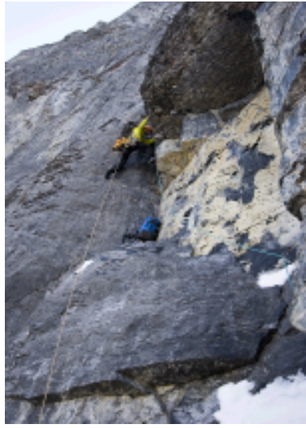
PUSH IN A

JON WALSH

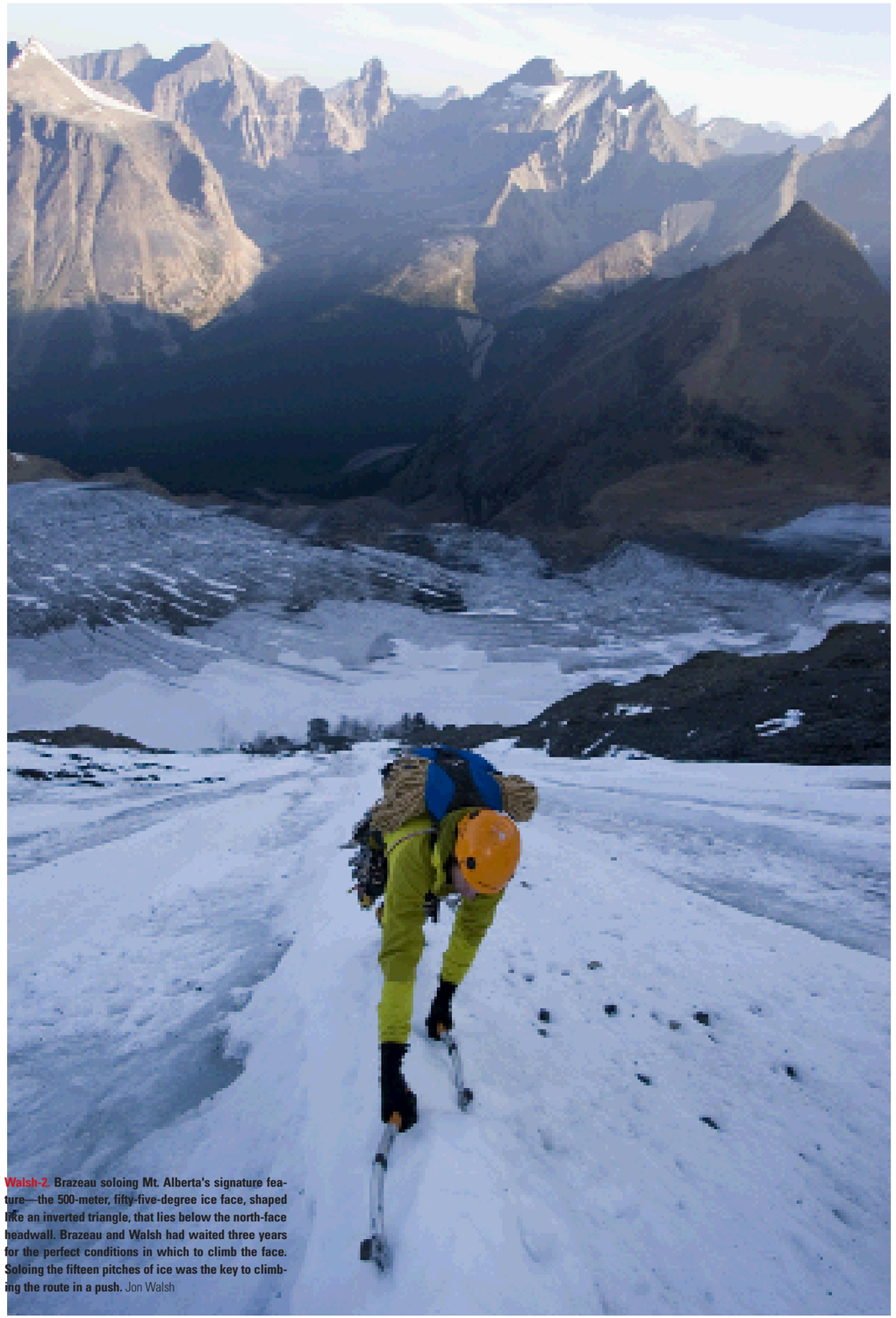
NO ONE HAD EVER OPENED A GRADE VI IN THE CANDIAN ROCKIES ALL FREE IN A PUSH.

