

Jimmy Surette

Summer vacation, 1986. Cathedral Ledge, New Hampshire.

Eighteen-year old Jimmy Surette stepped up and off the wooden belay platform he had hung from the cliff and climbed an arete to where a right angling seam ran into the arete. The wall below his feet dropped straight to the trees, a few hundred feet below. The sea of green rolled away into the soft hills in the distance. Jimmy followed the seam right, right and up. His footholds were microscopic. The seam was shut tight and the holds in it were much more like face holds than crack jams.

He reaches over right, his foot slipped, and he lobbed off. He lowered and swung over to join Randy Rackliff on the belay platform for a rest.

When Jimmy started to work the route, he knew that the hanging belay below the crux pitch was ungodly uncomfortable. He also knew that nobody would put up with such torture to belay him unless he styled-out the stance. So Jimmy lifted a wooden pallet from behind a store and drove it up to the top of Cathedral Ledge. He had a plan to deck out a stance that would make sporting him a belay an attractive outing.

Alison Osius remembers: “There was all this hammering and bumping out on top of Cathedral one day. Then Jimmy rapped down from the top with all this lumber and constructed a big wooden ledge. It was pretty funny.” The thing was like a tree-fort, and it stayed up there for weeks as Jimmy worked his route. Locals nicknamed Jimmy’s platform “The Space Station,” and it became something of a thing to take a turn on the platform and belay young Jimmy.

“People were pretty psyched to come down and check it out,” says Jimmy. “It was like a tourist attraction.”

Alison took her turn and thumped down onto the contraption at the end of her rappel from the top. The whole thing flexed. “Take it easy, Alison,” said Jimmy. “It’s not *that* solid.” Alison carefully settled in to belay, but made damn sure she stayed well tied in. She belayed in style, kicked back on the Space Station, and enjoying the view out over the Conway Valley. Alison called up words of encouragement and dished the string out to Jimmy while he tried again and again to crank through the crux. Again and again the white granite rejected him.

But not everybody had a positive take on the Space Station, and a letter published in Climbing Magazine savaged Jimmy and his construction. No big deal shrugs Jimmy, it wasn’t like he had spray-painted his high school colors on the cliff. And there was no other way he’d have been able to get people to belay him.

The route seeps – not a lot – but the seep goes right across the crux holds. And it rains a lot in the northeast. It took a few consecutive fine days for the seep to dry, and that severely limited the time Jimmy could spend constructively working the pitch. The leaf sea flamed as summer melted away into the crisp days of autumn. The colors of autumn blazed in the valley and Jimmy worked on the route whenever a stretch of good weather lasted long enough to dry the seep.

Late in September Jimmy was at the crux holds. Randy Rackliff lounged on the Space Station and served up the rope. Above, Jimmy underclinged off the top of the seam. His feet and body pointed left, but he needed to move right. Jim leaned way out right and popped his right hand over to a left facing vertical edge – a strenuous gaston. The balance was crazy, but Jimmy crossed his left hand over to another small hold in the seam. The seam stayed closed and Jim cranked on a series of small face-like holds in the seam to get to the base of an overhanging tight hands and finger crack. The moves up the crack were hard, but Jimmy was under control. He completed the pitch. The route was *Liquid Sky*, and 5.13 had come to New England.

A few days later, Jimmy cut the Space Station loose and took it to the dump. Too bad, that pallet really ought to dangle from the roof in EMS, the climbing shop closest to Cathedral Ledge.

Jim Surette grew up right in North Conway, within sight of Cathedral and Whitehorse Ledges, and remembers always being aware of climbing as a kid and wanting to try it. But it wasn't until Jimmy's older brother Dave and a group of Dave's friends went out to try ice climbing and let Jimmy tag along that he got his chance. It was 1982.

Jimmy was instantly hooked. "It was like somebody flipped a switch. I was so fucking psyched."

Every day after school, hair flying in the wind, Jimmy frantically pedaled his bike out to the crags. "I was on fire. I climbed every day, except for days that it rained, and I climbed a lot of them too."

Some kids obsess on Metallica or Led Zeppelin, binge drink, or tear up the local roads in fast cars. With Jimmy Surette it wasn't any such stereotypical obsession. For him it was climbing, and he tore up the steeps of New Hampshire with the passion that only a teenager can summon. Jimmy catapulted through the grades, and by 1984 he was one of the best climbers in New England.

