wall in Mammoth Lakes.

Details are sketchy and Outposts will update this item as more becomes known. Bachar, who was born in 1957, was famous largely for his accomplishments on difficult routes within Yosemite National Park.

He is survived by a young son named Tyrus.

On [John's website](#) is this passage:

"A true rock star as a teenager, Bachar soloed 5.11 when 5.12 did not yet exist ... then he did the first 5.12 in Yosemite Valley, bouldered ever climbed stronger than anyone. He refused to compromise his strong traditional style 'ground-up' ethics along the way."

Also posted are these respectful accolades: --John Long: "There has never been anyone like John Bachar, and there never will be again."

--Peter Croft: "Yosemite was THE place, Bachar was THE guy, that makes him more than just a climber."

--Rob Robinson: "John Bachar was unquestionably the greatest climber of our generation."

Below is a vintage video clip of John at work--very dangerous work.

Photo: John Bachar climbs Yosemite's Midnight Lightning in a photo that appeared in Climbing magazine. Credit: Phil Bard

John Bachar

American rock climber and leading exponent of the technique known as soloing

Ed Douglas

The Guardian, Friday 10 July 2009



John Bachar climbing without ropes. Photograph: Karl Bralich/peaklightimages.com

In the early 1980s, John Bachar, who has died in a climbing accident aged 52, found himself near the top of a rock climb in the Yosemite valley in California called the Moratorium. Four hundred feet off the ground and hanging from his fingertips, he faced an imminent death. He had deliberately chosen to climb with no rope, a technique called "soloing", on a route he had never experienced before. His decision was backfiring.

Bachar survived that time. Drawing on his high level of fitness, he pushed through his moment of crisis and reached safety, adding to his reputation as one of the boldest rock climbers in history. But he took little pride in it.

Recalling the incident recently, he said: "I felt hollow. I'd gotten away with something. I hadn't conquered anything. The mountain had just let me off."

For Bachar, soloing a climb in this way was the ultimate expression of his craft. Oscillating between overbearing egotism and humility, he made soloing seem both gloriously reckless and shrewdly calculating. His was not an easy trick to imitate and he never recommended anyone should try.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, the son of a maths professor, Bachar excelled in his youth as a pole-vaulter at the Santa Monica Track Club, coached by Joe Douglas, who later trained the Olympic medallist Carl Lewis. He discovered rock climbing at Stoney Point, an LA hangout for renowned 1950s climbers such as Yvon Chouinard, founder of the outdoor clothing company Patagonia. By the early 1970s, Bachar and his friends were calling themselves the Stonemasters.

His athletics background had switched him on to methodical, properly researched training methods. He wondered what might happen if a rock climber trained like that, and decided to find out. Together with a fellow Californian, John Long, Bachar started exploring further afield, particularly on the granite crags of Joshua Tree. It was here that Long introduced him to soloing, which Bachar quickly saw as the purist form of his new craft.

Determined, as he put it, to be the best rock climber in the world, Bachar dropped out of University College Los Angeles, where he was a maths major, and headed for Camp IV in the Yosemite valley, a kind of dirtbag Camelot for the knights of rock climbing.

Here, he set up a climbing gym which he named Gunsmoke, arranged among the campsite trees, including a hanging rope ladder which he would climb using only his arms. The apparatus is still known as a Bachar ladder. He took up the saxophone, buying his first instrument after a previous owner threatened to turn it into a bong, and would serenade climbers high on the big granite walls above Camp IV.

Devouring books such as Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Bachar worked on his flexibility until he could do the splits, and studied martial arts and Chinese philosophy to find the perfect state of mind in which to push the boundaries of what was possible. Despite the Californian froth, top climbers from around the world eagerly absorbed his approach and ideas.

In 1981, he was the first to ascend the bold Bachar-Yerian route on nearby Tuolumne Meadows, which was subsequently named after him and his colleague Dave Yerian. In 1986, Bachar and Peter Croft climbed the famous El Capitan and Half Dome cliffs in 14 hours, some 5,000ft of climbing.

Bachar was also famous for his ability at bouldering, a kind of haiku version of climbing where moves of intense difficulty, called problems, are done on short stretches of rock. The presiding American genius of this sub-genre was John Gill, and Bachar made a pilgrimage with Long to Pueblo, Colorado, to visit the master and repeat the hardest problems Gill had completed.

But it was for making solos of hard routes hundreds of feet long that Bachar secured his reputation as one of the best in the world. Apart from Moratorium, he made solo ascents of other Yosemite routes such as Butterballs and Nabisco Wall. These routes were at the limit of what the very best climbers were doing - but with a rope to catch them if they failed. Bachar's unroped ascents were almost shocking.

In the mid-1980s, rock climbing went through one of its periodic revolutions. Bachar found he was suddenly out of step with the new French tactics of drilling bolts into the rockface. He disapproved, his previous intensity turning to rage at what he saw as the dilution of the sport's ethos, sometimes defending his position with his fists. After some spectacular solo climbs in the early 1990s, he drifted away from the sport he loved, taking up snowboarding and even golf.

