
MARK RICHEY & STEVE SWENSON

The First Ascent of Link Sar



The south-east face of Link Sar (7041m). (Graham Zimmerman)

From 31 July to 8 August 2019, Graham Zimmerman, Steve Swenson, Chris Wright and Mark Richey made the first ascent of Link Sar (7041m) in the central Pakistani Karakoram via its 3,400m south-east face. Having been the objective of at least nine expeditions, the first ascent of this peak has been a highly sought-after prize for the climbing community. The team called their route the *South-east Face* and graded it M6+, WI 4, 90°, 2300m, although the grade does a poor job of portraying a challenge that the Karakoram veteran Swenson called ‘one of the most complex and difficult routes I have ever climbed.’

Swenson originally attempted the route in 2001 with George Lowe, Joe Terravecchia, Steve Larson, Andy Tuthill and Eric Winkleman. It was an amazing opportunity for the team since the face lies very near the contested border between Pakistan and India (known as the Actual Ground Position Line or AGPL), and the eastern aspects of the mountain had not been permitted since the mid 1980s when the Siachen conflict broke out. The team did not make it very high on the peak but their attempt inspired Swenson to return and he made repeated efforts over the following decade to get another permit for the peak with no success.



Approaching via the Kondus valley. (Steve Swenson)

Over the following years, several attempts were made on the peak's western aspect via the Charakusa valley. And in 2015, Swenson and Zimmerman, along with Scott Bennett, made the first ascent of nearby Changi Tower (6500m) via its *North Ridge* (M6, 5.10, A2, 1200m) and from its summit caught an excellent view of the massive south-east face of Link Sar, supplying better information about the best way to climb the route and further spurring motivation to attempt the mountain.

In 2017, it looked like the area was once again opening to climbing; Swenson and Zimmerman were finally given a permit to access Link Sar's south-east face. They also invited Wright on the expedition as he and Zimmerman had formed a strong partnership in the mountains of Alaska. During this two-and-a-half-month expedition, the team experienced atrocious weather and after multiple attempts reached only 5,900m. Despite this failure, the team made a myriad of observations of the face's immense complexities, providing them with the information they needed to make an ascent safe from the many objective hazards littering the wall.

In 2019, these three climbers, alongside Mark Richey, with whom Swenson won a Piolet d'Or in 2012 for the first ascent of Saser Kangri II in the eastern Karakoram, returned to the south-east face. They left home on 4 June. The approach to the peak is made via the Kondus valley and then up the Kaberi glacier. A road runs adjacent to the glacier up to the location of



Advance base, strongly supplied because of a low base camp.
(Graham Zimmerman)

the same base camp (3600m) used on the 2001 and 2017 attempts. They arrived there on 10 June.

From experience, they knew one of the primary cruxes of the route was acclimatisation. The Kondus valley is one of the deepest in the Karakoram and its walls are precipitously steep. On most 7,000m peaks, a nearby easier 6,000m peak would be used to acclimatise before starting on the primary objective. No such peak exists in the Kondus so the team was forced to use the lower portions of their route on the south-east face. To help with this, they set up an advance base camp at the top of the meadows that make up the bottom 1,100m of the face, hiring five local porters for whom they established a via ferrata of fixed ropes on a series of easy but exposed low fifth class slabs to ensure their safety while making the ascent to ABC.

The team had ABC established by 4 July but were then forced to wait for conditions on the mountain to improve. The 2018-19 winter in the Karakoram was one of the snowiest on record, making the mountain very dangerous, a fact emphasised by a large wet-slab avalanche observed low on the mountain from ABC on 7 July. Thankfully, the weather in early to mid July was clear and very warm, allowing for conditions to improve considerably and the team was able to climb to 6,000m on the peak via the route pioneered in 2017. After spending a couple of nights at this altitude the team considered themselves sufficiently acclimatised to attempt the route.



