

What's Worth Doing is Worth Doing Right, Especially When You're High in the Mountains

Doing What You Love:

Summiting Denali (20310 feet) 2019, Churchill Peaks

Text by Dan Koepke

Pre-Denali Training May 2019: Mount Shasta and Lassen Peak ski descents and rock climbing at Smith Rock

Starting in Paradise (5400 feet) from the parking lot beneath Washington's Mount Rainier (14411 feet) the afternoon of Sunday, May 5, I ski toured to Camp Muir (10188 feet) for the day's last light and a 4700-foot ski descent back to the parking lot. Turning past my father's footsteps, my own footsteps, the Muir Snowfield, and where my brothers and I played as kids, the line stood out as one of the longest, sweetest ski runs of my life. I crashed in the rental's truck bed lower on the mountain and the next morning returned to casually ski from Paradise to Panorama Point (6940 feet) and back. After a season of Alaskan backcountry skiing beginning in October, these moderate tours continued the low-intensity training for ascending 3,000 to 6,000-plus vertical feet consecutive days at altitude on Denali.



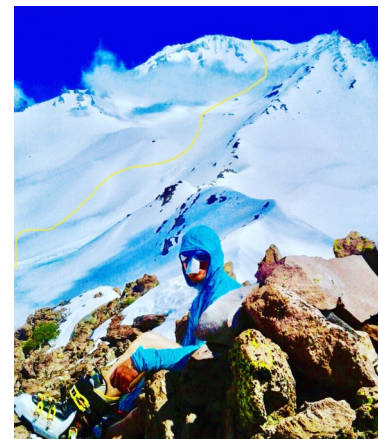
Dan Koepke climbing at Smith Rock.

Photo by Ed Shred

Tuesday, May 7, I met Ed Shred at Portland's airport and we immediately headed southbound for California's Mount Shasta (14180 feet) with an excellent weather window. That night we met spiritual guide and California native Jim Sweeney and prepared to take Ed Shred for his first tour up Shasta the next morning. Ed wanted to keep it casual, and as best friends of course our styles aligned. Ascending about 4000 feet from the Bunny Flat Trailhead (6950 feet), Ed and I toured just above Helen Lake where Jim stopped and descended right before us. Next day Ed and I toured up to 9000 feet around Sargents Ridge for two ski runs and another 4000 feet of vertical.

While discussing summit strategies on Thursday, May 9, Ed mentioned the idea of summiting Shasta from around 8000 feet just above Horse Camp where the timberline thins. A 6000-foot ascent and ski-descent seemed very attractive, especially thinking about Denali's summit (20310 feet) from Camp 4 (14000 feet). Friday we rested, skinned in with our camp, set up shop, skied back to the parking lot for dinner and the remainder of the gear, and then returned to camp and crashed at 8000 feet.

We easily coordinated timing from our previous days' touring and Saturday, May 11, left camp after sunrise in order to ski-descend in the afternoon after the snow softened. Especially considering our timing and experience, we were wary of the ice- and rock-fall in Avalanche Gulch. Surely enough, just before reaching Helen Lake, a helicopter rescued someone who took a rock to the face, which knocked him out and sent him sliding face-first hundreds of feet. Blood on the snow painted a bright reminder of the danger we still faced on our way up as dinner-plate-sized rocks flew by, making keeping an eye above essential. Shortly thereafter someone came tumbling down the snow unsuccessfully trying to self-arrest and eventually stopped about 1,500 feet later.



Dan Koepke on Mount Shasta's Avalanche Gulch.

Photo by Ed Shred

All the carnage made us extremely cautious and appreciative about making it to the ridge above Red Banks, where we both waited for the snow to soften and winced while listening to folks ski-descending Misery Hill who were not quite as patient. After snacking and watching with surprise as guys drank beers in the sun at 12800 feet, we then ascended Misery Hill and passed Shasta's fumaroles to its summit, where we signed the register. We did not ski-descend the last 100 to 150 feet of rime and rock, but we may have witnessed one brave gnardog who did. Ed and I simply stepped in and out of our skis beneath the rime around 14000 feet for a long 6,000-foot ride back to our camp. For many reasons this North American classic beat my recent ride on Rainier as the best ski run of my entire life. Best in Ed Shred's memory, too. We'll see how Rainier's Fuhrer Finger compares in May 2020.