Latterly, however, he rediscovered his passion, and slowly recovered his physical shape too. He had spent years designing climbing shoes for a Spanish manufacturer and, in 2003, set up in partnership with Steve Karafa. On the way back from a trade fair in 2006, their car crashed and Karafa was killed. Bachar broke four vertebrae. Lacking medical insurance, he was touched when the climbing community raised money for his treatment.

Despite his fused back, he was eventually able to climb well again and continued to solo. Several of his friends who were equally devoted to solo climbing had been killed doing it, and he was acutely aware of the risks.

No one witnessed the fall that killed him at Dike Wall, near his home in Mammoth Lakes, but help arrived very quickly. He is survived by his son Tyrus by a previous relationship.

VALLEY BOYS

By Trip Gabriel

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All last summer, on an outdoor bulletin board near Yosemite Valley, an unusual note hung alongside the routine offers from rock climbers who were selling Big Wall haul bags and seeking the return of stolen hardware. It

offered a reward of \$10,000 to anyone who could follow its author for one day of rock climbing. The note was written by John Bachar, and there were no takers.

By late September, Bachar's VW microbus is parked alone in the gas station, seventy miles from the Valley. Here in the High Sierra, up by 9945-foot Tioga Pass on the eastern edge of Yosemite National Park, snow has already fallen. The gas station is closed for the winter; the canvas-walled general store has been dismantled. Bachar's peers from seasons past have scattered, driven to various ignominious fates: John Yablonsky, in love in Santa Cruz. Ray Jardine, ostracized from Yosemite, some say, after cutting holds with a cold chisel, a purist's atrocity. Ron Kauk, the most naturally endowed climber of a generation, no longer active. Tobin Sorenson, dead.

'I don't need partners,' says Bachar, 26. 'I'm up here having an unreal time by myself.' On granite outcroppings in the shapes of domes, shark fins and saw teeth - gunmetal-gray cliffs that are etched against an aching blue sky - he spends his days soloing, climbing without a rope.

Bachar's solos, more than the efforts of any other rock climber in recent years, have shattered preconceptions of the sport's outermost bounds. This became apparent in 1979 with his unroped ascent of the Nabisco Wall, a 450-foot-high Yosemite Valley acid test. On a warm spring day, Bachar accomplished the solo observed only by a few colleagues, whose chief sensation was nausea. The word spread through the valley like wildfire. 'I never said a single thing,' Bachar recalls. 'but suddenly, people were running up and saying, 'You soloed the Nabisco Wall!? God, you're f*#king nuts man.' Or I'd walk through camp and they'd whisper behind my back. No one understood it, even the climbing magazines didn't know what to make of it.

'Four hundred feet down on either side, and it's outtasight. You feel like something that doesn't belong there, a human being running with the lizards on a wall without a rope, and it's just not your territory. It's like going to a new continent, the moon or something. I don't know. A new frontier. It's someplace no one belongs, way beyond the boundaries.'

THE OBJECT IN ROCK CLIMBING, SPORTS FANS, is short-circuiting the mind. With many superb climbers roughly on a par, true advances are made by leaps of imagination and skill that sorely test the inbred, ho-hum climbing community's powers of comprehension. Rock climbing, understand, is a sport well into an end game. Standards of difficulty now approach the ineffable. Years ago, ascents of Yosemite's Big Walls - El Capitan, Half Dome, Washington Column and Sentinel Rock, granite faces that take off like rocket trajectories half a mile high and block out all but a blue seam of sky - first established the valley as the foremost rock climbing arena in the world. By the early Seventies, however, the famous walls were saturated with multiday routes. Any expert climber could reach the top of a once-indomitable monolith. So rock climbing turned in upon itself, splitting once and for all from the older, summit-oriented sport of mountaineering. The action shifted to routes no higher than several hundred feet, where rock jocks sought to up the standard of pure difficulty.

'When I first got into climbing in 1969, 5.7 was a perfectly respectable grade,' says Bruce Brossman, director of the Yosemite Mountaineering School. 'Now you don't even start a conversation at less than 5.10.' The rock-climbing decimal system, a subjective measure of a route's difficulty, starts at 5.0 and was once believed to top out at 5.9. Indeed, 5.9 is difficult - like standing on a baseboard, grasping a door hinge and reaching for the molding. Yet in the early Seventies, climbers pushed on to more hideous standards - 5.10, 5.11. And a few years later, such Yosemite 5.12's as Crimson Cringe and Separate Reality were introduced. On the first ascent of the 150-foot Crimson Cringe, Ray Jardine worked a reported forty days, popping out of vertical cracks and hanging on projections, returning repeatedly until he had 'wired' the sequence of moves. To bag Separate Reality, Ron

Kauk, one of the elite Stonemasters who embroider lighting bolts on their boots, learned to climb like an orangutan. The hardest moves of the route require a climber to dangle from a crack by finger locks, execute a gymnastic flip to gain a heel lock and pull with that heel as if it were a third hand. Currently, the possibility of anything beyond 5.12, like the possibility of redemption, is a hotly debated topic.