So how does a quiet teenager who has become one of the world's best at his sport balance climbing and high school? "There wasn't much balance," says Jimmy. "I didn't socialize much in high school. There were no indoor gyms, no other kids out climbing. It was still a fringe sport. Half my classmates thought I

was some hippie out walking in the hills. The other half thought I was this total psycho out soloing every day. But at least my parents were cool about it.”

Jimmy’s parents – one feels for them – his climbing obsession can’t have been easy for them to handle. Jimmy’s wasn’t a sport-climbing obsession played out under careful supervision because sport climbing didn’t exist in those days.

Jimmy grew up playing out his hand on traditional crack and face climbs, placing delicate gear and making the constant stream of serious decisions that type of stone demands.

“I was maybe sixteen, out on Whitehorse with Jerry Handren when I had my first epic. We rapped in the dark, got the ropes stuck and all that, and I finally made it home at about two a.m. My parents were tweaking. (Who can blame them?) Mom said, “you’re grounded for two weeks,” but I’m like, no way Mom, I gotta go back tomorrow, my whole rack is up there.”

Alison chuckles and remembers Jim Surette as “Super-self contained, even from a young age. He always made up his own mind.”

“God, was he ever motivated,” continues Alison. “He was pretty quiet at first, probably because he was hanging around all these older people. Once he got a little older his humor started to come out.”

“I think there was a brief, glorious moment when Jimmy actually admired my climbing,” says Alison, “but he was bossing me around before he got out of high school. He was always telling me that I had too much gear.”

But what can his poor mom have thought when he came home in May of 1985 and said, “Hey Mom, I just freed *Armageddon*?” She might not have understood exactly what he was talking about, but with a word like that she can’t have been comforted.

*Armageddon* (5.12b) is a steep slab that rears up through a vertical bulge in the central section of Cathedral Ledge like a breaking wave. Rising up between such optimistically named neighbors as *Apocalypse* and *Mordor Wall*, *Armageddon* was first climbed by Doug Madera and Paul Ross in 1975 with the aid of a couple of skyhooks. The aid climb had such a wicked reputation that nobody had ever repeated it. Then Jimmy Surette decided to free it. He was a high school junior who had hardly yet been out on a date. But the kid could damn sure climb.

Bold but believable 5.10 face climbing got Jimmy up the 70-degree slab to a flake below the final headwall. He diddled a nest of brass RPs into the flake and started to boulder out the headwall. Up and down, up and down, Jimmy tried to find a way up the headwall. Jimmy pawed at rounded edges with his hands and smeared his feet onto the granite, but he fell off and took a twenty-foot whack into the slab below his RP nest. He regrouped and climbed back up to his

highpoint and beyond. The headwall spit him off again – this time for thirty feet. Jimmy was sure he could free the headwall, but enough was enough and he gave it up for the day.

He went back with Jon Bouchard and punched up the headwall and onto new terrain. Extreme face moves got him to the top of the headwall where he found a sloping shelf like a half-basketball. The RPs were 20 feet below and the slab waited to snap arms and ankles, but Jimmy kept his act together long enough to mantle into the basketball. *Armageddon* was a free climb.

Mrs. Surette is probably glad she didn't see that one.

“Yeah, *Liquid Sky* was the first 5.13 in the northeast and all that,” says Jim Surette, “but some of the other, more traditional routes stand out more. *Liquid Sky* was at the same time as Christian Griffith was psyched on Euro-tactics and I was influenced by that, but prior to *Liquid Sky*, I climbed in a pretty traditional style.” Those more traditional efforts are the ones that Jimmy is most proud of: “I like climbing with consequences. There's a lot more going on.”

Jimmy made scads of other hard and bold first ascents and first free ascents on the granite of the White Mountains. In addition to *Armageddon* some of the highlights are *Delightmaker*, *Lady Lara*, and *Fistful of Dollars* at 5.11+. *London Calling*, *Police and Thieves*, and *The Creation* hit 5.12, and *Steak Sauce* and

*Cerberus* check in at 5.12+. All were done before he graduated high school.

Jimmy is right, he was on fire.

