



REASONABLE DOUBT

Tomo Cesen's 1990 solo of the south face of Lhotse was called the greatest Himalayan feat ever. The ascent was called into question then, but the doubts were mostly dismissed. Lately, they're back.

Greg Child investigates Europe's big controversy.

I was nervous as I dialed the international code for Slovenia, in the former Yugoslavia, and punched in the number for Tomo Cesen's house in Kranj. After all, not only was I about to speak to the world's greatest alpinist, but I was, in essence, going to ask him if he had lied about the climb in 1990 that had made him famous — the first ascent, solo, of the 12,000-foot south face of Lhotse — because that was what the European press was saying in 1993.

Lhotse rises south of Everest in Nepal, and at 27,892 feet is the fourth-highest peak on earth. First to its summit was a Swiss team, who neatly dispatched the western slope above the Khumbu Icefall in 1956. Nothing was easy about the south face, though. Its avalanche-raked barricade of crumbling black cliffs and ice chutes had beat back 13 expeditions since 1973. A hundred alpinists had pitted themselves against it, including many of Europe's finest, like Pierre Beghin,

Christophe Profit, Marc Batard, Krzysztof Wielicki, and Reinhold Messner. The wall consumed four of Europe's best, too, among them Poland's Jerzy Kukuczka, the only man besides Messner to climb all the 8000-meter peaks. Kukuczka fell from near the summit when a rope snapped on a 1989 attempt.

By 1990 Lhotse's south face had earned the title of "Last Great Problem of the Himalaya." Whoever overcame its evil-looking geology was destined to enter history as the dragonslayer of alpinism. Then, 31-year-old Tomo Cesen claimed a solo first ascent of the wall in a 62-hour round trip in spring of that year.

The speed, endurance, skill, and damned good luck needed to execute the climb was phenomenal. Messner called it "the climbing event of the decade," and indeed it was light years ahead of any alpine achievement in recent memory. Measured

The immense Nuptse/Lhotse wall, with Everest rising behind on the left and Lhotse's main summit on the right (see page 79 for route diagram). Photo: Michael Kennedy

against Cesen, even the best alpinists suddenly looked like primitives. Mentally and physically, he had to be a superman.

Lhotse brought Cesen fame, though almost immediately his lack of witnesses, his sketchy story, and questions about his photographic proof raised doubts. In 1991 he was accused of fabricating the ascent, and European magazines became a battleground for angry letters between Cesen and his detractors. Notable alpinists such as Beghin sided with Cesen, though, and stilled the doubts. They believed him because they wanted to believe that Cesen had taken alpinism into the future, and that a climber's word can be trusted. Climbing has always worked on the honor system. When climbers failed, they admitted failure; when they succeeded, they got kudos, regardless of proof, which was often not available.

But the doubts that erupted in the past year — based upon the revelation that photographs Cesen used to prove his ascent do not belong to him — have been impossible to ignore. In the wake of this discovery, Cesen has lost many believers. Even Messner, who awarded Cesen the \$10,000 Snow Lion Prize in 1989 for his climb of Jannu and dedicated a chapter to Cesen in his autobiography, has recanted his support, saying petulantly, "If Cesen cannot prove his Lhotse climb, he will not be in my books about Himalayan climbing, and I will remove the chapter about him from *Free Spirit*."

Nevertheless, Cesen insists he climbed Lhotse.

As the clicks and whirs of satellite telephone language gave way to a ringing sound in Slovenia, I considered hanging up. I admired Cesen's achievements, and had always believed that he climbed Lhotse. Now I wasn't so sure. If his ascent was a hoax, then it was a con as cynical as if NASA's moon missions had been staged with smoke and mirrors. But what if he was genuine? That was possible, too. Sifting out truth from rumor would not be easy.

Cesen picked up the phone. I introduced myself and asked if we could speak about "the situation." He paused, then said, "Sure, OK." I was surprised. I expected him to hang up or shout a stream of Slovenian insults at me for being another bloodsucking reporter hounding him.

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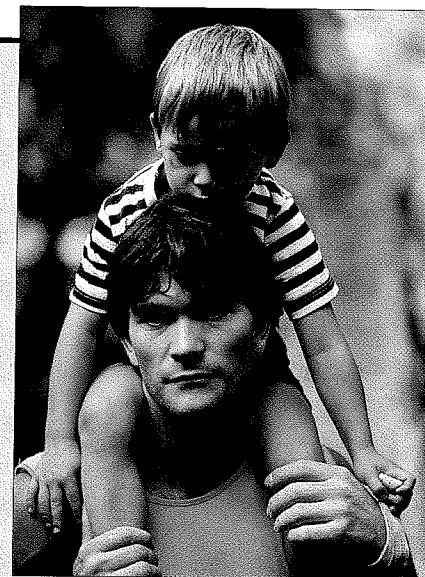
THE ROAD TO LHOTSE

Cesen certainly had the credentials to solo Lhotse. His rise to prominence began in Europe during the winter of 1986 with the Alpine Trilogy, a continuous link-up of the north faces of the Eiger, Grandes Jorasses, and Matterhorn, which he soloed in four days, acing Christophe Profit by one day to the coveted *enchainement*. Profit, who was filmed for television, linked the peaks by helicopter; Cesen, with more humble means, connected them by car and ski lift. Harder than the Trilogy, though, was Cesen's 1987 solo of *No Siesta*, a serious ice route on the Grandes Jorasses.

