

# Cucamonga Sunrise

As golden and sweet as Cucamonga honey under the blue warmth of a midafternoon. It rarely gets better than this. Such is the image conjured when my mind drifts between the fine line between rock climbing and spirituality. A person can get to know a climber's soul through their climbs—but not all ascents take place on rock, snow, or ice. Some climbs lead toward higher planes with a deeper meaning and a deeper verve—at the cusp of being art. Of the souls I've known, the one who has gotten the closest to such stately realms is Dan—soft-spoken and patient Dan.

In another time and place, I imagine Dan as a hippie. Not the shifty, flighty, or druggie type, but the optimistic, kindhearted soul searching for the Age of Aquarius within the Age of Reagan. Who wouldn't want to climb out of such places?

Before I met Dan, I don't believe I had a favorite type of rock climb. All were appealing, although not all were spud accessible. I lived for cracks, chimneys, slabs, faces, arêtes, walls, and whatnot. They all inspired magic, thrills, and a means to understand thyself. Before I met Dan, I climbed a lot of faces, not necessarily because I had an affinity for face climbing. It had to do with cracks were too painful and walls intimidating.

No matter how much finesse and style one has, vertical and overhanging climbs require upper-body strength and a bold spirit. Some spuds have neither. Strength isn't a benefit for low-angle friction climbing. Of much more importance on slabs are determination, concentration, and the slow, methodical movement of an artist in search of their soul. Brute force can sometimes hurl a person over a steep and physical cliff, but such antics on slabs would only burn rubber and stretch rope. Friction climbing is better suited to my body style and limitations. However, once I met Dan, I appreciated that friction climbing is noble and filled with style and grace.

I met Dan through the University of Washington Climbing Club. He'd just moved to the gray, mist-smear'd Northwest from golden-hued Southern California. Shortly before moving, Dan put up a classic first ascent in the higher-domed land above Yosemite, home of the placid waters and enchanted green subalpine meadows of Tuolumne.

Dan formed relationships with rocks and summits. If the personalities didn't sync, he kindly looked elsewhere. A climb meant nothing unless done with style. How could a climb ever become classic unless climbed with style? The epitome of Tuolumne and Yosemite Valley's class and style is the aptly named Crest Jewel on North Dome.

Dan eyed Crest Jewel's line for some time before laying any paint on canvas. When he finished, his art deserved to be in the Louvre, the Guggenheim, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, all rolled into one. Before the paint had dried, Crest Jewel had become an instant classic. Upon completing that *pièce de résistance*, Dan moved to Seattle, enrolled in the University of Washington, popped into the Climbing Club's first meeting of the year, and struck up a conversation with a native spud.

Through his childlike eagerness and soft-spoken sensibilities, Dan's belief in the spirituality of climbs began to rub off. He cringed at reckless maniacs who sought brute physical challenges at the expense of the experience. I might not have had the strength and boldness for the vertical, but I sensed a subtlety and beauty in the minute. Nearly hidden subtle curvature deflections are just enough for a carefully placed soft rubber shoe. A sloping depression accepts an inverted palm. Rising in perfect balance, you learn how much friction a palm can generate—and sustain. Such magic moments give rise to the notion that through climbs, you can feel, if not see, the meaning of beauty, style, grace. Dan opened a new and alluring world. Typically, he led most pitches. The spud just looked, learned, and followed.

Over the years, Dan and I occasionally climbed together, but I've always regretted never climbing with him on his favorite Tuolumne domes. Without hesitation, I said yes when invited on the first attempt of a new route on his beloved North Dome—the stately dome floating over Yosemite Valley opposite the more famous bifurcated Half Dome and right next to Tuolumne. Dan nearly owns North Dome, with Crest Jewel in 1981, then Dakshina in 1983. He returned the following year for a first free ascent of Dakshina. In 2002, he returned for the Crest Jewel Direct. Always believing that North Dome still held secret classics, he called me in 2004 for what he said might be his last foray to North Dome. Although woefully out of climbing shape, I packed with gleeful abandon for a five-day exploration.

I'd never touched North Dome rock, breathed North Dome air, or heard North Dome's spirit or vivacity. Previously, every time I'd been to Yosemite, snow and clouds had draped the valley and washed its edges with gray cascades and rivulets. Gray-dabbed rocks are picturesque but aren't appealing to the technical climber. Gray-slimed rock doesn't exude the warmth expected of golden Cucamonga honey—Californian dome climbing at its best. We pushed on, nonetheless. Every part of our attempt was a new experience for me.

“Look!” I exclaimed. “Yosemite rock with no snow and ice or dripping clouds!”

After parking at Porcupine Flat, we took the easy trail on the backside that led to the top. The trail provided us an easy summit and a tremendous view of upper Yosemite Valley. For the rappel down the massive, slabby south face, we used bolts from Dan's earlier climbs. However, the rappels broke our sprightly verve. Getting to where we wanted to go required rappelling at a steep diagonal. On the entire rappel, we fought and defied Newton's third law of motion. Gravity and other physical forces pulling us in one direction seemed greater than any opposing force, keeping us in line with where we wanted to go. (Not exactly a direct paraphrase of Newton.)

