Last Night I Dreamed I Had Legs

A degenerative nerve disease is destroying the body of Jeff Lowe, ONE OF CLIMBING'S GREATEST athletes and innovators. He's seen hard times before, on mountains AND IN LIFE. But how do you keep going when there's NO WAY UP?

By Pete Takeda

Jeff Lowe in Ogden, Utah, Ma 2008 (Bryce Duffy)

IT'S DECEMBER 2006, and I'm high up on a rock wall in Zion National Park, looking down at Jeff Lowe as he fiddles gear into a tiny crack that splits an otherwise flawless pane of tan, vertical sandstone. It's not pretty—his movements are slow, weak, and gummy. Lowe, 57, is one of the greatest climbers who's ever touched rock or ice, but since 1999 he's been afflicted with multiple sclerosis, a disease of the nervous system that can lead to terrible physical disabilities. For Lowe, the worst damage has been to his legs, which are dragging behind him like dead fish. This morning, near the base of the route, he could barely shuffle across a parking lot, even with the aid of two canes. The trail to the wall's base, a few hundred feet uphill, required 40 minutes of teetering, stumbling, and crawling.

Zion is an old haunt for Lowe. In the 1970s, he pioneered some classic climbs here—notching several of his roughly 1,000 first ascents—but today he's on a novice route, a 5.9 A1 called Touchstone Wall. What's more, he's direct-aid climbing, umbilicaled by nylon slings and engineering upward like a telephone repairman. During his prime, Lowe could have climbed these eight pitches in a few hours. Instead, he's still struggling to cover his first 30 feet.

Lowe clips into an aluminum chock he's wedged in the crack, then bends down and yards his right foot into an aider step with both hands. He repeats the process and sets a similar, thumbnail-size stopper a foot and a half higher. He squints through gold wire-rimmed glasses at the V-slot above. The desert sun is slowly reddening Lowe's pale skin while a breeze tousles his thinning platinum hair. He moves higher, pulling on the stopper, dragging a numb leg upward.

Suddenly, the stopper explodes from the grainy sandstone. Lowe's body hangs in midair before beginning its downward plunge. The rope tightens but then springs free as a second, lower piece is snatched from the crack, sending Lowe, arms outstretched, farther down the cliff, a hurtling bag of flesh and bone.

The rope finally catches, stopping Lowe with a bounce. He hangs there a moment, cocked sideways, before pulling himself upright. He looks up at the crack, thinking about the half-hour it will take to regain his high point. "Damn," he says, "now I have to do that all over again."

Unhurried and deliberate, Lowe straightens out his gear. He gropes his deadened quads and knees as if to manually check for injuries. Then, as he's done countless times over a legendary career spanning five decades and four continents, he sucks it up and goes—struggling, sweating, finessing some tricky gear past the crux. He spends several hours doing this, finally completing a 130-foot pitch.

That night, inside a hotel room in nearby Springdale, Utah, I draw Lowe a bath, testing the water to make sure it's not scalding, because he might get burned without feeling it. I put a glass of Scotch on the tub's rim. Lowe shuffles in, naked and paunchy. He eases into the water, hands grasping the support rails. "Thanks, Pete," he says with a laugh. "I feel like I've done an entire big wall instead of a single pitch."

Later, after his third Scotch, he says, "It's over—the fun is out of it, and that stuff up there wasn't even what I would call climbing." He sighs. "It confirmed what I already knew. I'll never climb again."

"JEFF WILL BE DEAD in three years," says his older brother Greg.

"Huh?" I say.

It's May of 2007, and Greg and I are at a Mexican restaurant in Ogden, Utah, where the Lowes grew up and where Jeff has lived for the past five years. Jeff can't hear us—he's at the other end of a long table with a half-dozen volunteers and guests for his ClimbFest Ogden, an annual climber get-together and fundraiser.

"I said, if he keeps going like this, Jeff will probably be dead in three years," Greg says matter-of-factly.

"How do you figure?"

"If you objectively assess his condition, he was on one cane last year, and this year he needs two. At this rate, he's not far from being in a wheelchair, and after that ..."

That's a grim diagnosis for anyone, let alone a man whom Steve House—winner of the 2006 Piolet d'Or, the highest award in the alpine world—calls "the most important and accomplished alpinist in North American history."