Hence, the importance of pumping granite. Once, you could get by on natural strength and an weekend of commitment to climbing. Now, to build up their bodies, year-round climbers flog themselves on outdoor pull-up bars and slack-balance chains slung between trees, on homemade climbing machines and, especially, on practice boulders. These constitute the stations of an open-air granite gymnasium. A climber will train for a month to develop the first-knuckle strength in his fingertips needed to swing from peanut-size crystals 300 feet off the deck. Holds on dime-thin flakes are tenuous enough that sweat is a critical factor. Now, an indispensable item of climbing gear is powdered gymnastic chalk.

“THE AMERICAN CLIMBER,” Lito Tejada Flores writes in the foreword to *Climbing in North America*, “has always been a maverick, often an eccentric, at times virtually a social outcast.” That is true, hombre, Today, when even upstart sports like windsurfing have \$75,000 professional competitions, there is hardly a penny to be made in rock climbing. To play in the end game requires certain sacrifices. In fact, you have to grovel. You have to become a Yosemite Valley Park Bum - a live-in, year-round, Camp Four climbing rat.

For fifteen years, Camp Four has been the foremost hobohemia of a vagabound rock-climbing subculture. A mile from the other valley campgrounds for RV’s with all the comforts of the suburbs, it is the wrong side of the tracks. Climbers in tattered tents, 200 or so strong, in season, are packed into dusty, denuded sites. They patch up their pile jackets, pass around falafel and jugs of Gallo wine, and at night are lulled to sleep by an electrical transformer idling like a locomotive at the edge of camp.

All this is as it should be. Park Bums, at least those who stay in Yosemite Valley, six months or more, are living in hobo heaven, on the very slopes of the Big Rock Candy Mountain. “What makes life easy here is getting all the scams rigged.” admits Greg Sonagere, 24, who has been an itinerant climber for five years. He makes it on \$1000 a year, easy. The rest is petty scamming, which can include “canning” - rooting around in park dumpsters for nickel-deposit aluminum cans. Amass enough of these and you can buy a baked potato and a dinner salad at the Four Seasons Restaurant. There are perishables to be begged from departing tourists and leftovers to be scarfed up in the park cafeteria. Most Park Bums don’t pay rent. Many are on the select rock climbing rescue team, which entitles them to a rent-free Camp Four tent site and the prospect of hazard pay when called out. Others bivouac illegally in vans, caves or tress, suspending a rigid submarine hammock from a valley conifer.

Spend enough time as a Park Bum and you acquire a Park Bum’s world view. In a sport where achievements are measured in mathematically absurd calibrations beginning with 5.10, perceptions in general can become a little intense. In the end game, where difficulties threaten to trigger a *reductio ad absurdum*, Park Bums tend to see other things in twilight-zone terms. They might pull aside a stranger in Camp Four to impart the desperate information that in the next few years, “the world is headed into the crux of a 5.13.” So what to do but build up your body, save money and make it to climbing epicenters like Cerro Torre in Patagonia, the Trango Towers in Pakistan or the sandstone cliffs of Dresden before it’s too late?

“I’ll probably leave here someday, and what I want to do is get in my station wagon, a 1954 Chevrolet, and drive around the country,” says Sonagere. In his eyes, you can almost see the lemonade streams and cigarette trees. “A lot of people take the attitude that life is real hard, that you gotta always be on top of things. But I just

drift along, and things always work out. Like, every time I run out of money, something phenomenal comes up. I've definitely noticed there's some kind of God who looks after us."

Indeed, He does look after some Park Bums. A few winters ago, He sent a Lockheed Lodestar, overfilled with six tons of marijuana, crashing into frozen Lower Merced Lake, just inside Yosemite's southern boundary. Customs-service helicopters salvaged part of the cargo and left the rest to await a springtime recovery. But before you could say *cualidad mejicana*, Park Bums were departing Happy Isles trail head in the eastern part of the valley like forty-niners. They hiked eighteen miles into the wilderness with chain saws and ice axes, broke up the floes and recovered an estimated 1500 pounds of high-grade grass. Throughout California that year, the stuff was known as Airplane. Climbers arriving at the lake jettisoned sleeping bags, tents, food, everything, to fill packs with twenty-kilo bales. Overnight, hobo Ville became a boomtown. New tents sprang up like fungi, and late-model vans appeared in the parking lot. Before the law finally put an end to things by stationing guards at the lake, the Great Yosemite Gold Rush had gotten pretty loose. Climbers were boarding valley shuttle buses back to Camp Four with back-wrenching of sopping Airplane, rivulets of resinous green liquid streaming behind them.

