Backcountry Snowboard Tour

Location: Freel Peak, South Lake Tahoe, CA

Date: March 17, 2013

Written: April 23, 2013

My alarm went off at 5:30, 5:45, and 6:00 before I was finally able to drag myself out of bed on Saint Patrick’s Day, not to celebrate the holiday in traditional fashion, but rather to attempt a very ambitious backcountry tour in the mountains overlooking Lake Tahoe. This plan included almost 11 miles of combined skinning, ascending, and snowboarding totaling almost 8000’ of ascent in an attempt to bag three high peaks in the Tahoe Basin. These mountains included the two highest mountains in the basin, Freel Peak standing at 10,881’ and Job’s Sister at 10,823’. They tower about 4600’ above Lake Tahoe to their Northwest, and over 6100’ above the Carson Valley to the East, where I have been greeted by them every morning I have woken up since moving here.

Their constant presence as the backdrop to my life in the Carson Valley had these giants weighing heavily on my mind by the time March rolled around, around the same time when I came to the unfortunate realization that it was increasingly unlikely that the East side of the Tahoe Basin down to the Carson Valley itself would get enough snowfall to allow me to descend from their summits back down to the Carson Valley over 6100’ below.

Thus the plan was formulated to attack these mountains from South Lake Tahoe, a markedly shorter ascent in terms of vertical feet, but more likely to be snow covered all the way to the trailhead. Based on this plan of action, I also decided to include Trimmer Peak on the agenda for the day. Trimmer is a very popular destination for the backcountry community of South Lake Tahoe; access to the Northwest slopes of Trimmer is very easy from the High Meadows Road trailhead where we also planned on beginning our tour. Additionally, two major wet slab avalanches in the 1990s carved out two adjacent slide paths on its treed Northwest slopes that look like the number 11, and thus have been known to backcountry enthusiasts as The Elevens ever since. Its location relative to the other two peaks on the docket for the day was also impeccable; Trimmer lay directly in the way of our egress from Freel Peak back to the trailhead at High Meadows Road. We planned to ascend and descend the peaks from East to West, such as to hit the peaks in order of furthest from the trailhead to closest to the trailhead. This meant that we would descend Job’s Sister, then Freel Peak, and finally Trimmer on our way back to the cars.

Thus I found myself at the trailhead at High Meadows Road, on what was shaping up to be a classic bluebird day over Lake Tahoe, preparing for the day’s activities while waiting for the remaining members of the group to arrive. The group that had signed on for this tour included three of my classmates from my AIARE Level 1 Avalanche Course. Although the group would eventually be four people, we started from the trailhead with three; Abe had gone to an Umphrey’s Mcgee concert in San Francisco the night before and was driving up to South Lake approximately two and a half hours behind the rest of us when we started our trek. He planned to meet us for the ascent of Freel Peak, opting out of Job’s Sister.

Immediately we were greeted by a lack of snow on High Meadows Road, which would serve as our access to one of the most remote and least visited areas in the Tahoe Basin. After about ¾ mile of
walking in our boots, we were able to put our skins to work, although we still had to navigate patches of dirt for a time before the ascent was completely snow covered. As we continued on our uphill grind, we slowly passed Trimmer Peak to our right (South), and caught good views of The Elevens, which still appeared to be holding good snow. Already I was hoping that we would have enough time to shred them on the way back, as there was only so much daylight to go around. Unfortunately our case wasn’t being helped, as one of the members of my group was having some trouble with blisters, which significantly slowed our progress.

We finally made the turn around the backside of Trimmer Peak, into the High Meadow that sits at the foot of the North slopes of Freel Peak and Job’s Sister. At this point, our blister-laden friend decided that he did not have it in him to continue, and decided to return to the cars. Here we also got our first real view of Job’s Sister and Freel Peak. Despite having scoped these mountains from Heavenly on the previous day, the aspect from Heavenly had hidden the bareness of the West flank of Job’s Sister, up which we had planned to ascend before descending the Northeast couloir down to Star Lake.

From here on it would be myself and Liz, one of the most talented telemark skiers I’ve met, until Abe caught up to us. Abe was making up ground fairly quickly since he was unrestricted in his ascent, and it appeared that he would meet up with us sooner than we expected. Nevertheless we continued on through the High Meadow up towards the Northwest shoulder of Job’s Sister. As we continued, the length of our approach began to take a toll on Liz, particularly her heel, which she had shattered in a climbing incident not 7 months prior.