Superclimber Steve House, WHO DOESN'T HAND OUT MANY COMPLIMENTS, calls Lowe "the most important and accomplished alpinist in North American history."

House doesn't hand out many compliments, but Lowe is worthy. The climbing techniques he introduced, refined, and perfected are so common now that they're taken for granted by everyone from beginners to hardened mountaineers. The gear he invented can be found the world over, from Manhattan specialty stores to dusty stalls in Kathmandu. While many alpinists in the seventies and eighties were making their names on high-profile grinds like Everest, Lowe was pushing the embryonic notion that on big mountains—just like on technical rock—the summit alone meant nothing. How you got to the top mattered, and if you didn't do it in a difficult and elegant style, it was, for Lowe anyhow, just another meaningless slog.

"Historically, Jeff is in the top rank," says Michael Kennedy, former publisher of *Climbing* magazine. "He shifted what people thought was possible. He was going light and fast, applying the lessons learned on smaller technical routes to the big mountains before it became fashionable."

Lowe's vast knowledge and disregard for convention is every bit as relevant today as in the past. "His decades-old vision is still futuristic," says House, who got the beta and photos for his next big project—the mighty west face of Makalu, in Nepal—courtesy of Lowe, who tried it himself once and got buried in an avalanche. "Not all his ideas were practical at the time, but that's the mark of genius."

Lowe's genius, however, hasn't always translated to success in daily life. Often when he applied his unique blend of carefree charisma and high risk tolerance to relationships or the business world, he courted chaos: In the past three decades, he's churned through three companies and two marriages, alienating friends and business partners over deals gone bad. "Jeff is very in tune with climbing and the outdoor world," says Greg. "When he stays in that area, he's great. Whenever he strays out of that realm, he's not an equally viable being."

I've come to Ogden to visit Jeff. Our relationship has had its own conflicts over the years, resulting in a few lengthy gaps. I also want to see what he's making of a physical affliction that takes you in only one direction: down. What I find is a predictably unpredictable mix. In many ways Lowe hasn't changed at all—he still wields a strong opinion, mixed with an aw-shucks good-guy demeanor that glosses over past transgressions. "A friend once told me that I was always so manipulative, ‘a silver-tongued devil,' as he put it," says Lowe. "I was never aware of it. But even the most self-aware people are assholes. If we were all entirely self-aware, we'd all be Jesus Christ."

Typically, however, he's also staying active in the climbing community, even though climbing itself is out for him—it might have even contributed to his disease.

Though various environmental and genetic factors can play a role in MS, nobody knows exactly what causes it. Lowe speculates that his case has something to do with the years of suppressed adrenaline inherent to high-pressure climbing situations, as if his body somehow backfired, placing an irreversible strain on his nervous system.

Though MS is treatable, there's no cure, and about 10 percent of its victims suffer from the primary-progressive variety, in which the disease marches on without significant reprieve. Lowe fits this profile; his rate of decline has been rapid over the past six years. He's both resigned to this and wistful about the natural gifts that the disease took away.

"I now realize that I don't need anything that I haven't already got," he says. "That's a great aspect about being physically stopped dead in your tracks. But I would still trade everything I've learned in these past years just for the chance to climb again—even a little."

MY MAIN DUSTUP WITH Lowe happened in 1999, when we were planning a trip to the Himalayas with Dave Sheldon. Our objective was the Sharksfin, a technical 21,850-foot peak in India that Sheldon and I had attempted a year earlier. It seemed like a dream plan—a great route, a legendary climber, and a pair of eager youngsters ready to make it big.

I trusted everything about Lowe except his reputation with other people's money. Two weeks before our departure, he called, citing "cash flow" issues and fishing for an airfare loan. At first I agreed, but after looking at my own skimpy bank account, I called back and, with great trepidation, removed him from the team. Lowe sounded calm, even slightly relieved. But two hours later he called back to rant at me for being "a fucking egomaniac," unwilling to share the glory.

Truth be told, a hidden part of me craved the glory of a great first ascent, which Lowe's long shadow threatened to obscure. But money was the bottom-line issue, and my decision drove a wedge in our relationship. In the end, the expedition was a failure, and Lowe discovered he had a bigger problem: Later in 1999 he began to experience the chronic pain, loss of coordination, and fatigue that, by 2001, would be formally diagnosed as MS.