Bouldering - working out on the granite gymnasium - is now a full-fledged rock-climbing subsport. It differs from so-called technical rock climbing, the ascent of routes with ropes and protection - that is, hardware like tetons, hex centric nuts, and bashies and smashies, through which the rope is threaded like a slack lifeline. Done without rope or protection, bouldering is the closest most climbers will ever get to soloing full-length, high-exposure routes, the purest of all climbing experiences.

Boulder routes are known as problems. Figuring out the moves in this minimalist endeavor is called problem solving. Not only does bouldering build strength, it teaches state-of-the-art hand and footwork, and techniques like finger-locking, heel-hooking and levitation. Yosemite Valley's bouldering circuit runs from Camp Four to the scree slopes leading to the Big Walls, to the party islands in the Merced River. This morning's problem, though, begins in a cave.

Using a toothbrush, Dimitri Barton cleans holds caked with gymnastic chalk. "Chalk's okay," Barton says, "but look at all this resin." Yesterday, a team of French climbers was on the circuit, slipping off everything and smearing holds with ballet resin, which is impossible to clean. "The Frogs are weird to begin with," someone mutters. "They're known boy molesters."

"There's all kinds of fab stuff in here," calls the Fish - twenty-one-year-old-Russell Walling from Anaheim - from a troglodytic crouch. He heaves out Playboy magazines, a mattress belonging to the Yosemite Park and Curry Company, and flip-flops he intends to keep.

The Fish has been in the valley five months, sometimes sleeping in a parked van, ever since he arrived with fifteen chalk bags of his own manufacture. He sold these to vacationing college boys to finance the summer season, but by late September, he's down to spare change. "It's total slum action," he sighs. "As usual."

Likewise for the other half-dozen Park Bums who are picking clean the skuzzy junk heap in this illegal bivouac cave as if it were a carcass. Call 'em PB's; that's how they're known, although some would disclaim the honor. Pat Nay lounges in shredded canvas baggies, the Big Wall uniform. Greg Sonagere looks peaked, but hey, his diet is atrocious: last year in the valley, a "city" of 60,000 visitors on a summer weekend, Sonagere came down with malnutrition.

The Fish, who is fond of such tourist gross-outs as simulating epileptic seizures, fishlike writhings, on the floors of Yosemite restaurants, says, "I just can't see getting a job. Go to college, get out of college, bag the money, bring it home to the wife. Like, my brother did that, and he's just racked right now. He went to college for years and years, studied all the time, went and passed the CPA rig. Now he's working heinous hours. He has no time off, a wife, the works. Oh, man, it makes me ill."

You invite a PB over, one park ranger tells another, and you'd better watch the flatware. On the other hand, they are all crackerjack athletes. Mike Paul dips into a chalk bag and claps his hands until they are evenly coated with fine talc. This morning's problem, often attempted, is very rarely solved. It is a fifteen-foot-long finger-width crack splitting the roof of the cave.

To establish a mood, someone pops a Black Flag tape into a third-world briefcase that's been rigged with nylon webbing and a carabiner (a climber's aluminum snap link) that Punk Roy and the Fish hauled up 5.10s all summer. These days, the more blackguard punk out of L.A., whence most of the PB's themselves originate, has become the climbers' music of choice. It has edged out Jimi Hendrix, whose tapes fueled many radical routes in Yosemite. In any event, the newer music is similar: high-performance stuff that vibrates the pituitary gland and releases hormones into the brain that rob one of inhibitions.

Suddenly, Mike Paul is hanging from the crack like a bat, his weight supported by three fingers of each hand, which are inserted to a depth of one knuckle, torqued and locked in. He moves out, karate chop by karate chop. At the lip of the roof - the crux - he dangles from his left hand, reaches wide with his right for a down sloping hold and, muscling up and pivoting around this point, emerges upright on the face of the rock. He tiptoes right and jumps off, puffing like a choo-choo.

"Way to go, Mike," someone says exultantly. "What's it rated?"

"On a climb, it would be 5.11 for sure Maybe 5.12."

"You've got it wired," Dimitri Barton says.

"Ruthlessly wired," Pat Nay adds.

"Brutally wired," the Fish says.

"No big deal," say Mike. "It's casual."

Afternoon tea is served at the Ahwahnee Hotel, a lodge pole-pine and quarry stone gem of national-park architecture a mile up the valley from the Yosemite Lodge, which resembles a student union. The Ahwahnee is like the trustees' office. It's out of a Teddy Roosevelt-era fantasy of genteel summer resorts in the wilderness. Streaming samovars are wheeled into the Great Lounge, past the walk-in fireplace, the Navajo rugs, the display cases filled with Pomo Indian baskets. Driven indoors by rain, the PB's are ordering pina colodas. They've got their feet up on the upholstery, and they're talking in loud voices about the climbing-bum Weltanschauung.

