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The Calculated Madness of Marc-Andre Leclerc

DREW COPELAND • SEP 1, 2017

Update: In March of 2018, Marc-André Leclerc and partner Ryan Johnson disappeared after summiting a new route in Alaska's Mendenhall Towers. [Read the obituary here.](#)

Unroped and alone, Marc-Andre Leclerc moves cautiously up the grey diorite of Mt. Slesse's East Buttress Direct, a 2,500-foot 5.10+. He pauses at the friable crux and then pushes through, gunning for a link-up of three routes to the 8,002-foot summit in a single day. It's late August 2014. This massive stone mountain is in Leclerc's backyard of the Cascade Mountains of British Columbia, where he first climbed as a child.

After climbing for two hours, Leclerc tops out. He picks his way to the summit proper, where he stops briefly before descending via the Southwest Buttress. And then it's on to the next 2,500 feet of climbing. All told, Leclerc wraps up the three routes—East Buttress Direct, *Navigator Wall* (5.10+), and Northeast Buttress (5.9+), comprising 7,000 feet of climbing—in just over 12 hours. It is a monumental accomplishment, one among many over the past few years for the 24-year-old. As he will blog, during one descent he repeats the mantra *I feel like a cat, I feel like a ninja! I feel like a ninja cat! An ALPINE ninja cat!* much to his own amusement.

Today, Leclerc is based in the Fraser River Valley with his girlfriend, Brette Harrington. (Harrington is herself an accomplished soloist and alpinist, known for her 2015 free solo of *Chiaro di Luna*, a 2,500-foot 5.11a on Aguja Saint-Exupery in the Fitzroy Massif.) You may recognize Leclerc for his February 2015 solo of Cerro Torre's *The Corkscrew* linkup (5.10d A1 90 degrees; 3,900 feet), a circumnavigation of the Patagonian spire. Patagonia veteran Rolando Garibotti, who wrote the guidebook [PataClimb.com](#), noted at his site that Leclerc's ascent was one of "earth-shifting proportions, by far the hardest route ever soloed on Cerro Torre and only the seventh solo overall." On the route, Leclerc climbed almost entirely ropeless, self-belaying in only two spots by back-looping his cord. Or perhaps you know about Leclerc and Colin Haley's first ascent in January 2015 of *La Travesía del Oso Buda* (5.10a A1 M6; 3,900 feet; aka the *Reverse Torre Traverse*), a skyline linkup of the Cerro Torre Group. Or perhaps you heard about his summer 2016 first ascent with Harrington and Joshua Lavigne of the West Buttress (VI 5.12a C1) of Great Sail Peak on Baffin Island. Or you may know him from his backyard granite area Squamish, where he's speed-soloed the *Grand Wall* (III 5.11 A0) as part of a 17-hour "house-to-house" marathon day that involved free soloing, rope soloing, and aiding 32 pitches on the Stawamus Chief; and repeated *Bruce Lee Vs. the Kiss Army* (5.13 R/X), Andrew Boyd's hairball 2004 headpoint.

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Despite his accomplishments, Leclerc is still after the raw experience of being in nature. He prefers the undoctored and the unknown over more "newsworthy" feats like alpine speed records, though many of his biggest days, like that on Slesse, certainly qualify. With his toothy smile and Bob Ross hair, Leclerc is far from imposing. But watch him move over rock or ice or mixed terrain, and you can see that he has the gift.

Leclerc grew up in Agassiz, British Columbia, an hour and a half east of Vancouver. It was here, in this quiet agricultural community low in the Fraser River Valley and just north of Mount Slesse, that Leclerc learned to climb.

“As a kid interested in the mountains, it really could not have been more ideal: an infinite amount of hiking and scrambling big and small stuff, and no rules or ‘established norms,’” recalls Leclerc. “It was an independent, choose-your-own-adventure learning style.” He would roam the Cascades by himself, exploring and scampering up rocks. When Leclerc was nine, he found a more formal introduction to climbing at Project Climbing, the gym in Abbotsford.

In his early days, Leclerc dabbled, getting a handle on plastic, but in high school the notion of bigger objectives began to dawn on him. Leclerc and a friend from high school often went scrambling together in the Cascades; they even tried their hand at technical rock, though, recalls Leclerc, “neither of us knew what we were doing.” He ordered pitons from the Mountain Equipment Co-operative, and learned pitoncraft from an old military book.

