

# Yosemite's El Capitan stonewalls but doesn't stop free climbers

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Somewhere up on that impossibly vertical rock face, two men were inching toward accomplishing what had never been done before.

Tommy Caldwell, 36, and Kevin Jorgeson, 30, could become the first to "free climb" the Dawn Wall. They are propelling themselves up this 3,000-foot section of Yosemite's El Capitan using only fingers and toes wedged into the granite's tiniest cracks and indentations. They use ropes only to catch themselves when they fall — which they do often — and not to aid in their ascent.

You look up and you see the possibility of doing something almost insurmountable with optimism, creativity, perseverance, friendship. - Tim Fulkerson, 51, of Portola Valley, Calif., watching the El Capitan free climbers

Of the 100 routes up El Capitan, only 13 have been free climbed, and the Dawn Wall is far harder than the others. In the rock-climbing world, the feat is monumental. But even to those who might not have followed the sport, the quest of two climbers about to finish what was thought impossible resonates.

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## FOR THE RECORD

In an earlier version of this post, the photo caption mistakenly identified Tommy Caldwell as the climber and Kevin Jorgeson as sitting on the platform. Jorgeson is the climber.

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"You contrast it with the killings in Paris, with the darkness in the world," said Tim Fulkerson, 51, of Portola Valley, Calif., watching Sunday in the meadow at the foot of El Capitan with his 13-year-old rock-climber son Ross. "You look up and you see the possibility of doing something almost insurmountable with optimism, creativity, perseverance, friendship. You see two guys holding on with bleeding fingers."

Caldwell, who now lives in Estes Park, Colo., grew up climbing in Yosemite and is a familiar and beloved face to many in the park.

About eight years ago he got the idea that the Dawn Wall could be free climbed. It became an obsession, he said. Jorgeson, of Santa Rosa, Calif., heard of his quest and offered his expertise in bouldering.

Caldwell and Jorgeson have trained for five years. They made two other attempts but were foiled by a storm, a broken ankle and exhaustion.

Ross Fulkerson, who made it to the nationals in competitive rock climbing, has seen them on the wall in other years. He knows Jorgeson — he recognized the climber's black Ford truck parked at the side of the meadow waiting for his return.

"The most exciting part for me is that they're going to do it after trying for so long," said the teen, who dreams of traveling the world and free climbing unknown routes.

Sunday marked Day 16 for Caldwell and Jorgeson, and the point where the worst may be behind them.

Each segment of the climb is called a pitch. When climbers fall, they have to go back to the beginning of that section.

Jorgeson was tested by Pitch 15. He fell 11 times over seven days, scraping the skin off his fingers. At some point he was going to have to tell his partner to go on without him.

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On Friday, his fingers finally held in the razor-thin crack that had almost stopped his dream. People gathered in the meadow cheered so loud that Jorgeson could hear the screams from 1,000 feet below.

On Sunday morning, while the climbers rested, Colleen O'Connor, a retired historian from San Diego, joined the onlookers.

"To not come here would be like being alive when Seabiscuit was running and not go to see him race," she said, referring to the thoroughbred who lifted hopes during the Great Depression. "When times are dark, something has always come along to remind us of what we're capable of accomplishing."

But this time, because of technology, an epic quest has taken on an intimacy not seen before.

The climbers are on social media from the wall, and photographers are climbing with them and sending out images.

Caldwell's wife, Becca, a climber and photographer, keeps a blog that chronicled how closely she and Caldwell's courtship intertwined with his Dawn Wall quest. She recently posted photos of their toddler, Fritz, talking to his father from the wall via computer.

"Because of technology I've actually watched Tommy in his little tent buffeted by wind. I've seen his wife crying as he talks to his son," O'Connor said. "I read Kevin's words when he finished the hardest part."

On Sunday, phone reception was spotty in the meadow. But a gathering of onlookers from various countries kept checking for word from the climbers.

In the meantime, they swapped bits of information: Caldwell is climbing with a missing finger — he accidentally cut it off with a saw. He was once kidnapped on a rock-climbing expedition in Kyrgyzstan.

A tweet made it to some phones and the phones were passed around. Jorgeson's words began: "Momentum is a powerful force."

He was close to reuniting with his partner at Wino Tower, a rare ledge on the Dawn Wall.

The most daunting parts of the climb were behind them.

All that remained is for the partners to finish the climb together, with the world watching from screens and a meadow in Yosemite.

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