For context, 6,000 vertical feet surpasses everything in Alaska's Front Range, the highest points in most (32 of 50) of the United States, and also the prominence of any peak in the Western Churchill Mountains. Summiting the Grand Teton (13770 feet) in July 2019 demanded ascending (and then descending) over 7,000 feet in a day - my biggest daily vertical ascent ever on a technical route. *Can't always climb close to home if you want to go big!* That said, Denali boasts the greatest vertical ascent (over 13,000 feet) of any

big mountain route in the world - of course including Mount Everest.

Ed and I nailed our primary objective and everything worked out just right after giving it the attention and time it deserved. Shasta's lesson inspired comfortable confidence about Denali that was coming fast: *what's worth doing is worth doing right, especially high in the mountains doing what you love.*

I knew Ed Shred and I could casually climb and ski nearby Lassen Peak (10463 feet) via its north face on May 12, the day after summiting Shasta because I had climbed Lassen solo in 2018 carrying a buddy's borrowed downhill skis, Ed and I were now stronger, and 2019's snowpack was even fatter. After skinning most of the way, I succeeded at my self-imposed challenge of continuously boot-packing to the summit without stopping. On the other hand, I did not ski from the true summit like Ed Shred; it just seemed gnarly and unnecessary when I could easily walk down a bit for more chill turns and still enjoy a run of about 4,000 vertical feet back to the parking lot. After Shasta and Lassen, the confidence of successfully returning to climb familiar mountains inspired me looking to Denali. Mountaineers returning to relatively unchanged mountains may notice how evolving impressions and reflections represent our own changes and developments, and perceiving this growth typically feels both beautiful and empowering.

Ed Shred and I arrived in the late afternoon spring sun at Oregon's Smith Rock on Monday, May 13, and climbed a few lines on its high-friction volcanic tuff before sunset. We discussed rock-climbing together many times close to home around Montana and Alaska, but until that trip we hadn't climbed together outside

those places near where we lived. Basking in the success of Shasta and Lassen, it felt like an excellent road trip and we looked forward to more like it in the future after Denali next.

Tuesday, May 14, after flashing "Five Gallon Buckets" (5.8) and beginning to belay Ed, the strong and gray climber I noticed earlier rope-soloing in hiking boots asked if he and his crew could jump on the classic route next. "Of course!" I remember hoping to effuse a cheery

and welcoming enthusiastic spirit in my voice, especially recognizing I was feeling good. As Ed Shred climbed, I noticed the cameraman and so much value in the Rock Warrior's sage words as I saturated all the articulate wisdom I could. Eventually when the time felt right, I interjected a question about intuition and soon with a smile I asked, "Are you some kind of living legend?"

Yes, we were speaking with Arno Ilgner, author of The Rock Warrior's Way, and he was dropping some legit knowledge. Later in June 2019 while reading that book at the American Alpine Club's Climbers' Ranch in Grand Teton National Park, I appreciated how much that experience made his extremely profound words come alive in a powerful way for me. This served as yet another reminder of how precious those personal connections in our community prove to be.

Climbing on the road made all these climbers and their stories come alive as I fused their stories into my own: climbing at Lover's Leap on "Bear's Reach" and feeling the spirit of Dan Osman, or on "Fantasia" and connecting with Royal Robbins, summiting Mount Dickey after reading Bradford Washburn's 1956 *American Alpine Journal* article about its first ascent, or reading John Long and recalling climbing in Yosemite Valley and Tuolumne and Joshua Tree, or climbing and skiing with Jim Sweeney after reading Alaska Expedition: Marine Life Solidarity while climbing on the Ruth Glacier, listening to Bill Briggs at the Jackson Hootenanny while looking up at the Grand Teton's north face, and shaking the hand of Vern Tejas at Camp 3 and wishing him good luck on his 60th Denali ascent and K2 before he offered quick tips and profound guidance via something as casual as a song. I've known the first part for years, but hadn't ever heard Vern's finish:

Go slow and ya always go.

Go fast and ya never last,

and the mountain will kick you in the rear.

So go slow to the summit, go home, eat pizza, and drink beer.

Before leaving Smith Rock Wednesday, May 15, Ed Shred and I scoped the Monkey Face. With added inspiration we soon planned to return around May 2020 to climb it, Mount Hood, and Mount Rainier with a ski-descent of the Fuhrer Finger. *Anyone else wanna come along?*

Commencing Denali 2019 Expedition 20310 on May 22

Ed Shred and I decided to climb Denali on solo permits this time. Especially after my attempt with a Denali solo permit in 2018, our strategy was important to me and made sense to him, too, because it provided the opportunity to continue and summit even if one of us needed to turn around. This framework also highlighted



Ed Shred ski-descending Lassen Peak's north face.

Photo by Dan Koepke



Dan Koepke leading "Five Gallon Buckets."