"It's called year-round climbing, but it's really year-round hanging," explains the Fish, whose hippy-length hair is bound in a once-green bandana, now sun-bleached white, which he wears waking and sleeping. His sockless feet are clad in purple high-top basketball shoes, which are therapeutic; last week the Fish hammered his ankles skipping rope. "It's like living in a giant house with a bunch of friends, but it's Yosemite instead of a house," he continues. "Like, every night we have these strange dinners. We feed each other. And the gear exchanging that goes on is amazing. People will sell all their gear, every stitch they own, then hit flat bottom, go get a job and

come back with a whole new rack. Last winter, when I had a job, I'd drive out on Friday nights and wake everyone up. We'd eat doughnuts and all these funky foods. Go into town and play Asteroids. The height of luxury....."

It's more than that; living the PB life is more than staying jazzed on the communalism of the Sixties. Yosemite is like the DMZ. "I'm twenty-eight now, and climbing is all I want to do. Say Pat Nay, a Vietnam-era army veteran. "Why work in L.A. for fifty weeks a year to get two weeks off a year? I was born and raised down there, in the suburbs, learned how to drive the freeways and everything like that, and I went down there after I was out of the army and blew a fuse. I wanted to f*#king deck people for a long time! I really did!"

Not the manager of the Ahwahnee, Pat, don't deck him. Punctilious grown-up, he's just swept across the Great Lounge to request that the noise be held to a "dull roar." No problem, the PB's murmur, like truant schoolboys.

What it all boils down to is that these longhairs and volatile vets and bodhisattvas are the last golden kids in sports-bum paradise. It is hardly possible to be a ski bum any longer, to live shamelessly in squalor while plucking the bounteous fruits of the best slopes or the best waves in America.

The economics are prohibitive.

"But we don't pay the park service to live here or climb Space

Invaders or Stoners' Highway," says Dimitri Barton. "I'm f*#king twenty-two and retired. This is the most high-powered rock climbing area in the world, and you can get by on a few thousand dollars a year and not have to look straight or act like a nimrod."

It is said that climbers ceased to be regarded as riffraff in 1969, when Yosemite Park and Curry Company, which holds a monopoly on park concessions, established the Yosemite Mountaineering School. But what to make of the maximum-security gates barring the restrooms of the gas station in front of Camp Four?

"It's getting harder and harder to get along," laments the Fish, who last year while knee-deep in a valley dumpster, was stopped for trespassing by undercover agents. Climbers work up real righteousness over Curry Company policy, which seems designed primarily to keep the crappers clean fro the long, armored columns of dues-paying Good Sam Club tourists in RV's. Sweeps by rangers through the lodge parking lots in search of PB's sleeping in vehicles occur almost nightly. Showering in lodge facilities with an illegally acquired pass key is a maximum bust; once caught, they're happy to put you up in the "John Muir Inn" - the Yosemite jail.

Yes, indeed, there is need for a jail in the valley. Murders, rapes and armed robberies are committed there; felons wanted elsewhere show up on occasion. There is also a Yosemite magistrate court, and that is where John Bachar found himself a few years ago after stealing a toothbrush from a Curry Company store. There he was, pleading for five years' probation or an onerous fine. But no way was the judge going to coddle a shoplifting Park Bum. Fifteen days in a halfway house in Riverside.

In contrast to such indignities, European climbers often find themselves on television. Their doings are followed by a non-climbing public, and many earn a living from the sport. The implications of this hit home for Bachar last year, when he was flown to West Germany to "star" in a rock-climbing "festival" Over there, they lionized him. He closed a sponsorship deal with a rope manufacturer, picked up some modeling work and , once, in a candy store in Gossweinstein, was recognized by a dumpling-shaped frau who obviously had never ascended anything more precipitous than a stairway.

John Bachar is like Bjorn Borg without an audience. That is, his single-mindedness of purpose and the level at which he performs are equivalent to those of any top professional athlete. If America were to adopt rock climbing as a spectator sport, Bachar would probably be its first superstar. His entry into the sport came in that period when climbing, for all intents other than financial, had transcended its amateur status. Today, amid the lodge pole pines of Tuolumne Meadows, he works out daily on a homemade gym consisting of gymnastic rings, fingertip pull-up bars and a rope and rung contraption called a Bachar Ladder, which has been widely copied. For a cardiovascular workout, Bachar clocks himself speed-soloing Tuolumne's Fairview Dome and crashing back down through the trees. The 900 foot ascent, according to the climbers guidebook, is rated 5.9 and requires five to eight hours for a roped party of two. Bachar has cut his round-trip time to forty four minutes.

Death defying, ballsy and outrageous, soloing is an extension of the audacity anted up by climbers in the end game. Besides Bachar, who hangs it out further than almost anyone else, other radical individuals on rock climbing's cutting edge have soloed difficult routes in recent years without ropes or protective hardware, and sometimes without shoes or clothing. Bachar's friend Ron Kauk once soloed the North Buttress of Yosemite's Middle Cathedral Rock, and for the next two nights, unable to sleep, he wandered valley meadows in a severely altered state of awareness. Bachar has come to live daily in what he calls Zone Three, those treacherous climbs of fifty feet or higher, where the racket of the birds is excruciatingly clear and the sky is piercingly blue, where everything just is: where one fall is fatal. It is, of course, very existential.