UNTIL NOW.



Sanford-1. [Main Photo] **The north face of Mt. Alberta (3619m), Rockies, Canada, showing the Brazeau-Walsh (VI 5.11 M6, 1000m). One thousand meters high, with a 200-meter headwall, the north face had not been climbed in more than a decade, and it had never been freed or climbed without a bivy. The face's six or seven ascents had all been by the 1972 Lowe-Glidden route (VI 5.9 A2, 1000m, Glidden-Lowe, 1972), which takes a line on the left-hand side.** R.W. Sandford

Walsh-7, 15, 16, 17 series. [Insets] **Chris Brazeau onsighting the technical crux (5.11b) during the first ascent of the Brazeau-Walsh (VI 5.11 M6, 1000m). The climb was the first Rockies Grade VI to be established all free in a single push.** Jon Walsh



Walsh-2. **Brazeau soloing Mt. Alberta's signature feature—the 500-meter, fifty-five-degree ice face, shaped like an inverted triangle, that lies below the north-face headwall. Brazeau and Walsh had waited three years for the perfect conditions in which to climb the face. Soloing the fifteen pitches of ice was the key to climbing the route in a push.** Jon Walsh

"Hey, Chris—how come you're not at work?" I asked.

My fingertips ached as I held the phone. It was September 5, 2006; the day before, my partner, Chris Brazeau, and I had hiked out of the Bugaboos, where we had spent four days climbing, jugging and scrubbing a new route. Most of the past few months, I'd been away on climbing trips in the Alps and the Karakoram, and I was in the process of getting reacquainted with a relatively settled life. All morning I'd been slowly forcing my cramped muscles to unpack.

Chris was supposed to be working the entire week and then spending the weekend with his girl, who'd been gone for two months. There was a reason, though, that we'd brought all our ropes and equipment out of the Bugs. For three years we'd been waiting for ideal conditions in the Rockies—and specifically on the elusive north face of Mt. Alberta. I knew what he was about to say.

"Jonny," Chris nearly shouted with enthusiasm. "The weather is supposed to be good for four more days, so I took the rest of the week off. We're both climbing well. We should head up there tomorrow. I'm super psyched!"

The remote north face of Mt. Alberta hadn't been climbed in more than a decade—and it had never been freed or climbed without a bivy. For that matter, we couldn't think of a single Rockies Grade VI that had ever seen a single-push ascent. If we left tomorrow, there would be just enough time to squeeze the adventure in before the weekend; Chris could attempt our climb *and* see his girl.

"I've got a really good feeling about this," I said to Chris, aware of how absurd that might sound.

"I hate to say it," he said. "But I've got a good feeling, too." That reassured me... until I remembered that Chris usually has a good feeling about whatever he does.

Walsh-3

Brazeau engaging Pitch 1 (M6) of the headwall. Although the area guidebook claims the Lowe-Glidden features "superb hard climbing on good rock with sound belays," Tobin Sorenson lost his life on the route in 1980 when all his protection failed. Brazeau and Walsh encountered delicate terrain on their route as well. Jon Walsh

In 1972, before either of us was even born, the prolific George Lowe, with Jock Glidden, had pioneered the first ascent of Mt. Alberta's north face. After seventeen ice pitches, thirteen rock pitches and three days of climbing, they established a Rockies classic, complete with the quintessential Rockies rating of VI 5.9 A2.