I quickly came to realize that we would not have time to hit all of the peaks on our agenda before nightfall; Liz and I discussed a course of action and decided to go directly for Freel Peak. Freel was the most important mountain on the agenda since it held the moniker of Tahoe’s Highest Peak. We altered our course slightly and made more directly toward Freel Peak, which towered over us to our Southwest, still nearly 2000’ above us.

We came out of the trees of the High Meadow into the alpine zone of Freel Peak. We were greeted by the striking Northeast face of the mountain standing above the drainage which wrapped around its impressive slopes from East to North as it flowed down into the High Meadow back toward Lake Tahoe. We were not worried about our position at the bottom of the drainage, which would have been a very dangerous place to be with elevated avalanche danger present, but the snowpack was extremely stable due to the numerous freeze-thaw cycles it had undergone. We were fortunate that the temperature was cold enough this day to maintain the stability of the snowpack and prevent possible instabilities from daytime warming.

It was apparent that this was going to be the last push of our ascent, and from the bottom of the drainage I decided to do the last section of the climb at my pace, and wait for Liz just short of the summit. After a quick half hour of skinning straight up the drainage and around onto the Northeast Face, I attained the summit ridge of Freel Peak on its Eastern side, but not after the most sketchy thirty yards of traversing over ice that I’ve ever had to do. The only thought going through my head was, “what would happen if I lost my edge here?” The answer was obvious; I would have slid back down to the bottom of the drainage over 1000’ below in an uncontrolled slide.

Luckily I did not lose my edge, and I set about to reassembling my splitboard in preparation for the final push up the rocky ridge to the summit. About a half hour later Liz reached my location and we marveled at the views as she gathered her strength. Around this time I began to think I was hearing things, as I
was beginning to hear what I thought was someone singing. I decided to stand up and look down toward the drainage, the bottom of which was now hidden by a roll which defined its Western side. I was greeted by the sight of Abe making his way up our skin track singing to himself. We decided that we should wait for Abe before summiting since he had made such a valiant effort to catch up to us.

Once Abe had reached us, Liz decided to start her push to the summit since her heel was still bothering her. I opted to wait for Abe, and once he was ready we began our final push to the summit. I was puzzled to find a TV cable running down the ridgeline, but my focus was only momentarily parted from my objective.

We all topped out within a few seconds of each other, and were greeted by some of the most spectacular views my eyes have ever been witness to. We found the summit log book locked in an ammo box, but were unable to locate the USGS marker labeling the top of the mountain. We took pictures at the summit and took in the views, feeling very much accomplished.

But reality came crashing back in on us, as the numerous delays had resulted in our group summiting Freel around 5 PM PDT. We knew that we had a long descent and egress before we reached our cars, and that we would be fortunate to make it back before nightfall around 7:30 PM PDT. Trimmer was out of the question at this point, the goal now was to make it back to the cars before dark.

We descended the Northeast face of Freel and were surprised to find good snow on this first part of the descent. We regrouped on top of the roll that bordered the drainage to the West and rode a few of the chutes on the face before screaming down through the bottom of the drainage. We began to get into the trees of the High Meadow, and decided to attempt to cut as much distance out of the descent as possible instead of following our skin track back out to High Meadows Road. This turned out to be one of the worst decisions I have made in my backcountry career and set us up for the most hellish descent I have ever taken.

Almost immediately the terrain flattened out, and at these lower elevations the entire snowpack was melting, and thus made it very unsupportable. Between attempting to cross country ski on my splitboard and futile attempts at walking, I sank innumerable times in snow up to my waist and even fell into a creek bed. To top things off, we were in the throws of a dense bushwhack, just hoping for the terrain to slope downward again towards our cars. By the time we reached the point where the terrain began to descend again we were quickly losing daylight; we realized that we just needed to find the road before dark or else risk being stuck in the thick of the woods after dark.

We found the road just as we were losing the last of the sun’s light after another exhaustive and torturous bushwhack. Joyously we fell down onto it, but we knew we could not linger long with the onset of night coming quickly. We used what little daylight we had left to quickly descend as much of the road as possible. Fortunately we were able to descend all of the snow covered sections we could before it was truly pitch black. Splitboards and skis made the inevitable transition from being attached underfoot to being carried on backpacks, and headlamps were retrieved from the depths of our packs.

The sight of street lights was never more wonderful than when we finally reached our cars at the trailhead 13 hours after leaving them in the morning. Despite the problems we encountered throughout the tour, the views at the top of Freel Peak made it all worth it. This had truly been one of the most rewarding experiences during my time in Tahoe to say that I had conquered Tahoe’s Highest Peak.

-Lou Cassano, NUHOC Tahoe 2013