Carrying a sixty-five-pound pack against a forty-five-degree angled pull tested my shoes' friction limits on the glacier-polished surface. If friction failed, gravity would gladly have propelled me and my pack on a wild pendulum ride across Crest Jewel, Crest Jewel Direct, Dakshina, and hitherto yet unnamed Hindi-sounding Dan routes. I had a tenseness that no *Om mani padme hum* mantra could silence, while Dan remained calm and serene, as if he were at home. Perhaps he was.

To lower my sense of gravity and vulnerability to pendulums, I tethered the Grendel-like pack to my harness. Big mistake, but Dan didn't—wouldn't—laugh or mock my silly antics. Tethering the pack lowered my center of gravity as intended, but scraping the sixty-five-pound pack along the rock's steep diagonal exposed me to an even greater potential for a wild ride of the pendulum kind.

*Om mani padme hum.*

Technique, style, or mantras didn't keep me on the rock and on rappel. Newer sticky climbing shoe rubber did. I'm forever grateful for the miracles of modern climbing technologies. If I'd been still wearing my EB Super Grattons, my skinless carcass would have been sweeping North Dome's broad south face by then.

*Feet, don't fail me now*, I thought. I've always loved Little Feat's song "Sailin' Shoes," but I never wanted to put it into practice on North Dome.

After 16 billion rappels, we reached the monster slab's toe and the end of our mantra saga—and nearly the end of my once illustrious and glorious pack. Dragging it on eight hundred feet of rock hadn't been kind to my old friend. Both the pack and I were in shatters. Even Dan admitted being tired.

Dan found the loveliest camp location for tracking the golden light's tranquil descent across Half Dome's blank northwest face. Not quite Cucamonga honey, but the next best thing.

We hadn't been tracing the golden arc for long before a lone climber hailed. We motioned for him to join us. He stumbled closer, along with his Grendel-like pack—clearly leading and pushing limply from behind. He'd just finished a solo aid route on Washington Column.

“For three days now, I've not had any real food,” he said as he tore into what we had to offer. While he enjoyed the food, most of all, he welcomed real conversation.

After my rappelling ordeal, I found talking took too much effort. I mostly sat idle as the Washington Column climber and Dan recounted climbing memories. Later, I transferred my remaining energy to watching the shimmering cosmic glow off Half Dome's northwest face.

The next day, Dan and I explored the first obstacle—getting past a dramatic overhanging arch blocking the beautifully long slab and face that ran to the summit. If successful, this would likely be another of Dan's North Dome classics.

I belayed as Dan began the slow *tink-tink* hand-drilling required for the first bolt hole. Hand-drilling bolts is slow and tedious, and my muscles were still shredded. But with the sun's soothing rays, I didn't mind.

Later, a stranger approached at what had to be ten miles an hour. He soon joined me on my sun-warmed perch. *Hiking* isn't even the proper word for it since he seemed to float uphill. This fit floater obviously didn't believe in the Don Whillans's conditioning theory.

With a broad smile, Dennis introduced himself. Dan remembered meeting him once before. Good climbers often know each other. Dennis had never heard of me—and likely never will. The Dennises of the world rarely have more than a passing acquaintance with spuds.

In time, Dan and Dennis took turns bolting and creeping ever slowly up to the overhanging arch. Important progress, but painfully slow. I belayed both. This turned out to consume the extent of our waning light and Dan's and Dennis's waning drilling muscles. I momentarily thought of

offering to give it a spell at the bit. But my forearms were so out of shape, I didn't think I would have been much help, considering the effort of switching positions on the rope. Besides, the light faded almost as fast as Dan's and Dennis's will to continue. As it turned out, Dennis had other plans that didn't involve North Dome. He'd merely dropped by to say hello as he passed through the area. As soon as our feet touched horizontal rock, Dennis dashed back to the Valley for adventures unseen. Dan and I returned to camp.

The next day dawned with cloud-filled skies that threatened to rain or snow. It had the look of typical North Cascades weather—and my typical Yosemite outing. I knew the Cucamonga honey wouldn't last. We now faced the prospects of exposure on a high slab during unsettled weather. Instead, we began the first ascent of a short new route lower and off to the side. We got to the top of the first pitch when clouds grew even more threatening. Briskly, we dashed back to camp, gathered our stuff, and began the long hike along the Dome's big thick toe to eventually arrive at the Porcupine Flat Trail leading us back to the safety of our car.

The first ascent of this anticipated new North Dome classic was not to be—at least for me. Four years later, Dan returned with a couple of other people and completed the main new route. He bestowed it the name Nataraj as a nod and continuum of his Hindi theme. In Hindi, this means “lord of dance.” While I didn't participate in its first ascent, this may be the closest I'll ever come to dancing with Yosemite's domed deities. The dance first entered my dreams and subconsciousness nearly a quarter century earlier when Dan demonstrated that spirituality can exist in climbing art. While Cucamonga honey may lead to golden, sweet climbs, it also forever grants spuds the warmest of Cucamonga sunsets to last a lifetime.