For Leclerc’s fifteenth birthday, his mother gave him *Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills*. He began making solo forays onto the six-pitch Falcon Crest Wall at Harrison Bluffs, teaching himself rope systems as he went. That year, he took his first shot at climbing the *Grand Wall*. It was an inauspicious start: He and a partner approached via the 5.10 slab *Apron Strings*, but were turned around on the smooth granite before even reaching the *Grand Wall* pitches.

Nonetheless, Leclerc’s fire remained. By systematically applying himself, he has honed his skills on rock. In September 2013, he speed-soloed the *Grand Wall* in a record-setting 57:30. That October, he freed *The Last Temptation of St. Anthony* (5.13 R/X) on the North Walls. Leclerc described the crux fourth pitch, a thin face originally surmounted via A5 hooking, as a “contender for one of the boldest leads on The Chief” at Gripped.com.

- [Related: Leclerc Sets Grand Wall Speed Record](#)

“It seems to me that he can’t get enough climbing,” says his friend Jason Kruk. The two met in Squamish early in the 2000s and climbed a few routes together, notably the *Free Grand* (5.13b) and *Genus Loci* (5.12b). “He can deal with the runouts, the old pro, the licheny rock, the missing bolts,” says Kruk. “He’s put in so many miles and so many hours doing the progression that he can go ground-up on routes that other people wouldn’t contemplate.”

Kruk recalls a 2013/2014 trip to Patagonia with Leclerc. Amongst a spate of bad weather, they ran up the ice couloir *Tolo O Nada* (85 degrees; 1,150 feet) on El Mocho on New Year’s Day 2014. Once they got to the steep and roped up, Leclerc couldn’t be subdued. “He just didn’t stop climbing,” says Kruk. “He led for hundreds of meters and he didn’t really even put any pro in—maybe a piece.”

In February 2015, Leclerc soloed *The Corkscrew* linkup on Cerro Torre. It was the first time he had attempted to solo a big route like this without previous inspection. “You just don’t know what’s around the next corner. ... It leaves this unknown, where you are questing up the mountain and figuring it out as it continues to unfold,” he says. The route involved 5.10d and WI5, traversing across icefields, and navigating around ice towers.

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That season, along with Haley, Leclerc established *Directa de la Mentira*, the first complete ascent of Cerro Torre’s North Face; and they completed the *Reverse Torre Traverse*, with its thousands of feet of vertical mixed climbing and descent over variable ice and rock, and tunneling through overhanging snow and rime mushrooms. The pair took four days.

Back in Patagonia on September 17, 2016, Leclerc made the first winter solo of Torre Egger, linking into *Titanic* (5.10a A2 WI4; 3,100 feet) on its upper half. He returned that September 28 and 29 with Austin Siadak to re-create the solo for film, in the process freeing the integral *Titanic* (5.12b M5 WI4). The free ascent took two days, with a bivy halfway up. As Siadak recalls, Leclerc would lead a pitch, fix for Siadak, rappel, untie, and solo 5.10+ for the camera high on the sheer flanks of Torre Egger. “None of it seems very difficult for him,” says Siadak. When they returned to El Chalten, the pair drank happy-hour beers and Leclerc wrestled with the shaggy dog at their hostel. In town and in camp, he listened to Elton John’s “Rocket Man” because it reminded him of what it’s like to be alone on a wall. “He never seemed like he was taking things too seriously,” says Siadak.

Says Garibotti, “The solos that Marc-Andre has done in Patagonia are a clear step forward. They are of a level of difficulty and commitment previously unheard of, not only in Patagonia, but anywhere.”

These days, when Leclerc isn’t traveling, he relishes his time back in the Fraser Valley. Here, he continues his ongoing love affair with the somber Mt. Slesse. Seven months after his Slesse triple linkup, in March 2015, Leclerc made the first repeat of the Northeast Buttress in winter—also its first winter solo. Ropeless, Leclerc encountered difficulties up to M5+, including a crux slab dotted with barely-there patches of ice. In an article at Gripped.com, he estimated he spent five hours on the route; by comparison, the first winter ascent, by Jim Nelson and Kit Lewis in 1986, took seven days and involved direct aid on the upper headwall.

