

Facing the Giant Alone

By Eric Dunkle

The Sleeping Giant Mountain in Connecticut has a definite mystical air to it. The Native Americans believed the mountain was an evil spirit, named Hobbomock, who became angry at the neglect of his people and stamped his foot near the current location of Middletown causing the Connecticut River to change course. Then a good spirit, named Keitan, cast a spell on Hobbomock causing him to sleep forever so that he would do no further damage. For me the Giant represented a challenge to myself. It wasn't just the challenge of climbing it, but of overcoming and moving beyond a difficult time in my life. From the first time I laid eyes on the basaltic rock which forms the giant's chin and tallest cliff, I knew that if I could accept the challenge of scaling these cliffs I would be able to find some sense of harmony that I needed badly.

I had climbed in CT a few years earlier at Ragged Mountain. My girlfriend Vicky and I were going to visit her brother and sister in law who lived about an hour away from Hartford. It was early on in our relationship, and she still supported my obsession with climbing. She even encouraged it at times. That weekend I was supposed to take her brother Jimmy climbing at Ragged Mountain, but his allergies were so bad he could hardly breathe. Vicky knew I had my heart set on climbing that day so she agreed to go with me. We had a good time that day. We met another couple climbing and socialized with them throughout the day. All was good, or so I thought. I didn't realize our relationship was slowly crumbling like sandstone after the winter thaw. As time went by she began to resent my climbing. She felt I spent so much time climbing that I was neglecting my responsibilities to the home we now owned together. I was feeling the opposite. I was trying to balance suburban life and the struggle to become the athlete I believed I could be. I had little time to climb, and was slipping from a 5.10 climber to the point where I felt sketchy leading 5.6's. This led me to try to climb more, which drove Vicky to eventually resent everything to do with climbing. Her dreams were slipping away while I was struggling to hold on to mine. About this time my old friend Matt whom I had lost touch with passed through town. He had invited me to visit him in CT. I figured a long weekend away from home was just what I needed.

So here I was heading back to CT, not just to visit an old friend, but also to figure out where my life was going. Needless to say climbing would be involved. I started searching the Internet and found a place called "Sleeping Giant State Park". The site had a small sketch about 2" by 3" with a few lines on it and some basic route descriptions. There were no heights listed and I incorrectly assumed it was an area I could set some top ropes for Matt who had never climbed before. He was eager to partake in something I was so passionate about. As it turned out, climbing that weekend went about as well as my relationship was going. It rained Friday and Saturday, the gym we tried to climb at had some insane rule that first timers had to take a \$60 belay course, and then on Sunday we met the Giant. After wandering around on the wrong trail for an hour I began to see the trees thinning. My heart started beating faster, and as we stepped out of the trees onto the talus at the base of the cliff, it stopped. The cliff looked to be at least 150' tall with a huge pile of talus at the base, which added about another 80 to 100' of vertical exposure to the cliff. I swear I heard my friend soil his pants when he saw it. "You climb this shit?" he asked in disbelief. "Yeah, but not today." I answered in disappointment. I hadn't expected a multi-pitch route, and I knew Matt wasn't ready to second me up it. I promised him I would teach him to climb another day. He was as disappointed as I was.

Vicky and I decided to separate after the New Year. Because we owned a house together I couldn't just grab my stuff and leave. For two months we lived together knowing we were going our separate ways. Stress levels were at an all time high. My thoughts would drift back to the Sleeping Giant. Such a magnificent piece of rock, it begged me to climb it. Matt was asking me to visit again, and I needed to get away. I began to contemplate a roped solo ascent. The thought of a solo climb was appealing to me at that point in time. I was hoping to gain focus and a sense of serenity that would help me overcome the stresses in my life. I bought a Gri Gri, and modified it into a soloist. I learned how to do this from a 25-year veteran, and I don't suggest one tries it unless shown by an experienced soloist. I had done roped solos before on several types of solo devices and the modified Gri Gri seemed to work the best for me. Then I went and practiced my rope techniques on a local 100' cliff. I split it into two pitches so I could practice multi-directional anchors for rappelling to clean gear and for upward pull in the event of a lead fall. This practice run was actually as fulfilling as I had hoped the Giant would be.