Photo by Ed Shred

the salient strength of teamwork whenever we synchronized and shared it, which was not always, but often.

With excellent weather Ed Shred and I landed at Kahiltna International base camp (7200 feet) early afternoon Wednesday, May 22, and about 3 p.m. began skiing to Camp 1 (7800 feet) where we cooked and crashed that night. Carrying a load from Camp 1 to Camp 3 (11000 feet) on Thursday, May 23, around 9600 feet we ran into friends Paul Strickland, Brandon Calhoun, Edward Doueihi, and Les Reaves, who had flown in a day before us, and then Ed Shred and I skied soft corn snow back down to Camp 1. We returned to Camp 3 the next day, and just for fun I enjoyed skiing powder above Camp 3 on Motorcycle Hill in the soft, serene, and quiet light before midnight that I always love in the mountains. Fat conditions and past experience made us super comfy and I never roped up above Camp 3. Ed Shred, Paul, and I left Camp 3 unroped but around the same time the next morning Saturday, May 25.

Weather called for a storm coming with winds picking up in the afternoon. That made us wary, especially around Windy Corner, since in 2017 Ed's toes suffered frostbite during a long single-carry from Camp 3. I recognized we might turn around before Camp 4 due to the high wind, but still wanted to move before the storm really blew in, and I decided to take a light load without skis and without a sled. By the time we got above Motorcycle Hill and on Squirrel Hill around noon, winds were gusting at least in the 20s and it was getting nasty. I had been scoping cache spots and saw large groups of climbers gathered before Windy Corner, where Denali Dispatches had reported blue ice and a rescue after a fall that was delayed four days due to poor conditions. I did not want to get stuck waiting in a line in the wind there and I did not want to get pinched regarding finding a cache spot, so the best conservative decision seemed to be caching at the top of Squirrel Hill and returning to Camp 3. Paul, who was on a solo permit, too, was relatively committed to Camp 4 after carrying his first load up there the day before, and we wished each other the best before he continued ascending. Ed Shred and I buried our cache, descended, and we liked our decision as the windy storm buffeted Camp 3 that afternoon.

Then Sunday, Day 5, the storm almost-fortuitously forced Ed and I to rest aside from caching our skis above Squirrel Hill in the evening. The next day on Monday, May 27, utilizing three small caches total, I ascended up to Camp 4 unroped, but often near Ed Shred until after Squirrel Hill. Immediately we ran into Paul at Camp 4 and met a young guy from Indiana, Nate. Paul, a kind logistical mastermind, began mentoring Nate at Camp 4, and Nate greeted us with a black trash bag of snow for water.

On Tuesday, everyone on the mountain wanted to move and take advantage of the great weather. In the morning I back-carried

some food I had left above Windy Corner, then around 3 p.m., I began carrying a load up the Headwall. I modestly aimed for at least the bergschrund and maybe a lap up the fixed lines, feeling fairly acclimated and strong. I hoped that cache would enable returning for a summit push whenever conditions permitted one. Felt excellent cruising up with skis awhile on the Headwall and then on crampons as I began ascending the fixed lines. I ran into Ed Shred and Paul as they descended the fixed lines after their cache run to Camp 5 with half their time waiting in traffic, but timing was perfect for me that day because all the traffic was early and gone late. I was happy to bury my light cache right atop the fixed lines without dancing farther on the ridge. I first heard about good and improving summit conditions while at Camp 3, and there was more



Overlooking Denali's Camp 3 above Motorcycle Hill.

Photo by Dan Koepke

encouraging news at Camp 4 as more summitters descended with stable weather, but I also met climbers who had been stuck at High Camp during the storm and returned with frostbitten fingers.

At Camp 4 I also learned about the numerous deaths on Mount Everest, which made me reflect on the overcrowding and inexperienced climbers I had seen during three consecutive seasons on Denali. Some examples contributing to injuries and rescues include impassable bottle-necking, guided clients completely unable to rappel and thus necessitating being lowered by guides on the last section of fixed lines, inefficient and dangerously-slow travel on fixed lines by rope teams with unnecessary and redundantly-redundant application of ropes. The Denali rangers described how to defecate on the mountain for about a half-hour in the mandatory orientation meeting, but they have literally said, "You can google that" when asked why there is no discussion of essential climbing and safety techniques. Sanitation proves paramount to safety, and that just seems backward. It would obviously be in everyone's best interest for the rangers to allocate even five minutes for checking that every single unguided and guided mountaineer *before flying to base camp* knows how to appropriately don crampons themselves,

how to ascend a fixed line, and perhaps even basic crevasse-rescue techniques; currently rangers are simply *enabling* incompetent climbers to compromise the safety of others as well as misuse public resources for rescues. Is this *status quo* some odd sort of job security, or just negligence? Incompetent climbers perpetually put other climbers and rangers at risk, and it seems like an outstanding opportunity – if not a responsibility – for the rangers to actively minimize the number of incompetent climbers on the mountain. The average unguided climber bears the brunt of this impact, but it also trickles down to ranger rescues, helicopter evacuations, and even medical attention that would otherwise be available for non-climbing citizens, too.

