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# Peter Croft

## Mr. Yosemite

Peter Croft was born in eastern Canada. He loved to be outdoors. He was good at soccer and running track, but he didn't like playing on teams. He didn't like being told when or where he could play.

Peter and his dad were hikers. Peter felt free in the mountains. He would walk and walk until he got tired. Sometimes he and friends scrambled up mountains. But Peter did no technical climbing. Technical climbing is when you use ropes and pitons. A piton is a metal spike. It has a hole at one end to pull a climbing rope through.

Peter wasn't tall, but he was handsome. His

body was hard like the rock he climbed. When he was 17 years old, he read a book called *I Chose to Climb*, by Chris Bonnington. Chris had climbed some of the highest mountains in the world. Climbers must use ropes and pitons to climb up those high mountains.

So Peter tried technical climbing—and loved it! “I had found what I wanted to do forever,” he said.

Peter’s friend Richard had climbed a little. Peter and Richard became a climbing team. “It’s all we wanted to do,” Peter says.

Peter knew they were making many mistakes. Their rope was too thick. Their boots were too heavy and stiff.

Peter read climbing books. He read one book so many times it fell apart in his hands. But he knew that reading books wouldn’t make him a great climber.

So he said goodbye to Richard and headed to the Canadian Rockies. There he found big walls of smooth rock. He also found better climbers. He listened to them and learned what

they knew. Then he tried to climb like them.

One day he and a partner tried a harder climb, a 5.8. Climbs are rated 5.0 to 5.14.

Peter and his partner were roped together. At the hardest part of the climb, Peter shoved his boot toe into a small hole in the rock. He slipped and slid down the rock like a drop of water on a hot frying pan. He tried to grab a flake of rock. His fingers couldn't hold it and he slid faster. Just before he went over a cliff, the rope held by his partner stopped him. Peter had taken his first 25-foot fall.

Peter went up again. This time, he tried to lasso a tree. But the rope got caught in some rotten branches. He was afraid to test it. "This is a bad start," he said.

The next day they tried an easier 5.7 climb. By the time they reached the top, it was dark. Two other climbers were waiting there for them. One of them said, "We could tell you were new at this. So we stayed to help you down."

"Thanks," Peter said.

"What routes have you climbed?"

Peter told them about the 5.8 route the day before. But he didn't tell them about his fall. He was too ashamed. He thought, "It's my first day of real climbing, and it's also my first day of lying about it."

The other climber looked down at Peter's feet. "You need to get lighter boots," he said.

Peter got new lightweight boots. That first year in the Rockies, he climbed more than 100 days. He wanted to climb more, but it rained and snowed a lot. "I just want to get good enough to be called a climber," he told people. "I'm not thinking about being great."

He did harder climbs. One day he climbed a 5.11 route. Months later, he climbed a 5.12 route. No one in Canada climbed harder routes than Peter. One climber said to him, "You're good, and you could be great. You should go to Yosemite."

Peter knew about Yosemite. Some people said it was the most beautiful place in the world. It has steep granite walls and 2,000-foot waterfalls. The weather is good and the

climbing is world class.

So Peter moved to the climber's campground in Yosemite Valley. There were many granite walls to climb. But Peter found other climbs, too. He loved going into the mountains alone. Sometimes he would go for 15 hours. On the same day, he hiked, scrambled, and free soloed. When you free solo, you don't use ropes. So Peter carried only a light backpack. In it he had a water bottle, water filter, sweater, and a few energy bars.

Peter didn't know anyone who did this. He thought, "I've created a new sport. I'll call it Light Weight Alpine Climbing."

For the next few years, Peter did all types of climbing. One year, he joined an expedition to Nepal. Some of the highest mountains in the world are in Nepal. Peter and seven other climbers set out to climb an icy peak named Langtan Lirung, 23,700 feet high.

For days the climbers built camps, each one higher up the mountain. As they moved from one camp to another, they adjusted to the

altitude. The higher up a mountain you are, the thinner the air. Climbers have to go up slowly.

Peter and a man named Reg were the strongest at high altitude. So one day they climbed ahead to find the best route. They went up without sleeping bags or tents. They carried only ropes, ice axes, and water.

The weather had been good for weeks. Peter and Reg were 3,000 feet above the last camp when they saw the first clouds. They looked like cotton balls. “Beautiful,” Peter thought.

They were slow to see the danger. Minutes later, a storm hit. Lightning flashed across the sky. Thunder rumbled and boomed. It began to snow.

“Let’s get down,” Peter yelled. He had to raise his voice because the wind was screaming in their ears.

“You lead,” Reg yelled back.

They left their ropes behind so they could move faster. They scrambled along an icy ridge. The wind almost blew them off the ridge.



Lightning exploded all around them.

“Hey, man!” Reg shouted. “My eye glasses are buzzing.”

“The charge is passing through your metal rims. Better take them off,” Peter yelled. The lightning was close! Every year lightning hit people, and some of them were killed.

“Boom!” Lightning hit so close, it knocked them off their feet. They landed on their backs in soft snow. “That was close,” they said at the same time. They were scared, but they kept moving.

They reached a cliff. It had been an easy climb before, but now it was covered with snow.

“No way we can get down that,” Peter said. “We’ll have to go back up and get our ropes.”

Reg just nodded. If Peter said they needed ropes, then they needed ropes.

When they returned to the cliff top, it was dark. They set their ropes. They hoped to slide down them to the bottom of the cliff.

“Look!” Reg shouted. “Your boots.”

