

The Agony and the Ecstasy

Climbing and skiing Mount Baker turns out to be a daunting task.

By Scott Harder

So there I was, dangling the majority of my body weight on two ice screws that were plunged into the side of an overhanging serac. Why were we doing this again? It was 9 a.m., and I had 20 minutes worth of sleep in the past 25 hours, and we would be awake for another 15 hours before any of us got close to any sort sleeping.

The day had finally come. Sergio Verdina and I got what we wanted: a chance to climb the North Ridge on Mount Baker. And attempt to do it in a day. Our new thing is all about getting down really fast in any type of quick transportation whether it be bikes, skis, or whatever is available. I chose to bring my skis and Sergio was to bring his splitboard. I was quite hesitant about this scenario since the route is technical. I assumed the skis would get in my way on some of the steeper ice as the tails hung down near my ankles. Then I was shown an image of a climber on the Coleman Headwall in Nelson's book and he was carrying skis, so I thought, "Why not?"

Sergio and I drove up to the Heliotrope Trailhead on Sunday night and met Dan Young and Cory Groom. We arranged our gear for what lay ahead and got situated for a few hours of sleep in the back of the Subaru. We got to bed around 9 p.m., and then awoke to Dan and Cory arriving right next to us. We told tales of previous trips, nestling in our bags around 10:30 p.m.

At midnight we awoke to the infamous quiet beeps of the Suunto Alarm clock. All in all we got about 15 to 20 minutes worth of sleep. We started walking by 12:45 a.m. It was quick moving, even though my pack felt like it weighed too much and the ski boots were quite heavy on our feet.

We hit snow as soon as we broke out of the trees and found ourselves heading straight for the toe of the Coleman Glacier. Once we got there we roped up and headed up the incline that takes you towards Heliotrope Ridge—and high camp for the majority of climbers ascending the Coleman/Deming Glacier route.

From there I was in front and followed some tracks that went in the vague direction of the North Ridge

never made its way toward us. We found our exit slope onto the North Ridge by following more steps and ski tracks and traversed a pretty steep slope that had perfect snow and ice conditions.

Once we got onto the North Ridge we took a much needed rest break, and ate some food. It was 7 a.m. and we were all feeling pretty good. Except me. It couldn't have been altitude sickness, since we were only at



Dan Young and Sergio Verdina on the Coleman Glacier Traverse.

over the crevassed Coleman Glacier. It was already starting to turn light as soon as we started the traverse, so it was pretty straightforward. After a few interesting negotiations past some big gaping crevasses we found ourselves trudging over avalanche debris that the Coleman Headwall had sweated off of its flanks. Earlier that morning we heard some icefall up above, but it

about 8,000 feet or so. It felt like the flu. The sun warmed us all up as we gazed upon brilliantly lit-up peaks far into Canada and the remote regions of the North Cascades. Dan and Cory took off as Sergio and I rested for a few minutes longer. The going was very slow from here on out and Sergio and I slowly made our way up toward the imposing "Ice Cliff Crux" of the

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North Ridge. The majority of the cliff is almost vertical and about two pitches in length (approx 60 meters). Dan and Cory tried to negotiate the easiest way to go, and wound up doing the far left ramp exit that generally has an easy route onto the upper North Ridge. But since the route changes continuously from the movement of the glacier, we found ourselves in interesting terrain.

Cory belayed Dan up to the first belay and then Dan brought Cory up. Sergio and I followed and used their protection and we all met at the first

sluff on a vertical 15-foot wall, and highly exposed. We set up our own personal anchors, and after much turmoil Sergio finally led out as it appeared to be bomber ice underneath all the sluff. The traverse out was pretty scary as it was a drop-off down the Ice Cliff, but once up and over the wall, it was easy climbing that stayed at 35 to 40 degrees for the majority of the climb to the summit. Sergio and Cory were both balling up really bad on their crampons, since there was about six inches of fresh snow or spindrift on the upper slopes,

the final function. Since I wound up being the last one to the summit I had the pleasure of cleaning the last pitch and topped out with five pickets on me, making it most difficult to walk.

We arrived at the summit at around 5 p.m. only 16 hours since we had left the car, and now barely surviving on no sleep in the last 33 hours. We rested on the summit for about 30 minutes, and we all swapped gear since Sergio and I would be making a quicker descent than Dan and Cory. Once I got my skis on my feet, and off my back, I was darn happy. My feet were totally trashed, though. After I got my skis on, I found it quite difficult to maintain direction so I checked all my adjustments. I realized that my legs had just given up. That's all, complete exhaustion! Sergio dropped in on the Roman Wall and I followed down the 1,800-foot slope. The corn snow was perfect. I had to rest several times on the descent down the wall as my legs locked up in pain. We reached the saddle in no time and made a darn quick descent to the upper camps as we glided across the Coleman Glacier, rather flat, but fun to cruise through. The lines down from 6,400 feet to the trail were pretty bad and runneled out. It was difficult skiing, pretty much survival skiing the entire time. We reached the trail in a little under an hour from the summit while taking gear back and forth during the descent. We kept as fast a pace as possible to avoid the pain we were enduring. The last mile out was excruciating for both Sergio and me. Our ski boots were rubbing us raw. Eventually, Sergio lost the battle: his feet turned to hamburger.

In the end, we were happy that we had brought our skis. The descent was completely awesome, and the route top quality. Doing Baker in a day is the only way to go. If you're into masochism, that is.

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Sergio Verdina boards down the Upper Coleman Glacier.

belay. The next bit of climbing was junky. Even though it looked icy it was crust on snow, which I continually punched through. I'm not sure what lay underneath me at the time, but I assume it was a very large moat.

Sergio and I bypassed Dan and Cory at this "Serac Traverse" pitch that was quite interesting as it was overhanging and the exposure was straight down to the chaos of the Roosevelt Glacier. Sergio belayed me up to the second belay and told me that it was a dead end and that we had to retreat. I knew at this point that retreating would be more dangerous. This was a "no fail" route, meaning you must continue upward and onward and can't go back. Sergio did not want to lead it as it appeared to be

and the last thing we wanted was someone to slide off the ridge and down the Coleman Headwall. That being said, we climbed the remainder of the route with running belays that took forever and a day. I had never placed so many pickets and screws on a route in my life. The weather was still cooperating with us, mostly sunny, but a cold breeze that was always present. All I had on was my short sleeve shirt and my shell jacket, wishing that I could put on my down jacket... but to do so meant I had to take my pack off, as well as the skis, and then dig to the bottom of my pack. It's just one of those things you tell yourself to do over and over but it never really makes it was from your brain to your extremities to perform