

Alpina

A semiannual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges

COVID-19

On March 18, 2020, Everest commentator Alan Arnette wrote in his blog, “I think it is safe to rule out climbing anywhere for the next several months.” His observation was swiftly followed by the announcement of the closure of Denali for all of 2020. Everest and other Himalayan peaks were closed. Nepal began to reissue climbing permits for the fall climbing season in August 2020, but many expedition operators were still wary of resuming trips. “I think running an expedition now would be trial and error,” Lukas Furtenbach, owner of Furtenbach Adventures, told *Rock and Ice* in July. “Trial and error was never our strategy for expeditions, where we are responsible for the lives of our staff and our clients.”

In Memoriam

Joe Brown (1930–2020). One of the greatest climbers of the twentieth century, the Briton Joe Brown, died on April 15, 2020, after a long illness. He was 89. No brief memorial can do justice to his career. Some of it may be found in his early (1967) autobiography, *The Hard Years* (Gollancz). It abounds in understatement and humor.

Brown burst upon the British rock-climbing scene in 1951. He was at the center of the Rock and Ice Club, which dominated British rock climbing in the 1950s. Often partnering with Don Whillans, Brown revolutionized the standards of what could be done in Wales and elsewhere in Britain. In 1952 he was the first to lead the famous Cenotaph Corner, a short but gorgeous line on Dinas Cromlech in Wales. His main focus was on Clogwyn Du'r Arddu in Snowdonia National Park, also in Wales. “Cloggy” is a dark and fearsome cliff. There, he and his cohort opened many steep routes, often in the rain, of which Wales provides a lot.

With Whillans and others, he made many hard climbs in the Alps. He broke into major mountaineering with the 1955 expedition to Kangchenjunga, at 8,586 meters the third-highest peak in the world, and at the time

the highest still unclimbed. His participation was noteworthy because, like Whillans, he was of working-class background, unlike almost all of his predecessors. He trained as an apprentice plumber and general builder. Rock and Ice member Vin Betts, remembering Brown in Jim Perrin's book about Whillans (*The Villain: The Life of Don Whillans*, Hutchinson, 2005), said, "Joe was elected to go and climb Kangchenjunga with the toffs as the first of the working-class lads to go on a Himalayan expedition." He performed brilliantly and was first on top. Just before the summit, he spied a steep crack. This was Brown's specialty. He turned his oxygen tank to full blast, placed a piton, and got up. The next day, a second party found an easy snow slope that obviated the crack.

The following year, Brown ventured to the Karakoram with a small group for a go at the Muztagh Tower (7,276 meters), made famous by the iconic 1909 Vittorio Sella photograph, which made it look even harder than it is. Brown led the way to the west summit. Perrin wrote that by this time Joe was "the most considerable all-round mountaineer in the history of the sport in Britain."

Brown never again went as high as these two mountains, but he remained active into his 70s. He made three climbing ventures into the wet, wild, and little-explored jungles of Guyana and Ecuador.

In 1975 and 1976, despite protesting that he was too old, he was part of the first ascent of the stunning Trango Tower (6,286 meters) in the Karakoram. He was also featured in BBC live broadcasts of him climbing, for example, a frightening sea stack, the Old Man of Hoy.

He participated in a number of movies, including Fred Zinnemann's *Five Days One Summer* and *The Mission*, in which he doubled for Robert De Niro.

Dee Molenaar (1918–2020). If climbers survive their time in the mountains, they often lead long lives. Noel Odell, the last man to see George Mallory and Andrew Irvine on Everest in 1924, lived to 96. The great Italian alpinist Ricardo Cassin died at 100. Five of the seven survivors of the American K2 expedition of 1953 lived into their 90s. On June 19, the last of them, Dee Molenaar, died in an adult care home in Burlington, Washington. He was 101. In 1971 The Mountaineers published *The Challenge of Rainier*, his story of serving as a summit guide in the 1940s, a definitive account of the mountain for which he is best known.

He was also a gifted visual artist. Aged about 90, he provided maps and sketches for *Fallen Giants* (Yale University Press, 2010), a magisterial account of Himalayan climbing by Maurice Isserman and Stewart Weaver.