In June 2016, Leclerc traveled to Baffin Island’s Walker Arm with Harrington and Lavigne, to Great Sail Peak. The expedition took the trio six weeks and involved paddling up the Walker Arm, trekking over frozen lakes, and immersing themselves in the sea of sheer granite. Harrington and Leclerc had first met and began climbing together in Squamish in 2012; they began dating a year later. “The amount of times that Marc is able to get the rope up—when, say, anyone else I know would bail—is so frequent that it would be limiting to point out one single instance,” Harrington says. She cites the pair’s first ascent of Lady Peak’s North Face, in the Cheam Range above the Fraser Valley, this spring as an example. In a range known for its chossy, compact rock and lack of pro, Leclerc danced up the forbidding face, stopping to place an occasional piton—including a Bulldog ice piton pounded into frozen moss—as he led out above belays that would have ripped in a lead fall.

Last October, along with Harrington, Leclerc put up *Hidden Dragon* (5.12b; 11 pitches), on the Chinese Puzzle Wall across from Slesse, taking eight days. “We could only speculate about the size and inclination of the Chinese Puzzle Wall,” Harrington says, “until we actually hiked up to the base with our big-wall gear, ready to climb.” Along the route, which tackles a wildly overhanging diamond-shaped face, the pair cleaned dirt- and moss-filled cracks in order to eventually free all the pitches. They endured a core-shot rope, damaged in a monster fall Harrington took on the “Mirage Corner.” It was the first ascent of a wall that had turned around all previous suitors, known, wrote Harrington in the 2017 *American Alpine Journal*, for “huge, looming blocks the size of grand pianos suspended by unknown forces.”

Leclerc has been pushing his climbing (and climbing, generally) in a new direction. “Three or four years ago, I started taking double ropes and trying to onsight runout trad climbs,” he says. “As soon as I started experimenting with that style, I didn’t want to headpoint anymore. Taking it up a number grade by top roping it for a week didn’t seem interesting to me.”

Leclerc has also moved away from speed records. He’ll still push himself, “but more for training and learning what my body is capable of. There’s something to be said for going up on a route in winter that you’ve never been on before. Maybe you get lost on the approach? You lose a couple of hours; it’s not really about how fast you did it.”

As he sets his sights on the next project, Leclerc draws inspiration from the pioneering big-wall climbers in Patagonia. “They were climbing the biggest, steepest faces of the Torres,” he says, citing the vision and dedication of the Italian Ermanno Salvaterra. Along with three partners, Salvaterra was the first to ascend Cerro Torre in winter (1985) and also the first to attempt the Cerro Standhart to Cerro Torre traverse—a visionary effort that remained uncompleted for over 20 years, until Garibotti and Haley’s first ascent in 2008.

Leclerc holds reverence for the efforts of those who came before: “Of course, with the constraints of the time, they were doing these climbs either with fixed ropes or Salvaterra was dragging a steel box up the mountain for 30 days, and this type of thing,” he says. Leclerc sees using his all-around skills to make the old new again: To take a fast-and-light approach to the big, technical faces, many neglected in the modern era. “Up the middle of the steepest wall, but having a lightweight ledge. Still climbing in alpine style, you know?” says Leclerc. He envisions continuing to fuse multiple styles—from the free, aid, ice, and big-wall realms—in the pursuit of a single objective.

Mt. Slesse could be the perfect proving ground. Leclerc wants to climb the East Face, a shield of grey rock, in winter, a feat that’s never been realized. He envisions it as a sort of big wall, sleeping in a portaledge until reaching the Terrace, the only decent bivy, at two-thirds height. From there, he’d make an alpine-style push for the summit.

Like climbing itself, climbers evolve, progressing through different eras and stages as they endeavor on. At the outset of mountaineering, there was no other style aside from heading up by any means available. As climbing continues to unfold, new methods come into existence and the sport fragments into different disciplines. There aren’t many climbers today who can merge the styles at a high level and go big in the alpine. It takes too much practice and discipline. Leclerc is one of them. Still, despite his prowess, for Leclerc it’s remained about nature and the experience.

“More and more, climbing is where I escape and live in this beautiful place,” says Leclerc, “even if it’s just for a few days, where I explore and climb, and be there.”

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