What Jim didn't know is that he had made a Faustian bargain with his charmed high school years. Jimmy paid with his shoulder, which, made wobbly by the years of relentless cranking, was popping in and out of its socket by the summer of 1987. Jim had just graduated high school and had planned to go to Europe for the summer, but Jimmy went under the surgeon's knife instead.

There's a photo of Jimmy cranking *Cerberus* (5.12+) on the cover of Ed Webster's second edition guidebook to White Mountains' rock climbs. The photo catches Jimmy at the height of his teenage game (and wearing those awful '80s tights). He's in mid-lunge on rock that overhangs thirty degrees, right arm extended, shoulder stretched full-out, fingers latched on an unseen hold, and his feet swinging through the air. "That's my classic blow your shoulder out move," says Jimmy. "Strong fingers and weak shoulders."

Recovery cost him eighteen months off hard climbing. "I kind of went crazy," says Jim Surette as he describes the aftermath of surgery. "I got into paragliding and motorcycles and practically killed myself."

"I was flying off Whitehorse one time and the winds were weird or something, and I wasn't going to make the landing at Echo Lake. I crashed into the trees and

flipped upside down. I was plummeting headfirst toward the ground when my wing snagged in the branches. I reached out my hands to this sapling and just as soon as I got my hands around it my wing broke out of the branches and I flipped around and slid down the sapling like it was a firepole. All the little branches tore off, but I fully walked away.”

When he finally came back from his surgery in 1989, Jim went to Chamonix with Randy Rackliff, *fully psyched* to alpine climb. They went after the Walker Spur on the Grandes Jorasses. There were already a lot of other parties already ahead of them, but they went for the route anyway. They crossed the bergschrund and climbed unroped up a mellow snowslope above. Then some Euro above kicked loose a bunch of rocks, one of which pounded Jim in the head and tumbled him over backward. “I went flying down the slope into the ‘schrund, but luckily I landed on a snow bridge. I was knocked out, but after a couple minutes I woke up, figured out where I was, and got the hell out of there. The route was supercrowded, so going up there in the first place was pretty stupid. I was still totally psyched to alpine climb, but I told myself that I was going to wait until I got a little bit older and a little bit smarter to get into it.”

Back in Colorado, Jimmy promptly rode his motorcycles head on into a car. In the aftermath of all the bad luck, surgery, and accidents, Jim decided that he needed something in his life besides climbing. He had never been much of an academic and wasn't going to go back to school, so he decided to get into filmmaking. He

has since participated in dozens of high angle and adventure film projects, and developed a solid career as an adventure cinematographer.

For the first half of the '90s, Jimmy devoted himself to bouldering and sport climbing and spent tons of time at Morrisson and Rifle. "It was cool and all," says Jimmy, "but after a while I felt like a rat in a cage. It wasn't much more than a contest to see how small of holds I could pull on."

When his English buddy Noel Crane invited Jim Surette to join him, Strappo, and Steve Quinlan in the Ruth Gorge in 1996, Jim felt like he was finally ready to indulge his lifelong interest in alpine climbing.

The new millennium finds Jimmy, now a little older, and presumably a little smarter, way into alpine climbing. Alaska, Peru, Kyrgyzstan, and the West Face of Cerro Torre in Patagonia have all felt the kick of Jimmy's crampons, and he draws on the vast experience he has accumulated in 18 years of climbing to do it well. Jim thinks he'll make his next expedition to the Garhwal Himalaya and says, "I'm gonna go big for a couple of years."

"Alex Lowe really inspired me. Alex just needed to climb. Sometimes I feel that way. Alex climbed and did it as good as he could and didn't waste time thinking about it."

Alison Osius, senior editor of Climbing Magazine, who grew up on the cliffs of New Hampshire ten years ahead of Jimmy, talks about Jimmy with the proud air of a big sister. She can never quite lose the mental image of Jimmy frantically pedaling his bike out to the cliffs. “I feel a lot of regional pride in his accomplishments,” says big-sister Alison. “I still can’t believe that he got his twelve year old ass up Cerro Torre.”

“Funny that she should remember that,” says Jimmy, “cause I didn’t start to climb until I was fourteen.”

That is certainly a glimpse into the beating heart of a climbing story.