Peter looked down at his feet. The metal

rings on his boots glowed.

“Lightning!” Peter shouted. He shoved Reg, and they both dived into the snow.

“Boom!” The lightning seemed to hit right where they had stood.

They sat up. Peter looked at Reg and shook his head. “We won’t get down tonight.”

“I know,” Reg said.

They were about 19,000 feet above sea level. Peter had never slept above 15,000 feet. And this time he did not even have a sleeping bag. Now he and Reg had only sweaters. Peter wondered— would they live through the night? Or would they freeze to death? Peter said nothing to Reg about his fears.

It grew dark and stopped snowing. It got colder and colder. Peter knew there was only one way to stay alive. He grabbed his ax and swung it at an icy slope.

“What are you doing?” Reg asked.

“We have to keep moving to keep warm,” Peter said.

And so they did. They swung their ice axes.

They jumped up and down, and pounded each other on the back. They rubbed their hands together. They threw rocks and rolled boulders down the mountain. Sometimes the boulders made sparks as they bounced off other rocks.

“Cool,” Reg said.

Even when Peter stood in one place, he moved his muscles. Over and over, he tensed and relaxed his legs and arms. He did it thousands of times.

By the middle of the night, Peter knew they were going to make it. They were cold, but not cold enough to freeze to death.

“I can still feel my toes,” Reg said.

“We’re going to make it,” Peter said.

The mountain was pretty near the equator. At the equator, the nights are about as long as the days. Peter and Reg had to wait 11 hours for first morning light.

At last, the black sky turned gray. At first the men did not move. They just stared out at all the icy peaks. A fresh coat of snow covered the mountain valleys below.

Reg said, “It looks like heaven.”

“It’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen,” said Peter.

After they got down the mountain, Peter wrote in his diary, “I thought that night was going to be the worst time of the trip. But it turned out to be the best time. We were afraid, but in the end it wasn’t that bad. I learned a lot about how I handle stress. It made me a stronger climber. It also taught me this: In spite of a cold night without sleep, you can still have a great time.”

Back in Yosemite, Peter got a new idea. He would climb both El Capitan and Half Dome on the same day. They were the two most famous rock walls in Yosemite, maybe in the world.

Other climbers said, “You’re crazy. You haven’t even climbed one of them. How are you going to do both?”

Peter knew he wasn’t crazy. He just needed the right partner. He needed John Bachar.

John was almost as famous as Half Dome. He climbed all the hard, short routes. Some

climbers called him “Mr. Yosemite.”

Peter didn’t know John, but he had seen him. He was afraid to talk to him. John was a god to him. “How could I ask John to climb with me? It would be like asking Michael Jordan to be on my basketball team,” he says.

Then one day, John walked up to Peter and asked, “How would you like to climb El Cap and Half Dome in one day?”

Peter felt his hair stand on end. He said, “I can’t believe it. I had the same idea.”

They began to climb together. They even did a practice climb of Half Dome. Neither one had ever climbed it before. They made a good team, both on and off the rock.

Two days before the big climb, John told Peter, “Do nothing for the next 48 hours. Lie in your tent, close your eyes, eat a lot.”

Peter did not believe in rest days. He said, “We’ll get out of shape in 2 days. Can’t I do some easy climbs?”

“No. Lie in your tent. Even if you can’t sleep, close your eyes,” John insisted.

They set their alarm for 11:00 p.m. At midnight they stood at the base of El Cap. Peter said, “John, you were right. I feel strong.”

They hoped to climb by the light of the moon, but it was overcast. Maybe it’s a sign, Peter thought. Maybe we should come back next week.

John said, “Let’s go for it. We can come down if we have to.” A minute later, the clouds cleared and the moon shined bright.

Half way up 3,000-foot El Capitan, Peter pulled on a flake of rock. The flake loosened and came part way out. Peter looked at two climbers below them. If that rock had fallen, it probably would have killed someone, he thought.

In a flash, John moved over and pushed the flake back in place. Peter said to himself, “He was so fast, I barely saw him. Maybe he really is Superman.”

They did the Nose route of El Cap in 10 hours. It was fast, but Peter knew John could have climbed faster. Peter realized he had

slowed him down.

They hiked down to Yosemite Valley. John's wife met them with a car and drove them toward Half Dome. As the two men hiked to the base of Half Dome, Peter was the stronger hiker. It felt good not to slow John down.

At the base of Half Dome, John and Peter felt fresh and strong. But other climbers were ahead of them. They would have to pass seven parties of climbers on the rock face.

About 900 feet up, Peter reached the first climber. Before Peter could say anything, the other climber said, "You can't pass. There is no way you can do that up here."

John was supposed to take the lead, so Peter waited for him. He'd let John talk to the guy. After all, everyone knew John as the super hero climber.

When the other climber saw John, he smiled and said, "Oh, John Bachar. Sure, you can go ahead."

An hour later, Peter came upon three German climbers eating lunch on a ledge. They

asked, “Are you John Bachar? Are you John Bachar?”

“No,” Peter said.

The Germans looked sad. But they smiled when Peter said, “John Bachar is 100 feet below me. And he’s climbing up.”

When John reached the ledge, the Germans treated him like a hero. They loved being on the same ledge with him. And when John asked if they could pass, they said yes at once.

Farther up Half Dome, a thunderstorm hit. It soaked Peter and John to the bone. But they were so strong now, and nothing could stop them. They reached the top of Half Dome about dinnertime. They had climbed it in just over four hours. It was the fastest time ever.

Now there were two super heroes in Yosemite.