John Evans (1938–2020). John Evans died January 9. Among his many achievements was the first ascent of the 6-mile-long and very difficult Hummingbird Ridge on Canada’s highest peak, Mount Logan (5,959 meters). Despite a number of subsequent attempts, and its inclusion in Allen Steck and Steve Roper’s seminal 1979 book, *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America* (Sierra Club Books), this route has never been repeated. Evans also made first ascents of the two highest mountains in Antarctica. In 1976, he was a member of the Nanda Devi expedition that opened a very hard route but ended tragically with the death of Devi Unsoeld, daughter of Willi Unsoeld, and namesake of the mountain on which she died. Evans went twice to Mount Everest, including the famously contentious and failed international attempt in 1971.

Mark Powell (1928–2020). A bright star of the early Golden Age of Yosemite Valley climbing died July 2 in a hospice in California. After a slow, overweight start, Powell became a bold and innovative climber. In 1955 and the following year he made fifteen significant first ascents in Yosemite Valley.

He lived for a time in the valley’s Camp 4. Photographer Jim Herrington, author of the book *The Climbers* (Mountaineers Books, 2017), described Powell as the “original dirtbag climber.” In 1957, Powell partnered with Warren Harding and led some pitches on early attempts on the Nose of El Capitan.

Then, in September 1957, Powell fell 30 feet on an easy route. His left ankle was badly broken. Rescue was slow and an infection set in. He was left with a permanent limp. Late in life the pain became so intense that he had the foot amputated. The accident did not end Powell’s climbing career, but it damaged it badly. It left many peers wondering what more he might have accomplished.

Winter 2020

In the greater ranges last winter there was some success, but the major prizes were elusive.

First success: On January 25, Spanish alpinist Alex Txikon reached the top of **Ama Dablam (6,812 meters)** in Nepal. Txikon, along with Jonatan García, Pasang Sherpa, Cheppal Sherpa, and Kalden Sherpa, made the ascent amid high winds, deep snow, and cold conditions.

After Ama Dablam, Txikon and company attempted **Everest (8,848 meters)** by the standard South Col route. They were turned back by dangerous conditions: some 18 inches of fresh new snow on the Lhotse Face.

While Txikon's group was heading for the South Col, a lone German climber, Jost Kobusch, was making an even more audacious effort. He climbed via the nonstandard West Ridge—first climbed in 1963 by Americans Tom Hornbein and the aforementioned Willi Unsoeld—without Sherpa support or supplementary oxygen, as is his customary style. In 2017, Kobusch made the first ascent, solo, of Nangpai Gosum II (7,296 meters), at the time the fourth-highest unclimbed mountain in the world. According to a Facebook report, this winter he reached about 7,360 meters on the West Ridge—a significant accomplishment.

K2: Same old story. The second-highest peak in the world remains the last of the fourteen 8,000-meter peaks (8,611 meters) without a winter ascent. A seven-person expedition led by the Nepalese mountaineer Mingma Gyalje Sherpa and John Snorri of Iceland threw in the towel after barely starting up the mountain.

Denis Urubko Retires

After a spectacular career in the greater ranges, the Russian-Polish Denis Urubko, 46, has given them up. “I plan to stop risky mountaineering, in any mountains,” he confirmed February 19, 2020, to the Spanish website *desnivel.com*. Urubko has been a supremely successful mountaineer, but also a controversial one (see *Alpina*, Winter/Spring 2019, for his “daring (or reckless)” winter attempt on K2). Urubko was the fifteenth person to summit all fourteen 8,000ers, and the eighth without using supplementary oxygen. He had made the summit of one or another 8,000er 22 times. In January 2018 he played a leading role in the amazing rescue of Frenchwoman Elisabeth Revol from high on Nanga Parbat (8,125 meters). He and three others had been helicoptered from their winter attempt on K2, as noted in *Alpina*, Winter/Spring 2019.

It Could Happen to Anyone

An expedition to the Gasherbrum massif showed how inhospitable and dangerous the greater ranges truly are in winter. Simone Moro and Tamara Lunger, two of the foremost winter mountaineers alive, were trying to enchain **Gasherbrum I (8,080 meters)** and **Gasherbrum II (8,035 meters)**—which would be a first in the winter season. Partway into the trip, Moro attempted to cross a snow bridge that Lunger had already

crossed. It collapsed under Moro's greater weight. He fell 65 feet into a crevasse and nearly dragged Lunger in with him. With her help, he was able to claw his way out, in two hours. They were airlifted by helicopter to Skardu, Pakistan.