Wright launching into the lower mixed crux at the start of the first night on route. (*Graham Zimmerman*)

On the morning of 31 July, the team started their alpine-style attempt on the route from advanced base camp at 7.30am. During the cool morning hours, they climbed steep snow and glacial terrain to a camp at 5,100m where they spent the afternoon resting before launching on the lower crux of the route in the early evening. Climbing at night was a necessity due to the intense heat at that altitude on the south-east aspect. The crux section of the route involved 10 sustained pitches of climbing up to M6+ that even in the middle of the night were in very warm, wet and subsequently challenging conditions. Arriving at an excellent and safe bivy at 5,900m around 9.30am, they once again stopped to wait out the heat of the day and recover from climbing through the night.

The following morning, they departed just before dawn. Above the second camp was a serac barrier that was both a cause for concern in terms of overhead hazard and a considerable challenge to circumnavigate. It is important here to note that this serac wall had changed significantly from when the team observed it in 2017 and presented a major surprise. Luckily, the team was able to find a way around the right-hand side of the wall with minimal exposure and well-formed WI4 ice climbing. After 100m of easier climbing, the team found themselves at another large and safe bivouac at 6,200m, situated below the final difficult band of mixed rock and ice climbing.



Top left: Above the second camp was a serac barrier that was both a cause for concern in terms of overhead hazard and a considerable challenge to circumnavigate. (*Graham Zimmerman*)

Above left: Looking up from the slope above camp three. (*Steve Swenson*)

Above right: Above camp three. (*Graham Zimmerman*)

At this point, the team hunkered down for a forecasted 36 hours of bad weather that arrived in the mid afternoon of 3 August, their third day on the route. On 5 August, at 3 am, they departed in poor weather relying on the clearing that was forecast. An hour above camp, they were forced to stop as they were facing technical mixed climbing in weather that had still not improved. In order to stay warm and get out of the blowing snow, they dug a snow cave where they waited until 9am. When the weather finally cleared and they were able to continue, three excellent pitches of ice and mixed ground led to a large snow fin that involved five pitches of very challenging and unpredictable snow climbing and one pitch of steep but solid serac ice.

At sunset, they finally reached a good bivy site at about 6,700m. Starting at sunrise on 5 August, the team left their tents in place and launched for the summit. An excellent pitch of alpine ice led to the top of a corniced ridge they started traversing. Two pitches along the ridge, Graham triggered a small slab avalanche, a part of which poured over the belay where the rest of the team was standing. The volume of the slide wasn't large enough to harm the belay but it did sweep Graham off his feet and he fell for about 30m or 40m behind a snow ridge and over a cliff. The lead ropes caught him and fortunately he was not hurt, climbing back up to re-join the team. After spending some



Above: The final summit slopes.
(*Steve Swenson*)

Left: Technical climbing above
camp three. (*Steve Swenson*)

time to regroup, we decided to continue but Wright took the lead given that Graham was shaken by his fall. Three more pitches of challenging snow climbing intermixed with short sections of ice and mixed terrain and steep unconsolidated snow led to a final belay 50m below the summit. Even so, the nature of the climbing gave the team little confidence in their ability to reach the summit, though it loomed just overhead. In the final few feet to the summit Wright gave the lead to Richey after an excellent effort. Mark, who has a deep background in the steep challenging snow conditions of Peru, then set off up the final metres, packing a deep trench into the steep unconsolidated snow that was over his head. He reached the summit at sunset.

As can be imagined, the team was elated. The route had taken six days of hard climbing during which they ascended over 30 technical pitches and covered roughly 8,000ft vertically from their advanced base camp and about 11,300ft from base camp proper.

On 8 August, nine days after departing, the team arrived back at advanced base camp. The descent off the peak had taken three days because of making anchors in the bad snow conditions and the need to wait out the heat of the day.

This first ascent of Link Sar had taken a maximal physical and mental effort from the entire team. It required all their collective experience and strength. They are proud to report that the intense decision making required to make the ascent safely came from a very democratic, discussion-



Graham Zimmerman on the summit. (*Steve Swenson*)

oriented decision-making process without which they do not feel that they would have reached the top of this elusive and beautiful summit.

Finally, it is important to note that the expedition was undertaken adhering to strict environmental standards, deep respect for the communities of the Karakoram, and that the carbon footprint incurred by the expedition has been calculated and will be offset with the help of Protect Our Winters.

Acknowledgments

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