

Barrier 14: from Eolus to Longs

by Jerry Wagener

*"Old and young climbers alike sometimes discuss the prospects for climbing the fourteeners in fourteen days in hushed, reverent tones."
Gerry Roach in Colorado's Fourteeners, Fulcrum Publishing, 1992*

The phone in room 219 rings and rings, with no answer. So I dial 107, and immediately the sleepy-sounding voice of the Leadville Inn manager answers.

"I'll be right down", she says, "we've been expecting you. Your party has not yet arrived."

It's nearly midnight and the "party" - Jeff Wagener and his support team - is spending a rare night in a motel instead of camping at some remote trailhead. I'm just in from near sea level to join them for the homestretch in Jeff's quest to become the first person to climb all of Colorado's 14ers (the 54 mountains over 14,000' high - or 56, depending on how you count Cameron and Challenger Pt) in less than fourteen days. This is the tail end of day 12 and, if he was successful on Snowmass, Capitol, and Castle today, he will have climbed 46 of the 54 in the first 12 days. Just 8 more to go with two days left.

Originally, day 13 was to be an easy 4-peak "rest" day, finishing on day 14 with Longs Peak and Pikes Peak. But the day 13 plan was moved to day 8, as Jeff was exhausted following days 5-7 and he needed a break before the Huron-Missouri-Belford-Oxford-Harvard-Columbia marathon day. The latter, day 9, had been the longest

(though not the trickiest) day so far, starting at 5:30am and finally emerging, via headlamp, from the darkness at 11:30pm. (The trickiest had been day 5, involving an unscheduled 5.4 downclimb off of Ellingwood, following summiting Little Bear and Blanca, when the ridge to Lindsey deteriorated.) The adjustments to the schedule would make the last two days long and hard.

I check into rooms 219 and 206 and pay the bill, as we would be leaving early the next morning, then drop off to sleep next to the phone in room 219. At 12:30am the phone rings. It's Monica, a member of the support team - they had just arrived after a long but successful day. I rush out to meet them: Monica Davis, then Jim DiCarlo, Dave Hauser, Jeff, and finally Jean Wagener, all looking a bit like death warmed over. They mumble greetings and head straight for the beds. It was plain to see that the record pace had taken as great a toll on the support team as on Jeff himself.

Unlike a long-time-on-the-mountain expedition, like Denali, where the climbers do all the work themselves, an expedition such as this is more like a presidential visit in which the unsung support team bust their butts behind the scenes doing the million

and one things needed to make it possible for the endeavor to succeed.

Jean and I talk for a minute, set the alarm for 4:30, and crawl in with the already-asleep others. A meaningful first meeting with my bedmate, Jim, whom I hadn't met before, would have to wait for later in the day. With my arrival, Dave, Jim, and Monica could sleep in for a change, and luxuriate with a shower, while Jean and I run support for Jeff in the morning.

At the 4:30 alarm Jean and I jump out of bed, pull on warm jackets against the chill mountain air and, in the motel parking lot, start the two-burner propane gas stove. On one burner we heat water for a quart of hot chocolate, on the other burner a large pan of sliced potatoes and onions. The pancake batter gets mixed while the potatoes are frying. At 5am we get Jeff up (no mean feat), serve him the hot chocolate and fried potatoes, and begin frying the pancakes. By 5:30 Jeff is still half asleep, but stuffed, and we are ready to roll. Jean and I haven't eaten any of that feast (no time); but even with meals like that (including lots of syrup on the pancakes) Jeff is rapidly losing weight. An important function of the support team is to pump food into him at every opportunity.

The other major function of the support team is to get him to the trailheads while he sleeps. This sounds simple, but rare are the days like Huron-...-Columbia in which he is deposited at the trailhead in the morning and they don't see him until he finishes that night. A more typical day involves picking him up after one or two peaks and making a mad dash to another trailhead for the next one, followed by yet a third ferrying jaunt. During these between-trailhead dashes Jeff catches up on some much-needed sleep (lack of adequate rest is turning out to be a bigger problem than losing weight).

Today, day 13, is another one of those three mountain, three trailhead days. While Jeff sleeps, Jean and I drive from Leadville down route 24 to Clear Creek Canyon Road. Twelve miles in, at Winfield, we head north for two miles on a 4-wheel-drive road to the LaPlata trailhead at 11,000'. It is about 7 miles round trip to LaPlata, with nearly a 3500' elevation gain; Jeff starts at 6:30 and thinks it will take him about four hours or a little less. It's a beautiful morning; Jean and I decide to go to Buena Vista for breakfast.