Lowe described the route as one of his most enjoyable undertakings in the Rockies, but most climbers attributed the modest grade to his ahead-of-his-time talent and vision. Though Sean Dougherty's notoriously sandbagging guidebook, *Selected Alpine Climbs in the Canadian Rockies*, claims it's "perhaps the most sought after of the Rockies *grand-cours* routes, with a reputation for superb hard climbing on good rock with sound belays," subsequent ascents have indicated differently. In 1980, while attempting to solo the second ascent of the route, Tobin Sorenson lost his life when all the pitons he had placed on a pitch failed to hold his fall. On the third ascent, by Barry Blanchard and Gregg Cronn in 1983, Blanchard led all the headwall pitches. "The crux of... the Alberta headwall demanded everything I had learned during my 700 days' climbing," Blanchard wrote in this magazine. Indeed, legends of the Rockies generation before us—David Cheesmond, Peter Arbic, Ward Robinson and Alex Lowe, to name a few—had struggled with the face. Every one of the six or seven ascents to date had been by Lowe and Glidden's route, and they had all required at least three full days to get up and down.

About a year earlier, Chris had asked me, "What do you think about doing Alberta in a push, without bivy gear?" He sounded nonchalant, but I knew he was serious about getting my opinion. Although he's a stronger climber than I am, Chris consistently finds something to admire in everyone; in me, he seemed to respect the routes I'd done, in winter as well as summer. Going for the first free ascent was so obvious it didn't even need to be mentioned, and I suggested the possibility of a new route on the headwall. But secretly, I wondered whether such a daunting objective could be climbed in a pared-down style.

If it could, Chris was the partner for the job. With his freestylin' hair, shit-eating, gap-toothed grin and tension-free personality, Chris radiates a magic combination of utter psyche and profound humility. You'd never know it from his reticence, but his ticklist is impressive, and his ascents are invariably light, fast, hard and fully committed: the Greenwood-Jones (V 5.9, 1400m) on Mt. Temple (3544m) in 4:20, solo, car to summit (the approach alone is two hours); the Grand Central Couloir (V 5.9 A2 WI5, 1200m) on Mt. Kitchener (3480m) in six hours, solo, bivy to bivy; the Gervasutti Pillar (5.10, 800m) on Mt. Blanc du Tacul (4248m), solo; and the Denali Diamond (Alaska Grade 6) on the south face of Denali (6194m) in a forty-four-hour push without bivy gear and with minimal acclimatization. He rarely even carries a rope or harness on his solos.

I'm not quite as motivated to solo as Chris is, but my psyche meter is equally high, so whenever we tie into the same rope, we usually find ourselves exploring our limits. Fortunately, Chris has some indispensable qualities for single-push ascents: prodigious skill, rhino-strong headspace and a willingness to suffer. Would we be up for Alberta? Well, we'd managed to get out of whatever scrapes our shared compulsion had gotten us into... thus far.

But where the hell was that damn rappel line?

We'd hiked seven hours and thirteen kilometers, forded the frigid waters of the Sunwapta River and napped until midnight in the Mt. Alberta Hut. An hour later we'd stumbled into the moonlit landscape and across a glacier to the base of the Northeast Ridge. Now it was 3 a.m. Before us, the black outline of Mt. Alberta's north face blocked out the moon. We stood on a vast, icy balcony above a cliff while I searched for the place I'd rappelled from three years ago. Like George Lowe and Jock Glidden before us, we'd gotten lost just trying to find the best way down to the glacier below.

The dark wasn't helping our cause, but this time of year, the northern latitude yields less than fourteen hours of hours of daylight anyway. Four new rappel stations later, it occurred to me that our light style would mean a high commitment if things didn't go according to plan. I'd bailed from below the north face before, and those pitches of runout M6 with bad anchors to get back onto the balcony were nothing I ever needed to do again.