We patched up the feud in later years, and it seemed frivolous and remote when Lowe picked me up at the Salt Lake City airport. Now a few inches shy of his old, ramrod-straight height of five-ten, he was hunched over two canes. Though he can barely walk, he can still drive. During the 40-mile trip to and through Ogden, he braked hard, accelerated harder, and zipped around to show me a few local crags. After a slightly terrifying 60 minutes, we reached the six-bedroom

brick rambler where he grew up. He bought the house from his siblings after his mother, Elgene, died in 2006.

Lowe's office was a long rectangular space toward the back of the house. Bookshelves and file cabinets bulged with guidebooks and alpine journals. The light table in the far corner was stacked with slide sleeves. I thumbed through past glories: Lowe in the Tetons in the late sixties; Lowe and David Breashears on a dramatic peak called Kwangde in 1982; a sinewy, ripped Lowe in his early twenties, shirtless and bouldering. It was an amazing collection of historic climbing photography.

A stone's throw up the road was a gated trailhead marking a path to the base of a blocky, half-mile-wide quartzite wall. On those walls and on the boulders scattered below, the Lowe clan—four boys and four girls—learned how to climb. In 1967, Greg free-climbed a route on the backyard crag that nobody repeated for 35 years. (Free climbing means using gear for protection only, not as a support or means of progress.) At 5.12b/c, it was then the hardest free climb in the world.

"Mom would pack our lunch and send us off with no supervision," Lowe said. "There were enough of us so that if she lost a few, there would still be plenty left."

Elgene was a classic 1950s housewife and a rare Lutheran living in Mormon Utah. Lowe's father, Ralph, was a Pacific Theater bomber pilot in World War II who rejected his Latter-day Saints upbringing and declared himself an atheist. Later he earned a law degree, eventually becoming an assistant DA for Ogden's Weber County. Ralph's work ethic led to a heart attack that killed him at age 65. This hard-driving example left a mark on the Lowe kids. Lowe tells me that their sibling rivalry "often resembled an episode of *Dallas*."

Not all of them could handle the pressure. In 2001, Lowe's younger brother, Kim, died of a drug overdose. "Kim was an alcoholic," Lowe says. "He was trying to live up to everyone's expectations."

Lowe was, too, and he set a high bar for himself. Smaller than his brothers, he had to be tough just to keep up. His climb of Telluride's Bridal Veil Falls in 1974, followed by his ascent, at 23, of the technical north face of 19,400-foot Peak 19, in what is now the Central Asian republic of Tajikistan, hinted at an emerging greatness. With these, and a score of standard-setting climbs in the Canadian Rockies, Lowe introduced a new level of difficulty to the alpine world. He combined exploits in the Andes with several landmark climbs in the Himalayas. His 1978 attempt on the north ridge of Pakistan's Latok I—a dramatic 23,443-foot peak where he, his cousin George, Jim Donini, and Michael Kennedy were turned back 500 feet from the summit—

remains unmatched three decades later. After some two dozen attempts, nobody has come close to their high point.

The next year, solo and unroped, Lowe took on the south face of Nepal's 22,494-foot Ama Dablam. The 4,500-foot route—taller than any other ice climb of that era—demanded tough climbing on sketchy ice at high altitude. It was the first solo first ascent of that magnitude in the Himalayas.

On Everest in 1981, Lowe joined one of his few formal, siege-style expeditions. He didn't summit and says he was turned off by "the groupthink, politics, and vaguely militaristic feel." From then on, he kept pursuing trips on aesthetically pleasing and difficult objectives. In 1994, he revolutionized ice climbing with an ascent of a route called Octopussy, in Vail, Colorado. In his mid-forties, a still-spry Lowe pulled through the horizontal rock roof and dripping ice fangs, often pitched upside down in a gymnastic pretzel position called a figure four. Mixed climbing, which simultaneously takes you through rock, ice, and snow in a creative hybrid of movement, tools, and techniques, was as old as mountaineering itself. But no one had ever fused outrageous terrain with such a wild blend of traditional technique and new-wave sport-climbing moves.

Will Gadd, now one of the best mixed climbers around, remembers seeing pictures of the route while in his late twenties and going straight out to buy a new set of ice tools. "The shots of Jeff on Octopussy changed my mind-set about winter climbing," says Gadd. "A whole new world was suddenly wide-open. It was like falling in love with a supermodel."