It takes an hour to get to Buena Vista, and 45 minutes for a leisurely breakfast of omelets and homefries. Back at the trailhead, we arrange the car for a quick getaway and set up the stove for a quick meal. At 9:30 I start up the trail to meet Jeff and ten minutes later find a good vantage point (I'm not exactly sure which way he might

come down). In another ten minutes he emerges from the trees, moving briskly; it's taken him 3 hours and 20 minutes round trip. For the entire two weeks, with a couple of exceptions, he has consistently beaten his time estimates, which are based upon the conservative (for him) formula of an hour for each 3 miles plus an hour for each 1500' of elevation gain.

Jean lights the stove as we approach and has a quart of juice ready. By the time Jeff has shed his elaborate fanny pack (the only thing he carries on these hikes - it contains snacks, storm gear, and two quarts of gatorade that he can reach while walking) and had a swig of juice, a hearty soup is ready. We pack up as Jeff eats, and in a few minutes we're on our way to the next trailhead.

Mt Holy Cross is next. It's about as far north of Leadville as LaPlata is south. Monica, Jim, and Dave are ready and waiting. We transfer Jeff to the other car, where he can stretch out. Dave joins me as navigator while Jean dozes off for some badly-needed rest.

"How did the vote come out last night?", asks Dave, referring to the senate vote on the president's budget bill. Dave's interested in politics and talking about something other than climbing. *It couldn't have been closer; 50-50, with the vice president breaking the tie.* I had listened to the report while driving to Leadville from the Denver airport. We get to talking about this and related things and miss

the turn north of Leadville. That mistake costs us a half hour (though Jeff gets more sleep), and I feel like an imposter on the expedition and a detriment to it.

Jeff finally gets on the Mt Holy Cross trail at 1:10. It's 13 miles round trip with a 5500' elevation gain. His formula says 8 hours, but Jeff says to expect him in 6 or a little more. About 5:20 Monica and I start up the trail to meet him. It soon becomes clear that she's faster than I am (I would like to think the reason is that I'm not yet acclimated to the elevation, but ...), so I suggest that she step on out if she would like. She does, soon disappearing from view, while I experiment with finding a workable pace. (I'm not the only one having trouble, all the males except for Jeff seem to be suffering from the continuous high elevation; the females - Monica and Jean - are faring much better.) No sooner do I find a comfortable pace than here they come; we get back to the trailhead at 6pm. Jeff has done Mt Holy Cross in less than 5 hours, making up for that lost half hour and then some. "He's a climbing machine", remarks Jim.

There's one more 14er today - Quandary Peak, south of Breckenridge. That means a mad dash down the interstate, stopping for a snack in Vail along the way. While the subs are being made we gas up both cars and buy Jeff a new pair of shoes. This is the third pair of heavy duty trail-running shoes for him on this trip - he's been wearing a pair out every six days. Until

there's an opportunity to get a new pair the team has kept him on the trail by sewing up the ripped seams with char-treuse dental floss (mint flavored).

The Quandary trailhead is at about 11,800' on Monte Cristo Blue Lakes. It's roughly 2.5 miles round trip and a 2500' elevation gain - the formula says two and a half hours, but it's 8:10 when he starts so not only will he have to descend in the dark but the last part of the ascent will be by headlamp. Monica goes with him, expecting to get about halfway up and to come down the last part with him. This route on Quandary would appear, from where we are, to have three distinct sections, each roughly a third of the way. The lower third appears not too steep, with good footing. This leads to a broad ridge along a snowfield, hooking above the snowfield where it meets the summit ridge. We can see it all clearly from where we're parked at the lake.

Jim has departed with them, not to climb but to seek some twilight solitude. Soon his vivacious spirit, arrested by the altitude malaise, escapes momentarily and wafts across the valley in the form of a pennywhistle melody. At dusk he emerges from his hidden stage and joins Dave, Jean, and me in scouring the ridge as the light fades.

There he is. It's a little after 9pm and quite dark except for bilyuns&bilyuns of bright stars. But I saw a quick flash at the base of the summit

ridge. "Sure that wasn't a twinkling star?", asks Jean. *Could be, but it looked a little different than the stars.* Later we learn that's where Jeff turned on his headlamp, and soon we're all seeing headlamp flashes on the summit ridge. He's moving up and away from us, so the flashes are sporadic, but we can follow his progress up the ridge. It's obvious when he gets to the top and turns around, giving us the full force of his headlamp. He spends a few minutes on the summit, signing the register, recording the moment (it's too dark for pictures, but he also has along a microcassette tape recorder), and perhaps catching a quick snack.