Let's address current international mountaineering ethics and values that are very pertinent after a deadly climbing season on Everest resulting from overcrowding and too many inexperienced climbers. Experienced as well as up-and-coming mountaineers in our community desperately need to step up and discuss this topic. To be clear: the Seven Summits is certainly not my "holy grail" as an Alaskan international mountaineer, and that also seems to be true for the best contemporary alpinists around the world. What happened to the simple, deep joy of camaraderie and pushing the limits of alpine *technique* and human performance compared to superficial social-media posts and sponsorship? Why do so many wannabe mountaineers value lists so much more than the experience? Okay, that answer seems obvious. Have elite mountaineers like David Lama, Tommy Caldwell, Hansjörg Auer, Ueli Steck, Alex Honnold, or other modern alpinists of the youngest millennial generation pursued the Seven Summits? Of course not! Very different from bold pioneers like Reinhold Messner profoundly expanding the limits of human performance in the alpine, millionaire businessman Dick Bass established his Seven Summits list as a commodity that could be bought and sold; this particularly appeals to greedy Ministries of Tourism, capitalist businesses, and hordes of inexperienced mountaineers endangering themselves, others, and the environment around the globe. Where is our community's leadership and what are they saying about this? For the love of the mountains and the planet, it needs to stop, or at least to be managed much more responsibly. Does Nepal's Ministry of Tourism treat Everest like a sacred mountain? No, a sacred mountain like Macchapucchre (22943 feet) is completely off-limits for climbing in Nepal; Mount Everest is simply open for business. *Responsible mountaineers: f--k Everest and the contrived Seven Summits, at least in the near future until there is adequate sustainability, which we must develop ourselves.* What's worth doing is worth doing right. *Responsibly learn your craft and create sustainability, or create your own meaning and your own list and your own "holy grail" if the mountains and wilderness are truly sacred to you.*

Weather reports were somewhat discouraging regarding going for the summit: they called for good conditions on Wednesday, May 29, before a storm moved in Thursday with heavy snow predicted for Saturday. Rather than ascending and getting stuck at Camp 5 to endure the storm, Ed Shred and I enjoyed skiing deep soft powder above Camp 4 on the West Rib Cutoff instead. By Thursday as snow blew low-visibility in and forced a rest day, the weather report evolved from heavy snow Saturday to snow, clouds, and wind below 15 miles per hour Saturday with clearer, but windier, weather expected to come Monday. Especially given the brief weather-window appearing, I was considering a solo 6,000-foot push from Camp 4, but that would be a bold move. The potential benefits of teamwork appealed to me more, but I knew coming to a consensus about a plan would be challenging and essential for effective teamwork on summit day.

Around 8.30 p.m. Thursday – our Day 9 – while discussing the newest 8 p.m. weather report with Ed and Paul, Paul briefly went out and brought Indiana Nate to join the conversation. While initially somewhat distracting and frustrating, that also proved to be productive for the three of us who had been on Denali before and knew each other best. Nate, who I later learned had brought quartz, but no lighter, on the mountain, wanted to simply wait for an ideal weather window, and he was even concerned about moving with a forecast of 70 percent chance of snow independent of the accumulation. Someone else casually and despondently added that there was not much we could do but wait a week or so for good weather.

I said, *"No, I am not just going to wait."* I knew this was not the type of blizzard or intense storm that would lock up Denali for a week at a time like what I had seen the past two years. Paul asked if I wanted to leave in the snow first thing in the morning. No, executing plans takes time and preparing that late in the cold seemed unwise: I planned to prepare the next day (Friday), listen to the next weather report Friday evening, hope to leave Saturday for Camp 5 without rushing, and perhaps summit Sunday if the conditions allowed. I believed Saturday's weak snowstorm would keep winds calm, like my summit day on Aconcagua in January 2018, and Saturday to Sunday appeared to be the best window in the next week, due to weather reports calling for the winds to increase into the 30s on Monday. High winds seemed to be the most dangerous factor regarding wind chill and frostbite. Incorporating a contingency plan, I believed Saturday would at least be good enough for a cache run to Camp 5; if the conditions were bad, we could simply leave my Trango-3 tent and more food there for next time. All that solid communication united the three of us and enabled us to efficiently continue making progress up the mountain together.