These days, more and more ascents around the world are proving the equations of "speed is safety" and "less is more." We carried packs just big enough for ice and rock gear, puffy jackets, a tiny stove, a pot and a fuel can, and enough food and water for our hut-to-hut "day." As long as you have

enough caffeinated energy gels to keep you going and fresh batteries in your headlamp, it's better to train hard, then charge out of the gate until the route's done. "Marathon climbing," I call it. If you need to sit down, shiver it out for a while, climb all night by headlamp, and/or scream, so be it. It's about the experience, and it neither begins nor ends on the climb.

When we touched down almost directly below the face, it was already 6:45 a.m., but at least now our objective was visible. In the early morning light the hulking mass of mountain appeared relatively snow free where it mattered. We needed cold enough temperatures to keep the rock together, but we weren't planning to drytool the whole time, so we hoped the temps would be just warm enough to make the rock climbing bearable. If they were too warm, though, the rockfall on this face, as on most *grand cours* routes in the Rockies, would make the ascent a lottery.

We soloed up the fan and across the 'schrund to the base of the rock.

"Mind if I go?" I asked when Chris arrived. I was already ten feet up the first 5.8 pitch in my crampons. Chris tied into the rope and began simulclimbing as soon as it came tight. When we reached Mt. Alberta's signature feature—the 500-meter, fifty-five-degree ice face, shaped like an inverted triangle—we stashed the cord and began soloing again.

I was starting to feel almost superstitious. Had everything in the alpine realm, for once, aligned in our favor? Ice conditions were ideal; as we moved close together on perfect, two-foot-wide snow runnels, Chris seemed to glide effortlessly upward. His composure relaxed me even more. Within our continuous, rapid motion, we began to reach that perfect rhythmic state that we both enjoy so much.

In recent years the climbs I've remembered most vividly have been twenty-four- to forty-eight-hour, full-commitment pushes—just the kind Chris prefers, too. The combination of high intensity, technical difficulties and total-body endurance produces a buzz I've never found anywhere else. Yet for both of us, alpinism means more than just immediate pleasure. How we remember our ascents, both mentally and morally, is as important as the moment of climbing itself.

I'm no bolt nazi: I've been known to go Euro on the rock, and I love to place bolts and clip bolts. However, I don't appreciate unnecessary ones, and I generally leave the bolt kit behind in the mountains. Several years earlier I'd placed a bolt during a new variation on the south face of Snowpatch, because I hadn't been in good enough shape to make the move without it. The desire to get to the top had overruled my ethics, and I've regretted the decision ever since. Most of the alpine routes in the Rockies have been done by "fair means," without a bolt kit, and we didn't have one now. If Chris and I placed a bolt on Mt. Alberta—or if we jugged, bivied or pulled on gear—I might wonder forever if we could have climbed it differently. This time, I was willing to fail before doing something I'd regret.

Walsh-9. **Brazeau slips into something a little more comfortable at the belay stance between Pitches 4 and 5.** Jon Walsh

As we neared the notoriously loose yellow band, a corner system right of the Lowe-Glidden appeared before us—the only other weakness through the towering black headwall. A traverse right below a prominent rib led to a perfect trickle of thin, seventy-five-degree waterice that split the rotten rock, bringing us directly to its base. In 1985 Sean Dougherty, David Cheesemond and Alex Lowe had intended to try this same line, but after a cold bivy in the chossband below the headwall, a two-to-one vote against the "Big Cheese" had changed their plans. A mad traverse off to the Northeast Ridge and one more bivy had ensued before they made it back to the hut. For me and Chris, there was no need for discussion: we'd try the unclimbed line.

It was now 9:45 a.m.; we were back on schedule, and we began swapping leads into the unknown. Chris got the first pitch: delicate mixed climbing up a thinly iced corner to a small belay stance. I soon took over the sharp end and worked my way past some snow in the corner above. As the corner ended and the wall overhung, I whaled in a knifeblade and committed to a twenty-foot finger traverse. Luckily, a good crack around the corner allowed me to continue to a small hanging ledge, where I equalized a cluster of pitons and nuts into a belay.