IN 1979, LOWE fell in love with an outdoor-clothing designer in Telluride named Janie Hannigan. They married in 1982 and had a daughter, Sonja, six years later. At the time, he was consulting for his brothers Greg and Mike at Lowe Alpine Systems, the specialty outdoor company Greg had founded in 1967. Jeff was their sponsored climber and chief tester, overseeing catalog production, refining hardware and soft goods, and influencing the design of revolutionary gear like the Lowe modular ice tools.

Desiring more creative freedom, Lowe started his own company, Latok Mountain Gear, in 1983. Under the Latok label, he developed RATS (the first ratcheting-action screw) and a belay/rappel device called the Tuber. Latok grew faster than Lowe could manage, though; money problems consumed him, and he sold the company to Lowe Alpine in 1987. Instead of consolidating his finances, he launched International Sport Climbing Championships a year later, in an attempt to promote climbing competitions. But, once again, Lowe's big dreams and bigger expenses flattened his wallet. By 1990 ISCC was going broke.

While that played out, Lowe jetted to Pakistan to film an ESPN production featuring himself and Catherine Destivelle, from France, who was considered the best all-around female climber in the world. They freed a mammoth spire called Nameless Tower. Though the climb was successful, it ended Lowe's marriage. In the thin air of the Himalayas, Lowe and Destivelle started an affair.

"It went way beyond just sex with Catherine," says Lowe. "It was more like recognizing a time of shared destiny of our souls. We were both born to climb, and we each glimpsed the possibility of the perfect partner in the other." Lowe returned to the U.S. and started dealing with divorce and bankruptcy proceedings.

In 1991, Lowe revisited the Alps to complete one of the world's most difficult climbs—alone and in midwinter. His route, Metanoia, on the notorious North Face of the Eiger, involved a direct line over 5,000 feet of wispy ice, rotten cracks, and tottering limestone overhangs. Lowe's life depended on tiny hooks draped over popcorn-like nubbins and ice so thin and glassy it threatened to dislodge in crushing panes. Wet, exhausted, and in danger of freezing to death as a storm blew in, he was airlifted from the summit ridge after nine days. The audacity of the landmark climb made him famous again, and he rode a new wave of six-figure sponsorship.

Two years later, his relationship with Destivelle ended when she fell for another climber, Erik Decamp. A new romance blossomed with Teri Ebel, a tall brunette who was the managing editor of *Rock and Ice* magazine. "Jeff was an ice dancer with a hacking asthmatic cough," Ebel recalls. "He was a struggling visionary and a big dreamer. When we met, I didn't have insight into his history as a climber, but he was friendly, had no attitude, and was articulate." Ebel belayed Lowe on his groundbreaking Octopussy climb in 1994. Not long after, they were honeymooning in the Utah desert.

In January 1995, the pair turned to Colorado's Ouray Ice Festival, managing the small, grassroots party that today raises 50 percent of the Ouray Ice Park's operating budget. Later, with financial help from a host of investors, Lowe also launched a clothing company called Cloudwalker.

In business, as in his best climbs, Lowe pushed things as close to the edge as possible. He worked more and climbed less. By 2001, Cloudwalker had folded. In the wake of the company's demise and the earlier Sport Climbing Championships bankruptcy, Lowe developed a reputation among peers for flakiness, unpaid debts, and a pie-in-the-sky style better suited to freewheeling ascents than to running a company.

"It was a huge disappointment," says Mat Tyndal, an investor from Alabama. "I lost maybe $30,000, and I'd convinced my friends to invest. Lowe had incredible vision but also a stubborn

blind streak. Still, no one worked harder or was more disappointed than Lowe when Cloudwalker failed."

The end of Cloudwalker ushered in what Lowe calls "my darkest era." In October 2001, Lowe and San Juan Mountain Guides—a local outfitter he worked with—were slapped with a $10 million wrongful-death suit. The previous winter, during a seminar at Ouray Ice Park, a 35-year-old public-affairs manager named Peter Ro had been prematurely taken off belay by another student; he leaned back, perhaps expecting a tight rope but instead plummeting 135 feet to his death. The suit was settled with a payout to Ro's widow in 2002, by which time Lowe had sold the ice festival to the Ouray Ice Park.