Fortunately, both Ed and Paul liked my assured idea and my perspective, especially after Friday's weather report reinforced my take on it. The weather predicted on the board at Camp 4 was far from perfect, but it was so beautifully interpretable that I took a picture of it Friday and asked Ed to take another picture Saturday when we knew it was time to ascend. Ed, Paul, and I ascended from Camp 4 early in the afternoon Saturday, June 1 – Day 11 for Ed and me – and we made great time to Camp 5, where we settled into a good spot among pre-existing snow-block walls. Each of us recognized that was our best chance ever as we prepared everything before crashing Saturday night.

Awaking at Camp 5 in the morning of Sunday, June 2, I may have barely felt my only altitude-headache, so I took half an aspirin, Ed felt great, too; that says a lot about our acclimation. We certainly felt the cold, though! Outside the tent in the cold, wiggling toes kept me busy as we geared up and melted snow for everyone's water. I was so ready to get moving and go! As we headed out of camp, the ranger informed us it was a "no rescue day" due to the wind. Despite that chilling warning, it felt fantastic to warm up on the Autobahn. Modestly inspired seeing the summit so far away as I made the turn around Denali Pass and climbing higher than I had ever been on Denali before, exploring the new terrain felt like a whole new world and I relished all of it. I cherished learning more about what it took to earn Denali's summit, now visible and so tangible, and I embraced my fatigue approaching Pig Hill behind some skiers who humbled me, even when they exhaustedly asked, "Why are we doing this?"

I knew countless reasons why I was en route to the top of Alaska and North America. That said, Ed and I were also very glad about not carrying our skis' weight up there that day. Ski-descending from the summit finally made sense to me compared to only imagining it before ever seeing it – so maybe next year. Denali's summit ridge was somewhat more exposed than I had envisioned, and reaching the summit was as sweet as could be, even with clouds obscuring some of our hard-earned, spectacular view. I clearly remember Ed and I hugging and congratulating each other at the summit, ensuring we got some decent summit photos for ourselves and others, and the fear of frostbite when exposing fingers to the cold. I also remember almost sadly deciding to descend and then cherishing every step, especially when high-fiving climbers we passed on their way up. Each and every step counted, particularly on the windblown Autobahn where snowy and windy conditions forced a down-climb traverse essentially the entire way back down to Camp 5, which had doubled or tripled in size during the day as snow cleared and winds increased. At Camp 5, Paul was immediately thrilled about returning to Denali in 2020 – it was only on the summit ridge that I knew for sure he turned around behind us after Denali Pass. Who else is Denali 2020 dreaming? Eddie and Bran-

don had arrived to Camp 5 and they congratulated me with happy hugs, and I accepted staying one more night there. Helping me appreciate aggressively gunning for the summit in that slim weather window that had emerged, Brandon and Eddie would endure five days at Camp 5 before summiting and also rescuing a mountaineer on the summit ridge. The camaraderie Paul, Ed Shred, and I shared together while I melted snow in the tent that night made the wind's ceaseless, noisy whipping a fair-enough trade.

Monday, June 3, the three of us were all eager to get out of Camp 5's wind and to descend to Camp 4, where we retrieved caches, distributed extra food and fuel, and organized gear in the sun. Then after Paul on snowshoes and before Ed with his skis and sled, I descended on skis past Windy Corner with almost no visibility whatsoever. Skiing past everyone piled up on the lower side of Windy Corner and down to the top of Squirrel Hill felt like a luxurious thrill, and then I began enjoying a sustainable sort of backwards side-sliding that I continued down Motorcycle Hill until the warm, sticky snow forced me to sidestep the very last part.

I looked forward to using the cached sled from Camp 3 down, and I enjoyed walking it like a dog and letting it pull me down to Camp 1. Paul and I ate at Camp 1 as we waited for Ed, and then the three of us roped up for one last bittersweet leg on the Kahiltna Glacier back to base camp. Paul was blown away that we descended 10,000 feet, and the three of us slept in our sleeping bags in the open air under the stars before the warm sun woke us. Waiting lazily for the plane to fly us back to Talkeetna, Denali provided one last dose of humility: we met Will Miner, 20 years old, who was a great guy and Denali's youngest solo summitter in history.



Ed Shred and Dan Koepke on Denali's summit.

Photo by Ed Shred