I moved out, Vicky and I promised to stay friends, and I focused on climbing so I wouldn't go mad from loneliness. I was already having one-sided conversations with my dog Trango. A friend of mine from the gym, Robbie, heard me talking about CT climbing. He would be visiting his brother in CT in a few weeks and wanted to climb something. We planed on traveling separately, and meeting to climb. I visited Matt in New Haven, and Robbie visited his brother who lived north of Hartford. I was hoping he would be able to climb at Sleeping Giant with me, although Ragged Mountain was a much more sensible choice. It was almost exactly between us whereas Sleeping Giant was closer to New Haven. We climbed two days at Ragged Mountain. I finally got to teach Matt the basics. He did well for a beginner, and I was happy to see he wasn't discouraged by the fact that he didn't make it all the way up. Robbie was on a natural high. He had only been outside a few times prior to this trip, and had never climbed on rock like the old lava flows at Ragged. I was feeling pretty good myself. I was leading without fear again, and I redpointed a 5.10b on top rope. I left CT without seeing the Giant, but felt confident I would conquer him on my next visit.

Throughout the summer I climbed at the Gunks several times, and I got to Seneca for the first time in my life. Each trip had its own rewards, but I had unfinished business with the Sleeping Giant. It was now eleven months later, and I decided I'd visit Matt again. We'd been keeping in touch, and he'd been a big help when I was down. I asked him if he would come along and photograph me when I climbed the Giant. I was still planning to rope solo it. He graciously accepted. You know you have a true friend when he carries half your gear up a mountain and then takes pictures just so you can find your "quan" alone clipped into a thin rope clinging to tiny features on a 150' rock jutting out of the earth.

About three weeks before I left for CT I began practicing and fine-tuning my solo techniques in the gym. The key to soloing with a modified Gri Gri is keeping it upright with a loop of chord added to the top of the Gri Gri that is clipped into a chest harness. If you can't keep it tight it tends to lock up when you try to pull rope out to clip into gear. This can burn you out quickly and becomes very frustrating, essentially ruining the whole solo experience entirely. After three separate nights of fine tuning a chest harness that I made out of webbing I believed I worked out all the bugs. I packed my gear, dropped my dog of at the kennel, and set out for CT on Thursday October 17, 2002.

I used to get anxious at the beginning of long trips. Now I tend to use the time alone in the car to relax, and contemplate life. I usually crank up the CD player and listen to something that fits my mood. Some how Blues Traveler's "Conquer Me" seemed to be appropriate while I tried to visualize the challenge ahead of me.

"I hail to you my mountain climber...
busy at your task.
I know you're in a hurry...
but there's something I must ask.
Do you ever get lonely...
climbing up so high?
If you don't want to answer me...
I can understand why.

Conquer me! Figure me out and set me free."

The route I'd been eyeing up was "Weissners Rib" a 5.6 originally lead by the famous Fritz Weissner in the 1930's. For the most part, it seemed to follow the right face of the outside corner that formed the rib. Although the new guide that came out this past summer describes it as being able to be top roped I'm glad I had received a better picture and more detailed route description from John Peterson, a local climber who maintains the Ragged Mountain Foundation web site. He described the climb as 2 pitches, and about 120' tall. I would end up climbing the route in one pitch and passing the mid point in my rope about 15' from the top. I don't think you could top rope the climb even with rope stretch.