In 2003, Lowe finalized his divorce from Teri Ebel. "When he got depressed, he'd drink a lot and cut himself off from the world," she says. "He could be focused climbing, but it was hard for him to slave at a desk. When things came to a close, there was anger, trauma, wrenching, yelling, hatefulness, heedlessness, harshness, heartbreak, confusion, longing. It was hard. He finally moved back to his mother's house in Ogden."

A FEW WEEKS AFTER the Zion climb, Lowe and I are sitting in a restaurant called Buen Tiempo, the place to be during the Ouray Ice Festival. I'm teaching clinics on behalf of Marmot. Lowe is an honorary festival guest. We've had a few drinks, and we're talking about our past triumphs and failures. Lowe is excitedly describing his ongoing book project, a compilation of his 150 finest first ascents—a personal magnum opus.

"I'm hoping it will be unlike any other climbing book," he says, "but it's a little bit overdue." (Later, his publisher will tell me it's several years overdue.)

Ouray is a scene: people climbing, girls and guys hooking up, industry moguls mingling with the public—it's part bacchanalia and part rock gym. Everyone from the sheriff to the latest twenty-something climbing phenom drops by the booth to pay homage to Lowe as he finishes off a huge plate of fajitas.

"You know, I watched my diet after this MS thing started," he says. Gesturing with a beer, he adds, "I stopped drinking alcohol for two years because of the MS, but it never made any difference."

He reflects, "I used to think that my business mirrored my climbing—if I wasn't failing at something, I just wasn't trying anything hard enough. Now that I can't climb, I can focus on just succeeding."

(Indeed, 2007 saw a reversal of fortunes. Lowe's nonprofit, Ogden Climbing Parks, garnered substantial municipal support and corporate sponsorship. He secured a $200,000 grant to build a year-round ice-climbing tower in Ogden's historic downtown commercial district, and the 2008 ClimbFest grossed $43,000 for local projects to promote climbing. Another project, the High Adventure Mountain Film Festival, is expected to raise upwards of $50,000.)

I broach the subject of his unremitting MS. It's clear that Lowe doesn't want pity. He's fully aware of his frightening future. "If I go downhill, I'll need someone to take care of me, but I don't know if I want to put that on someone. Based on the progression I've seen—"

Lowe stops, then bangs his fist on the table so hard that the salt shaker topples over. "I don't know, and I don't like thinking about it, but every year I just get worse." He stops again, then adds, "I've always felt, well, if your life is not what you want it to be, then ... suicide is viable. It's like the Indians: When they became a burden to the tribe, they'd walk off into a blizzard."

Listening to Lowe, I'm reminded of a statistic: Although MS patients can expect a nearly normal life span, in severe cases like Lowe's, almost half die prematurely from complications such as pneumonia, which Lowe will struggle with for weeks in the spring of 2008. Some 15 percent commit suicide.

"Last night I dreamed I had legs and could run," Lowe says as he stares at the crowd, glowing and red-cheeked from beers and windburn. "I was running and I was free and it was flat, and then I was running through hills and everything was sunny and green."

There's an uncomfortable pause. "If there's one thing I regret, Pete, it's that we never climbed a big route together," Lowe says. I want to tell him that if I could do it over, I'd max out my Visa card just to be with him in the greatest mountains in the world. But before I can respond, two bodies slam in beside us—Mark Wilford, a onetime climbing partner of Lowe's, and leading American alpinist Jared Ogden. They're buzzed on tequila, boisterous, and oblivious to the conversation they've just interrupted.

Later, in Lowe's motel room, I show him my next climbing project—a 22,605-foot mountain in Pakistan called Peak 6890. We'll regret our hangovers the next day, but the buzz enhances the images on the flat laptop screen. I show him my pictures and point out my line, a circuitous path weaving up the left-hand margin of the mountain's east face, a massive thrust of rock and ice, profiled like a bullet.

"That's where I hope to go," I say. Lowe raises his beer with his right hand and pauses. With a thick middle finger, he draws an imaginary route up the face's steepest, most direct, and most fiendish path.

"No, Pete," he says, "the real line is obvious. The only route worth doing is straight up the middle. What you're looking at is just second-best."

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