The descent is fascinating to watch, as we can see the headlamp continuously, mingling with the stars just above the summit ridge. But, too soon, he drops below the summit ridge. *He's coming down the snowfield.* "Ah, sure", mocks Dave. "Why would he do that?" asks Jean. It's too dark for us to see the snow, so we can't be sure that's where he is. *My guess is that he's discovered the snow conditions are good for descent or he's bypassing some tricky part of the ridge;* he continues dropping from the ridge, convincing me even more that he's on the snow. About halfway down the snowfield he abruptly cuts over to the broad ridge where Monica, it turns out, is waiting. After the hookup with Monica we watch two headlamps bobbing their way in tandem down the mountain. At 10:20 the two headlamps approach our vigil,

and human forms take shape out of the darkness. It has taken Jeff 2 hours and 10 minutes on Quandary.

What a fantastic sight, I remark as Jeff and Monica are rejuvenating with hot Ramen Noodles, *watching your headlamp go up the summit ridge, then down and onto the snow, and then to see both headlamps for the final part.* "I went to the snow", Jeff explains, "because there's serious exposure on the other side of the ridge that I didn't want to cope with in the dark. I'll bet following the headlamps in the dark WAS interesting." He seems surprisingly chipper after a (relatively "easy") day of over 22 miles of trail and 11,000' of elevation gain.

Maybe it's because there's just one more day to go on the quest for the record. The last day is a long one, though, and would prove to be a cliff-hanger. To get ready for it we have to go down the road to Alma, take route 416 to Kite Lake, at 12,000', and find the trailhead for Democrat-Cameron-Lincoln-Bross. The plan is to climb this group in the morning, Longs Peak in the afternoon, and finish on Pikes Peak after dark. There is adequate time, as he has until 6:50 am the following morning to break the 14 day barrier. In anticipation, we set up camp on Kite Lake and for the second night in a row the team gets to bed well past midnight.

Those early morning stalwarts, Jean and Monica, start day 14 at 5am, frying potatoes and mixing pancake batter. Jeff gets up at 5:30, eats as

much as he can, and is on the trail by 6:10. Monica and I follow about ten minutes later. Our plan is to go to the col between Democrat and Cameron and then possibly do the Cameron-Bross loop. *Don't wait for me*, I advise Monica, knowing that I'd only hold her back. She skips on ahead while I plod along, trying to find my pace. All the way to the col it is a struggle, with several hikers overtaking me and watching me disappear in their rearview mirrors.

When I finally get to the col I see Monica near the Cameron summit, moving well. What to do now? I'm too far behind and too slow to risk the Cameron-Bross loop, but there is still time before I have to head down. So I opt for the Democrat summit and then straight back. I hadn't gotten far when here comes Jeff down; he's in high spirits. "So you're going to Democrat", he says. *Yeah, I'm too slow for the loop. See you at the bottom.* "OK", and off he flies up the Cameron ridge.

After a day maybe I am starting to acclimatize, but more likely it was the gummy bears at the col. At any rate I begin to feel a little stronger, and even begin to make up ground on some of those earlier passers.

While talking with someone on the summit, I look across the cirque and see Monica (or is it Jeff?) midway on the Cameron-Bross traverse. I need to get going, as it is farther from the top of Democrat to camp than from the top of Bross. On the way down to the col I pass all those who had passed me on

the way up. Just before getting to the col I see Jeff top Bross; it was going to be close.

A storm blows in, with hail at 13,000'. Jeff catches Monica on the way down from Bross and they hurry into camp, in a downpour, a few minutes before 10am. I follow about five minutes later and am promptly served a bowl of hot soup, which hits the spot after the cold rain; Monica and Jeff are well into their soup. Jim and Dave and Jean have everything ready to go, and five minutes later we are on our way to Longs. By this time the rain has really settled in, with low ceilings as far as the eye can see. We are getting out just in time - and hoping for better weather on the front range.

There is no elegant way from Breckenridge to Longs Peak if you are trying to make time. Route 72 to 7 looks to be the most direct, but it's curvy and slow and tough to access from I-70. So we decide to go via Denver, Boulder, and Lyons. My second driving error in two days is to think that 121 is a shortcut between I-70 in Denver and route 36 into Boulder; we should have gone I-70 to I-25 to Longmont, and taken 66 into Lyons. At any rate, we put Jeff on the trail up Longs at about 2:10 and settle in for what we expect will be a 6-7 hour wait. It is a bit windy at the trailhead, and there are quite a few high clouds, but the weather doesn't look too bad. I curl up with a novel; it is nap time for most of the rest of the crew.