"Soloing feels so free, it's almost like flying," he says. "If you let go, you will be flying. If you screw up, you die. But when you make it - God, I really get power from that."

Bachar's appearance does not at first suggest a desperado character given to working the seam between life and death. Trouble-free eyes and lank yellow hair would seem to place him on a West Coast beach pursuing mindless pleasures. Despite an easy volubility, articulating why he does what he does is not a strong point. Yet the looks and manner belie a fanaticism that Bachar has vented on his body and his climbing skills. At twenty-six, after years of working out, he has developed a terrific, leopard-like physique. The habit of testing each hold for a meditative beat before transferring his weight on the rock carries over to produce a strangely syncopated economy of gesture even when he is driving, which he is famous for doing with his knees, so that his hands are free to finger a saxophone.

At fifteen, Bachar was cutting high-school track in Los Angeles to boulder. At eighteen, he dropped out of UCLA to climb year round. He summers in Yosemite and winters at Joshua Tree National Monument in the Mojave Desert, where he says, "In February, I'll be climbing 1000 feet a day while most everyone else is sitting on their asses." With all the training, Bachar figures his solos are less the feats of a wild man than of a fairly calculating climber.

While soloing, he climbs in better style - and with more control - than at any other time. That's because he finds himself concentrating with such intensity that he may as well be only five feet off the ground. The world spins away, and all of creation is telescoped down to the few moves directly in front of him. Doing the moves is not the problem. The problem is crossing the trouble line inside your head. To do this, Bachar relies on a slow burn of raw fear.

"That's the kind of sport climbing is. You get a surge off it, and you either let your mind dribble over to where it's completely paralyzed, to where you're indulging in this stupid feeling of terror, or you go with it. I know I'm risking my life when I solo, but I don't think of it as risking my life for the sake of risking my life. It's a tension thing. I draw from that life-or-death kind of challenge."

Recently, Bachar's friend Tobin Sorenson appeared to him in a dream. Fabulous Sorenson, who had a reputation for climbing forty feet above his protection and still exhibiting a full measure of go-for-it; who would follow behind Bachar on "easy" 5.9's with the rope tied in a noose around his neck; who used to bellow with joy while skateboarding the center line of the tunnels leading down to the valley, cars whizzing by on either side; who died soloing Mt. Alberta in the Canadian Rockies. In his dream, thinking he was alone, Bachar was preparing to solo a route when Sorenson appeared at his side. They held each other in an embrace, and Sorenson told Bachar that he hadn't really died, he'd just climbed higher, and that any time John wanted to see him, he could come to this route. "He was letting me know that things were okay," Bachar says. "I don't know. Normal people probably think about death a lot differently than I do. Maybe someday I'll find I'm as in control as I thought I was. Maybe I'll pop and be dead. I'd rather go this way than on a deathbed at eighty. It'll happen pretty fast, anyway.

Is Bachar the world's top rock climber? The sport has no rules or contests, no seedings, rankings, winners or losers. Do competitive considerations matter? You bet. Witness rock climbing's self-policed system of handicapping, called Ethics.

Ethics is the torturous debating of matters of climbing style - how a route is done. It allows status-obsessed climbers to rank one another precisely. It is serious business, involving envenomed character assassinations and trashing of other climbers' routes, as a random sampling of the polemics practiced in any of half a dozen climbing journals shows: "I'm sorry to see such a great climbing area continue to be known, not for its fine lines and hard ethics, but for disgusting routes and disgusting climbers."... "I had hoped by now it would be obvious nobody really cares what Pat Ament says or does."

Ethics goes way back in climbing, but never before has the debate been quite so arcane. This has resulted from the blurred distinction between free climbing and aid climbing. Treatises worthy of a Duns Scotus have been written on this subject, but the important point to remember is that free climbers ascend using hands and feet only, while aid climbers, like window washers, haul themselves up by supporting their weight on ropes and protection.

In the quest to free-climb ever more absurdly difficult routes, "unethical" climbers resort to improbable schemes. Before attempting to lead a route free, they might rappel from the top to look over the difficulties or to preplace protection, usually expansion bolts. They might dangle on their rappel ropes, trying a few moves and marking holds with chalk, which is known as hang dogging. They might practice the climb with a top rope many times, called rehearsing, and they might rest on their protection after each fall instead of returning to the bottom, which is known as yo-yoing. These schemes scandalize ethical purists. They believe aid has been used to indirectly in order to learn how to free-climb the route.