In the shattered limestone, none of the pieces looked bomber; I barely dared to weight them. This was going to be the kind of climb where even the second wouldn't want to fall.

And then, on the third headwall pitch, the lottery started.

"Rock!" Chris yelled. I pressed myself against the stone. As the sound and smell of rockfall pricked my senses, I tried to watch him, but a bulge blocked the view. More rocks whizzed by. I tightened the hood over my helmet. "How's it going up there?" I hollered. The pitch was taking a while, so I knew it had to be giving him full value.

"C'mon Chris—the need for speed," I muttered to myself.

"Watch me," Chris said calmly. "I think I'm almost there."

I loved the way Chris retained his laid-back demeanor under such circumstances. Given his attitude, I knew we could pull off the route. The question was: Could we do it all free?

In the Rockies, as everywhere else, standards and styles are evolving with time, and one by one, Rockies 5.9 A2s such as the Andromeda Strain (Mt. Andromeda), The Grand Central Couloir (Mt. Kitchener) and the Orvig-Robinson (Mt. Temple) have been getting freed, often with the use of modern mixed techniques, often in the M6 to M7 range. But rarely are difficult new routes opened all free, onsight, in a day, or even in several days. Of the fourteen or fifteen grade VI routes completed in the Rockies to date, less than half have even been repeated. And on the seven faces in the range that have routes of this severity, I'd only heard of a few attempts in single-push style.

One of which involved Chris. He and Ian Welsted were nearing the top of the difficulties on the second ascent of the Blanchard-Cheesemond on Twin's Tower when spontaneous rockfall broke Ian's arm. In a heroic effort, Chris led every rappel for 1000 meters and the pair just barely made it off the face, minus a rope and their entire rack—and then walked out for ten hours. No doubt this epic retreat only increased Chris's confidence.

After ten meters of mixed climbing in boots, Chris had changed into

Walsh-9. **Brazeau running it out above marginal gear on the improbable traverse of Pitch 5 (5.11). The pair had one set of rock shoes ; Walsh followed the pitch in crampons.** Jon Walsh

rock shoes (without hanging), attached his cramponned boots to the back of his harness and clipped his pack to a piton. Now I watched from the belay as he committed himself to strenuous stemming, drop knees and face holds through the overhanging crack: the technical crux of the route.

Some fifty-five sustained meters later, I heard the familiar cry of "Off belay." When I reached his anchor, my own forearms flaming, there was only one nut left on his harness.

"Nice lead," I said, gasping from the exertion and the 3300 meters of altitude. "That was hard."

Chris gave me a goofy smile and held up his hand for the automatic high-five he gave daily, on any occasion, as though we'd just managed to send a bouldering problem at the local gym.

I organized the rack as quickly as possible and continued up the steep corner system above. Soon my runout had me focused in my own little world and everything else became irrelevant. Blissfully flat edges appeared one after the other beneath my bare fingers, followed by perfect sticks for my ice tools in patches of snice. After forty-five meters, a finger crack with solid gear led me through a roof to the best ledge of the wall, where immaculate blue ice provided the anchor for my belay. The quality of the climbing was exceeding all our expectations.

Walsh-10. Brazeau engaging Pitch 5 before runout 5.11, friable rock and marginal gear convinced him to search for other options. Jon Walsh

The protection, on the other hand, was not:

"That's just for show, Jonny," Chris said, as he fiddled in a micronut on the fifth pitch. I laughed at his attempted humor. Just because there was gear didn't mean it would hold, but I knew he was committed, and I felt grateful for that antigravity bubble that seemed to surround him.

As he continued to search for features across the airy limestone traverse, I pondered the massive pendulum potential of following his lead. We only had one pair of rock shoes between us, which meant I'd be making the traverse in crampons. From the belay it looked totally improbable: the dark rock was undercut and the often-loose holds appeared upside down. Yet inch by inch, the rope kept on moving through my belay device, as just enough small edges allowed Chris to weave a cunning line up, down and across the vertical wall.