"LET'S GET TO PIKES" comes the shout, muffled by the car window. I awake with a start (guess that novel wasn't that gripping after all) to see Jeff. "It's bad up there, and I don't have a death wish. I made it to 11.5, the clouds are down to 12, the wind is REALLY strong, and it's getting worse. Longs is no go at the moment." It's 3:50. Defeat, snatched from the jaws of victory by the fickle weather. "I ran all the way down, hoping we can get to Pikes, and then come back and do Longs last."

Five minutes later we are on our way to Pikes. The race now is to make it to the Pikes Peak road entrance before it closes at 7pm. After gassing up in Longmont we are ready to roll, almost. "We've got to cancel our motel reservation", Jean reminds us - the "victory" arrangements at a Manitou Springs motel for that night. "You do it", says Monica, "we'll start out with Jeff. Meet you at Pikes." With that, and with Dave at the helm, Jeff stretched out, and Jim and Monica riding shotgun, one car takes off. The phones at the gas station are out of order, so Jean and I drive to a nearby shopping mall. On the first try the motel line is busy. When we finally hit the road we figure the other car is 6-7 minutes ahead.

We should have made it easily. But a construction bottleneck on I-25 in Denver slowed us down, as did the "open" road south of Denver. They'd never get away with it on the German autobahns, but on the US interstates slow drivers "park" in the left lane

with impunity, blocking traffic. Consequently we arrive at the Colorado Springs exit, and a long stop light, at eleven minutes to 7 with about nine miles to go; it's not looking good. But then the lights give us a break and the road beyond Manitou Springs is great. The gate is still open, we pay our ten bucks, and as we roll through the time changes from 6:59 to 7:00 and they close the gate behind us. The other car, it turns out, had made it through a few minutes earlier. They dump Jeff at the 11,000' mark at 7:15, and we catch up with them at 12,000'. Both cars arrive at the summit together at 7:30. We expect Jeff about 8:45.

As it was working out, we have plenty of time to get Jeff back to the Longs trailhead by 2am, the time he wants to start his second try on Longs. But there is a problem. The exit side of the gate we came in on Pikes closes at 9pm, and they start herding everyone off a few minutes after 8. The Dave/Jim/Monica car has already started down, to wait for Jeff below. That leaves Jean and me to face the ranger's "Everybody off." order.

I halfheartedly start looking for the ranger to explain our predicament, not knowing quite what to say. As it was, he found me. "You have to start down", he says matter-of-factly.

I wonder if you could give us a few more minutes; we're expecting a climber a little after 8:30.

"Nope, no exceptions. We want everybody down by dark. Is it the guy I saw a little while ago on the rocks? He was moving pretty good."

Could have been. He's fast. We'll be out the gate by 9:00, or close to it. (That probably was fudging a bit.) I'm a good driver on these kinds of roads - darkness won't be a problem.

"Climbers are on their own. Cars have to be through the gate by 9:00, so we can go home." He was making me feel bad - suppose he has kids waiting for him at home. I am hoping he isn't going to force me into refusing his order to leave, causing an awkward situation. But there is no way Jeff can descend all the way to the gate in time for us to make it back to Longs on schedule, and I am pretty certain that even if we picked him up at Crag campground it would be too late. We have to let him summit, descend on the road as much as he wants, and then whisk him off to Longs.

I understand, but he's near the end of a record climb of the 14ers. He won't make it if we can't pick him up.

"Why now? why didn't you come earlier? This is a private road, and you know the rules."

The schedule had us doing Longs this afternoon, ending on Pikes this evening, in the dark, from Crag's. But he got blown off Long's by the weather and had to abort, so we had to change the schedule. We would have preferred it different, but this is how it's worked out; we still have a shot at it if we can pick

him up.

The ranger turns to an apparent colleague who has just joined us. "We have a situation here. These people have a climber out there who's trying for a record." Eying my gray hair: "They're probably relatives or something. They want a few more minutes. I'm going to take a chance on them."

In that instant I know that it all depends on the weather on Longs 6-8 hours from now.

We park near the Pikes Peak summit plaque. Jeff appears at 8:45, right on schedule. Because we're here to greet him, he realizes, without us saying anything, that we've been granted a favor. The ranger has watched the final part of the ascent, and pulls up beside us. *You may have to ride off the summit with us*, I whisper to Jeff.