Friday morning we got off to a late start. I wasn't exactly eager to climb early anyway. It had rained all day Thursday, and was cold and damp Friday morning. We finally got around to breakfast at around 11:00 AM, and it was about 1:00 PM when we rolled into the parking lot at Sleeping Giant State Park. After about 20 minutes of hiking we got to the base of the cliff. All of the preparation I had put into this climb, both physically and mentally, seemed to bring to the place I wanted to be already. I wasn't anxious or scared at all. I felt strong. Standing at the base I knew I was ready to do what I set out to do. I no longer feared the Giant. I was ready to embrace it. I started preparing my gear as Matt informed me he forgot the batteries for the camera. It didn't matter. This was the moment I had been anticipating for so long and I was so focused the sun could have fallen out of the sky and I wouldn't have turned away. The climb basically starts about 10' off the ground in a corner at the end of a ledge that angles down to the right. I walked across this ledge, and set my bottom anchor. I equalized it, made one final check of everything, and set off.

I climbed up the first corner placing a couple of pieces until I gained a stance about 25' above the start. The next move is up and right across a small exposed slab with no footholds. I had a solid hex so I wasn't too worried about my feet kicking off. Once I crossed and climbed on top of the slab I moved up easily to the base of another corner. The corner was about 12' long and smooth on both sides. It was separated by a crack, which got thinner towards the top, until only the first half-inch of my fingers could fit. This was the crux and I put a #6 HB offset in as high as I could reach before I started up. I laid back to the right and tried to use what friction I could find to keep my feet on. I went hand over hand until my right foot kicked off. "Breathe." "Focus." I adjusted my feet, put my right hand on the arete to the right and pulled up onto a small ledge.

I placed a cam and moved on. I could hear a teacher on the trail below who had apparently brought his students on a field trip. He was explaining how I would climb up placing gear while safely belayed by a partner at the bottom. I laughed to myself when he realized I didn't have a partner and tried to figure out how I was belaying myself. At this point in time I started having trouble with the Gri Gri. There was too much weight from the free end of the rope and it would pull the Gri Gri down and cause it to lock up. I decided to pull the remainder up and pile it up on the ledge I was just standing on. This seemed to remedy the problem. I continued up to the belay ledge on the left, jamming my fingers into a crack and making a high step on a small slanting edge. As I mantled out I said out loud "Fritz.... You had more courage than I would have to climb this back then". I can't imagine what it would have felt like to climb this with a hemp rope and hiking boots.

I rested for a moment and started wondering about Matt. He said he was going up top to take some pictures of me with the disposable camera he had also brought. That was about 40 minutes ago, and I was beginning to think he might be lost. I wasn't too worried. It wasn't out of the ordinary for Matt to get lost. He'd turn up eventually. Since I didn't have any rope drag I figured I'd just run the route out to the top. I was about 50' from the top and it looked like easy climbing. I traversed up and right from the belay ledge into a broken corner that led to the top. After about 20' I began to have the same trouble with the Gri Gri locking up. I knew what to do now so I didn't waste any time. I pulled the remainder of the rope up and piled it up behind a block wedged in the broken corner and continued up without a problem.

As I topped out the sun bathed me with warm rays. For the first time in well over a year I felt satisfied with where I was in my life. I had proven something to myself and nothing else mattered. I enjoyed the view for a few minutes and then decided to rap down and clean my gear. If I didn't hear from Matt soon I'd have to start searching for him. I rapped down cleaning my gear and checked my watch at the bottom. 1 hour 20 min. Not bad I guess. I climbed the rib again, self-belaying with the Gri Gri, so I could clean my top anchor and walk off the top. Finally I heard Matt. He had gotten lost and was now back on the trail below me trying to explain to some hikers why I would climb this cliff alone. I just smiled with pride and continued up. When I topped out the second time I met an old man with a straggly beard and walking stick. "Isn't there an easier way up?" he said. I laughed and tried to find the words to explain the feeling one can get from such an accomplishment. Even though I felt that my words weren't doing it justice he simply replied, "I understand". Who knows, maybe he climbed this cliff back in the early Yale days at Sleeping Giant.