Here is the game rock climbers play. In one corner, ethical purist John Bachar. "Take Tony Yaniro," Bachar says, a climber who, by all accounts, is a pleasant enough fellow, but who also happens to be a likely contender for Bachar's title as world champion free climber. "Some of Yaniro's climbs are bullsh#t," Bachar says with surprisingly casual vitriol. "He'll rappel down, put in fifteen bolts, hangdog around and then climb from the bottom. Call it 5.12 or whatever...f*#k, if I went out and did all those tricks, I could do a route so ridiculously hard, no one would believe it. But why bother? You might as well take a helicopter to the top."

Proponents of indirect reliance on aid say that without their little tricks, hard routes would never be done at all. This is because the ascent of a 5.12 can be a trial-and-error process involving many falls. Each time a climber falls, he learns from his mistakes. But the nerve-racking process of repeated falls can be avoided by rappelling,

hang dogging and the rest. So aren't free-climbing purists implying that if a route cannot be climbed without a fall, it must remain forever unclimbed.?

Not necessarily, say Bachar. "You have to make a distinction between putting your weight on the protection in order to stop a fall, and putting your weight on the protection in order to stop a fall, and putting your weight on the protection to rest or make forward progress." The pure climber who falls doesn't hang around resting on his protection. Before climbing onward, he immediately gets lowered off to the ground to begin again. And this pure climber, he shuts his eyes. He doesn't want to ogle the holds passing by, because he would be inspecting the route while being supported by a rope. In other words, with aid.

Something nags at the 99.44 percent pure climber. "I guess, theoretically, you can't have done it free if you fall even once," Bachar says. Because before you complete the climb, you will have put your weight on the protection - the rope - to make forward progress. You will have depended on the rope to save your lie, permitting you to return another day and do the route free. And that's aid.

The Yogi of the Annex parking lot is weary of such disputes. He's made his peace with the ardent ways of other climbers, as well as with their traditional nemeses. Last night, when park rangers busted three Park Bums for divvying in the annex lot across the road from Camp four, they did not disturb the Yogi. In his Patagonia jacket and pink baseball cap, which shades red-rimmed eyes, the Yogi is a familiar figure in the valley. He's lived there on and off for twelve years, and his year-round home is a two-tone Dodge family wagon parked inconspicuously in a corner of the lot. At the moment, it has no battery. Using a pair of pliers, the Yogi slides back the door to reveal a potbellied stove; a pressure cooker with a few days' pre

cooked meals of lentils, rice and barley; a cheap guitar; a post-card portrait of Krishna; and a cloth copy of the Bhagavad-Gita.

Inside, he lights a kerosene lamp. His anchoritic air is formidable. Partly, it is by choice, and partly, it is involuntary: since birth the Yogi, thirty-three-year-old Werner Braun. Has been pretty much stone deaf. When he speaks, the sentences are like epigrams cast over an abyss.

"Where are you from, Werner?"

"Same place as you, man."

This summer, when the Yogi put up several new routes in the valley, he did not even bother to rate them. "You know how it is," he explains in a didactic, lisping voice. "I get totally gone up there. I hear some of the most absurd thoughts. Like, most of them are death thoughts, or sometimes I'll hear blues songs. But because you sit, you know they're just thoughts, and you give them up. You lose yourself totally, and your climbing is just incredible. Then you come back into the world and want to put some damn number on it: 5.11, 5.12. Nowadays, everyone is just climbing numbers. The rock is giving itself away, pulling you up and in like your mother, but we want to t numbers on our backs like suitcases. See how they drag you down?"

Yet rock climbing, the Yogi says, will occasionally produces people who do not climb numbers, do not seek to make it by the conventional standards of rock jock society. And he inscrolls this analogy: "It's like that guy Sid Vicious. He was a punk rocker, right? He was totally nuts. But he was for real. A madman is halfway better than a dead man, and most of us are just dead men now. Vicious, though, was true to the core, which is why he killed himself. Someone as crazy as that is either going to kill himself or go the other way and resurrect himself. Too bad. Vicious didn't make it in this lifetime.

After many summers and winters in Yosemite, when the rangers have finally granted the Yogi an undisturbed night's sleep, he finds he's losing his passion for climbing. Because of this thing - he taps the Gita, illuminated by a kerosene corona inside the family wagon - climbing isn't pulling him as hard. "Climbing is just something you do to achieve contentedness, or whatever you call it," he says. "You have to do something. You can't just stay still.

"Like, right now, if I were content, I wouldn't even be talking. Because if you're talking about climbing, you're in the past or in the future. What a waste of time. Words never climbed nothing, right?"