After making the decision to take a chance on us the ranger seems to warm to the project, even though he says that the boss is mad (maybe the boss has kids at home too). The four of us chat for a minute, then Jeff says "I have one more favor to ask. Can I run down the road a ways before they pick me up? I'll make it fast." "OK", says the ranger, and Jeff takes off.

Jean and I chat with the ranger a while more and we exchange business cards. Then we present him with one of the expedition T-shirts, that say

the 14ers in fourteen ! ?
on the back. After that, it's off to pick up Jeff.

By the time the headlights find him he's already way down the road and running hard. We trail him for quite a while further, until he's satisfied that he's descended far enough from the summit. We load him up and rendezvous with the other car, waiting outside the gate.

A Pizza Hut in Colorado Springs says that they can have pizzas to go in 15 minutes. That gives Dave and me time to gas up the cars. But it's just 10pm, and with only three hours to the Longs trailhead the gang decides to take the time to eat the pizza there rather than on the road. As we're wolfing down three large pizzas Dave, with a sheepish grin, sneaks over to the jukebox, and in a minute Happy Birthday blares out full blast; I never should have told them it's my birthday.

At 1:45am we roll into the Longs trailhead. Jeff has slept all the way from Colorado Springs, but he pleads "Give me 20 more minutes; I'll get on the trail at 2:15". While he gets a few more winks we service his pack and check the weather. It doesn't seem too windy, and the sky is full of stars.

Jeff would like the snooze alarm set for yet another 20 minutes, but it's time to go; he pulls on his shoes, straps on the pack, and is ready for his last mountain. There's 4 hours and 40 minutes in which to reach his goal. I walk him over to the trail and give him a hug. *Go for it, but respect the mountain.* "OK", he replies, "and I always respect the mountain." And with

headlamp breaking trail, he was off.

We nap in the car, waiting for dawn. At 6am the skies are clear and the air balmy. *He's got it, if the wind's not too bad on top.* We grab some breakfast and Monica and I start out to meet him. As before, she pulls ahead, but somehow we reach the 11,400' Chasm Lake cutoff together, at 8:40. Maybe she was holding back, but maybe I'm getting better acclimated too; we had averaged 1400'/hr this time - less than 2/3 Jeff's pace, but not totally shabby either.

And here comes Jeff, striding down the trail, jubilant. *So what time did you summit?* "Just before 6", he answers, "with an hour to spare. I stayed on top almost an hour, and watched the sun come up. It was absolutely beautiful - what a great way to finish."

Just below 10,000' Jean is waiting for us. "How did it go?" she asks. "Did you bring a laundry pen?" Jeff responds. "We need to cross the question mark off the T-shirts."



Jerry and son Jeff have climbed extensively together, and are the first father/son team to have climbed the highpoints of all 50 US states. They've climbed the two highest mountains in North America together - Mt McKinley (Denali) and Mt Logan. Jerry would have liked to have accompanied Jeff on the 14ers, but he says there's no way he could have kept up with 25-year-old-and-in-great-shape Jeff this time. And, after sending husband and son off on many mountain adventures, Jean enjoyed being in the thick of one herself. She says it was really tough, but she wouldn't have missed it for the world.

breaking the barrier

93:07:26:06:50 - 93:08:09:05:55

1. Eolus, Sunlight, Windom
2. El Diente, Mt Wilson, Wilson Pk, Sneffels
3. Uncompahgre, Wetterhorn, Sunshine, Redcloud, Handies
4. San Luis, Culebra
5. Little Bear, Blanca, Ellingwood, Lindsey
6. Crestone Needle, Crestone Pk, Humboldt, Kit Carson, Challenger Pt
7. Yale, Princeton, Antero, Tabogauche, Shavano
8. Grays, Torreys, Bierstadt, Evans
9. Huron, Missouri, Belford, Oxford, Harvard, Columbia
10. Massive, Elbert, Sherman
11. Pyramid, South Maroon, North Maroon
12. Snowmass, Capitol, Castle
13. LaPlata, Mt Holy Cross, Quandary
14. Democrat, Cameron, Lincoln, Bross, Pikes, Longs

(Note - these times are from the summit of Eolus to the summit of Longs. While this is a common practice with some climbers, subsequent clarification of the "rules" have it that the time must start roughly 3000' down before the first summit and stop 3000' down after the last summit - adding about 3 hours to Jeff's time. This revised time is still easily the current record, but perhaps 14ers can still go on talking in hushed tones about "fourteen days".)