In an interview with *Rock and Ice* magazine, Moro said,

My weight and how I was falling was so abrupt that Tamara was not able to hold [the fall]. Remember, too, that she was in snowshoes, which acted like skis. So she was flying, literally, and she landed just a half-meter before the crevasse edge. So I fell 20 meters headfirst, hitting all over the walls. I hit really hard on my back.

Spring 2020: The Virus Strikes

This section might almost be left blank. In March, Nepal closed all its mountains. Chinese authorities had already closed the Tibetan side of the mountain. Other closures ranged from **Denali (20,310 feet)** to peaks in Yosemite to such decidedly smaller crags as the Shawangunks in New York. So the season was uniquely quiet in the mountains, big and small. It became a time for people to stay home and dream of their next adventures. And a time for the mountains to recover from all that human activity.

There were 51 Everest summits early this spring, all from the north and split between two Chinese expeditions: one a commercial expedition made up of Chinese nationals, the other a government expedition by Chinese surveyors with the goal of remeasuring the mountain's height. The results of the new measurement had not been released at press time.

Clearly, COVID-19 had its effect on the economy. Mingma Gyalje Sherpa told the climbing writer Stefan Nestler: "The owner of a hotel in Gorakshep (the last village near Everest Base Camp) has already bought enough food for the whole season. This food with limited date won't be able to be used after six or seven months. The market price of the food, cargo to Lukla, and seven days' work by porters to Gorakshep is all a total waste."

The *Kathmandu Post* of July 5 reported, "Struggling shop owners have put their businesses for sale to pay off their debts but there are no buyers." In the tourist center of Thamel, the newspaper went on, 270 travel and tour agencies, restaurants, curio shops, and hotels had closed over three months.

Fighting in the Mountains

Some areas that saw no climbing did see plenty of fighting. The seemingly endless India-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir continues.

In other areas as high as 14,000 feet, India has another adversary: China. Casualties have remained low, but could accelerate. The *New York Times* reported on May 31 a “melee” at Pangong Tso, a glacial lake 83 miles long, that resulted in injuries. Two weeks later the *Washington Post* reported, “Twenty Indian soldiers were killed in clashes with Chinese troops high in the Himalayas . . . marking the most serious conflict between the two nuclear-armed neighbors in decades.”



Belgian climber Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll works his way up one of two new lines he and Nico Favresse opened in Patagonia. NICO FAVRESSE

The deaths occurred in the mountainous region of Ladakh, where India and China share a disputed—but largely peaceful—border. No Indian soldiers had been killed in clashes on the frontier between the two countries since 1975, experts said.

Patagonia

Before the virus shut things down, a number of bold routes were opened on the granite spires of Patagonia.

Belgian climbers Sean Villanueva O’Driscoll and Nico Favresse, frequent partners and big-wall troubadours who lug their tin whistle and small guitar on multiday climbs, opened two new lines, both on Aguja Poincenot. They named one of the climbs Beggars Banquet, “because we borrowed all the gear we used to climb it and also after the Rolling Stones’ album,” Favresse wrote in a press release afterward.

Perhaps the most stunning climb of the season was the completion of Marc-André Leclerc’s *Visión*, a difficult and committing new route on Torre Egger opened by Brette Harrington, Quentin Roberts, and Horacio Gratton. It was a multiyear project for Harrington. The route was first envisioned by Harrington’s late partner Leclerc, who died in 2018 in an accident in the Mendenhall Towers, Alaska. Harrington decided to realize the climb in his honor.

“Climbing Torre Egger has been a dream for me primarily because of Marc’s stories,” Harrington told *Rock and Ice* magazine. “He always talked about the beautiful Torre Egger as being the hardest summit of all the towers in Patagonia. It is overlooked by its sister Cerro Torre and guarded by the steepest walls.”

Another significant first ascent was 600-meter *The Die Is Cast*, climbed by Italians Matteo Della Bordella, Matteo Bernasconi, and Matteo Pasquetto. Della Bordella told Italian journalist Federico Bernardi that the route “follows a system of very logical cracks and the pitches slide one after another in a spectacular way. . . . A truly dreamy climb!” Bernasconi, 38, died later in the spring in an avalanche in Italy.

Finally, in February, German climber Fabian Buhl completed the first paraglide descent from the summit of Cerro Torre after climbing to the top—a magnificent multisport achievement.

—Steven Jervis and Michael Levy