John Bachar timeline

1957 - born

1971 - started climbing - Stoney Point - age 14 - bouldered with Bob Kamps

1973? - set record for his high school in the pole vault

1974 - FFA of Black Harlot's Layaway 5.11d (Taquitiz) w/ Tobin Sorenson

1974 - FA of Short But Thin 5.11b w/ Tobin Sorenson

1974 - FFA of Rixon's Pinnacle South Face 5.11d w/ Tobin Sorenson

1975 - FFA of Free Blast w/ Kauk, Bridwell, Long, Worrall and Graham

1975 - FFA of Astroman w/ Ron Kauk and John Long

1975 - FFA of Hot Line 5.12a w/ Ron Kauk - first recognized 5.12 in Yosemite

1970s - 5th or 6th ascent of The Shield; 3rd ascent of Tangerine Trip

1975? - free solo of Double Cross 5.8 w/ John Long

1975? - 3rd ascent of Naked Edge 5.11b w/ Tobin Sorenson w/ some falls

1975 - FFA(except for start) of Tips 5.11d A0 w/ Ron Kauk

1976 - dropped out of UCLA after one year - wanted to become the best climber in the world

1976 - FA of Gait of Power 5.11d w/ Ron Kauk

1976? - Colorado bouldering tour with John Long and John Gill

1976 - free solo New Dimensions 5.11a

1976 - elbow tendinitis - unable to climb as hard as before (probably recurred in later years)

1977 - Yosemite plane crash scavenging - bought a car

1977+ - guided in Estes Park CO for Fantasy Ridge

1977 - FFA of D7 on the Diamond onsight w/ Richard Harrison

1978 - FA of Caliente 5.12b - Suicide - possibly the hardest pure face climb in CA at that time

1978 - second ascent of Midnight Lightning, after working with Kauk on the FA

1978 - FFA of D1 on the Diamond w/ Bill Westbay

1978 - FFA of The Wisdom 5.11d - Eldorado

1978 - FFA of West Owl Direct aka Silly Putty 5.11+ R - Estes Park

1978 - Nose speed record - 15 hours w/ Mike Lechlinski

1979 - solo groundfall from Clever Lever 5.12a - swung further out than expected without rope drag

1979 - free solo Nabisco Wall - Waverley Wafer 5.10c - Butterballs 5.11a - Butterfingers 5.11a

1980 - close call during onsight free solo of The Moratorium 5.11b - (was rated 5.10d) - wanted to downclimb but unable - gave up onsight 5.11 solos after this

1980 - FA of Chasin' The Trane; Frankenjura - first 5.13 in Europe

1980? - 7-Up commercial with Bridwell - \$30k

1980? - featured on That's Incredible (TV show) –
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03udLvtNR6Y>

1981 - started playing saxophone - self-taught

1981 - FA of Black Magic 5.11c R - Tuolumne w/ Alan Bartlett (June)

1981 - FA of Goldfinger 5.12a - Tuolumne (July)

1981 - FA of Body and Soul 5.12 R - Tuolumne w/ Mike Lechlinski (July)

1981 - FA of Bachar-Yerian 5.11c R - Tuolumne w/ Dave Yerian (August)

1981 - issued \$10,000 challenge for anyone to follow him on a day of soloing in Tuolumne Meadows - no takers

1982 - started distributing Fires for Boreal (Spain) - after Miguel Angel Gallego gave him a pair - \$65k/year

1982 - FA of Movement in Camouflage 5.10d R - Tuolumne

1982? - FFA of Bombs Over Tokyo 5.12b/d? R - Tuolumne

1982 - FA of Tunnel Vision 5.12d

1982 - FA of Moongerms 5.11d w/ Werner Braun

1982 - free soloing in Joshua Tree - Hot Rocks, Spider Line, Leave it to Beaver, More Monkey than Funkey, Baby Apes

1982 - married Brenda Lugo

1983 - Rolling Stone article (28 April) - "Valley boys" by Trip Gabriel - transcription:

1983 - Gillette shaving commercial - \$38k

1983 - FA of The Promise 5.11b R w/ Dale Bard

1984 - FA of The Believer 5.12a

1984 - Life Magazine article (September) - "The ultimate dare - solo rock climbers in Yosemite, John Bachar, Ron Kauk"

1985 - FAs of The Kid 5.11b R, The Pinhead 5.10c R, and Here's Johnny 5.10d R - Tuolumne w/ Kurt Smith

1985 - free solo Father Figure 5.13a - Joshua Tree

1986 - FA of The Phantom 5.13a R

1986 - Nose speed record - 10:05 w/ Peter Croft

1986 - linked The Nose and Half Dome NW Face in 14 hours w/ Peter Croft

1988 - punch incident at Camp 4 parking lot after Cottage Dome project was rap bolted and bolts chopped on Arch Rock

1990 - separated from Brenda Lugo

1990 - Foresta house burned down in forest fire - after building permit hassles, sold land and moved to Mammoth Lakes

1996 - son Tyrus Bachar born with Val

2000 - stopped working for Boreal

2003 - formed Acopa International LLC with Dario Piana and Steve Karafa

2006 - car accident where Steve Karafa died; Bachar fractured 5 neck vertebrae; had intermittent weakness in one hand/arm

2009 - died in soloing fall near Mammoth Lakes; CA