Forty meters of sustained 5.10+ face climbing later, he stopped at an icy ledge and began to belay me across. Each delicate move I deciphered brought a quick burst of relief. Two hundred meters of perfectly plumb limestone surrounded us. My gaze followed the dark rock of the headwall down to where it met the icefield we had soloed earlier in the day. Far below, a broken glacier tumbled into distant, barely explored forests. The rotten rock walls that we'd rappelled some fifteen hours earlier rose up from the glacier, emphasizing the height and remoteness of our position. Any retreat would be long and grueling. In such a pristine setting I enjoyed even my fear: the exposure had become beautiful.

It was now the fifth hard pitch in a row, and our "in-a-push" philosophy was encountering some resistance. Our first route-finding choice had failed on friable, unprotectable 5.11 rock, and Chris had wisely returned to the belay after six or seven meters. Maybe if we had a bolt kit we could have forced it, but that would have been cheating, not to mention so time-consuming it would likely have been end of the free ascent. Our unlikely but successful second choice had been to aim for a mixed weakness forty meters to the left that suggested an exit onto the summit icefield. Once there, the route would be virtually in the bag, with just one more pitch between us and easier climbing.

Chris fired the second choice, and by sunset, I was leading the last pitch of the headwall. As I ran the rope out as far as it would stretch up the summit ice face, the intensity began to ebb. It would be all endurance from here.

Chris's eyes bulged like those of a spooked horse when he arrived at the belay, and his gap-toothed grin spread wider than I'd thought was possible. "That good feeling we had," he said.

"I know."

Above us, massive seracs burned with the last rays of sun. We skirted along their left side, on sixty-degree alpine ice so unnervingly brittle we were forced to belay. Three more seventy-meter pitches led us to the double-corniced northeast ridge, where we simuled for the summit. At 10 p.m., fifteen hours after crossing the 'schrund, we were high-fiving and hugging on top.

"Get this harness and crampons off me!" Chris shouted. He had changed into rock shoes twice during the day. I'd been in crampons the entire time, and now, as I took them off, my feet throbbed.

"Hell yeah," I sighed. For the first time in twenty-one hours we could sit, brew up and enjoy the view. To the south, the full moon glowed a smoky orange above the Columbia Icefield, covering the sinister north faces of the North Twin, Twin's Tower and Mt. Columbia with ominous shadows. We'd completed the first free, the first one-day ascent, and a new route on Mt. Alberta's north face. With that mission out of the way, future challenges rose into our imaginations.

"I guess that means we have to get down," I said, two liters of green tea and some chocolate later. Exhausted, elated, we began the descent. Twelve hours later, at 7:30 a.m., after the longest down climb of my life, we staggered back to the hut, thirty and a half hours after leaving it.

After a few weeks of work and sport climbing, the memories of our climb on Alberta began to lose their brightness, and it soon became necessary to find new ones. Sometimes I feel as though our whole existence has become a continuous push, mountain to mountain, trip to trip, packing up faster than we can unpack, cramming as much stimulus into each moment as possible, and always increasing the intensity.

Neither of us knows where the next fix will come from. The only thing we know for certain is that wherever it occurs, we'll be meeting the mountains at their level—and that's a good place to start.

Summary of Statistics: New route (VI 5.11 M6, 1000m), north face, Mt. Alberta (3619m), September 7, 2006, Rockies, Canada, Chris Brazeau, Jon Walsh, first free ascent and first one-day ascent of the face.

Walsh-14. An ecstatic Brazeau reaches the belay after following the last pitch of the headwall. All that remained were three brittle, seventy-meter pitches on the upper ice face, a simul-climb of the Northeast Ridge to the summit and an inobvious descent in the dark via the Japanese Route (V 5.6). Too bad they forgot to look at descent beta in the guidebook.... Jon Walsh