His Himalayan exploits began in 1985, on the first ascent of Yalung Kang (27,903 feet), a subsidiary peak of Kangchenjunga. Cesen was a member of a large Slovenian team which tackled the mountain in traditional expedition style, fixing ropes and establishing four camps with Sherpa support. After reaching the summit (Cesen used oxygen to do so), his partner, Borut Bergant, literally gave up and dropped off the mountain while descending. Cesen survived a freezing bivouac by pacing back and forth on a ledge. The experience ravaged him — he lost 35 pounds — but it taught him the art of survival at altitude.

Cesen made a 19-hour solo of the regular route on 26,400-foot Broad Peak in 1986, followed by an impressive solo attempt on K2, where he climbed 8500 feet in 17 hours. In 1987 he tried Lhotse Shar, next to Lhotse's south face, with a big team. After this he always soloed his big routes. "If I'm aware that everything depends on me and only on me, I can concentrate 100 percent," he said in a 1991 interview for the book *Beyond Risk*. "And if I have 100 percent concentration, I can pull out of myself all the power and strength I have."

Winter 1989 saw him solo more desperates in Europe — the Red Pillar of the Brouillard on Mont Blanc, and *Modern Times*, a 2500-foot free route on the Marmolada in the Dolomites. In the spring he went to Jannu's north face, an oft-tried flank of that 25,294-foot Nepalese tusk. This solo involved hard ice and verglassed 5.11 rock up an 8000-foot wall. The skill and self-reliance it called for was staggering, as was Cesen's speed: he bagged the route in a 23-hour push, just a week after he reached basecamp.



Laudatory articles in the climbing press, an autobiography, and a commemorative stamp issued in Slovenia followed in the wake of Tomo Cesen's solo ascent of the south face of Lhotse, the "last great problem" of the Himalaya, in spring 1990. But doubts about the ascent soon surfaced, and by 1993 the controversy had all but eclipsed earlier praise of Cesen (shown here with his son, Nejc).

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THE CESEN PHENOMENON
A Profile of the World's Top Mountaineer by Claude Rie



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Cesen said, in the 1991 *American Alpine Journal*, that these experiences taught him "the limits of risk and impossibility are very different for different people." He decided that he was ready for Lhotse.

CESEN'S LHOTSE ACCOUNT

The following is the story according to Cesen's published accounts. He decided to climb the south face of Lhotse by a variation of the route tried in 1981 by a force of 22 Yugoslavs, led by Ales Kunaver and including Viki Groselj. Before Cesen left for Lhotse four years ago he had sat in Groselj's house, looking at his slides, plotting a route.

The 1981 attempt had reached 26,740 feet. In 1985 the Frenchmen Michel Fauquet and Vincent Fine got to 24,300 feet, alpine style, which convinced Cesen that he could solo the route. He had studied it from Lhotse Shar in 1987, and knew that survival would depend on speed, and avoiding the daytime hours when snowstorms engulf the face and avalanches thunder down. Indeed, in 1980 Nicolas Jaeger, a Frenchman, had disappeared on Lhotse Shar when an eight-day storm hit him after he had soloed to 26,500 feet.

Cesen reached basecamp on April 15, then sprang up on Lhotse Shar four times, going as high as 23,600 feet, in order to acclimatize. On April 22 he set off into the frozen night. He carried a 40-pound pack containing a sleeping bag, bivouac sack, seven ice screws, 10 pitons, 300 feet of 6mm rope, extra gloves, socks, and goggles, camera, walkie-talkie, food, and three liters of coffee. He took no stove.

He climbed for 15 hours on 60-degree snowfields left of the

1981 route, then bivouacked at 24,600 feet as dawn lit the wall and rocks started ricocheting down. Early the next afternoon he continued up a couloir flanked by canyon-like walls, then bivouacked again at 26,900 feet. Above loomed the huge, loose cliff that had halted the 1981 team. On April 24 he started again at 5 a.m. in good weather. In the 1991 *American Alpine Journal*, he described this section: "A snowy ramp led to a vertical step, mostly rock but covered here and there by snow and dubious ice. This would have been fine at 5000 meters but at 8000 meters it needed superhuman strength. It took a good three hours to gain some 60 meters, some with artificial aid ... I fixed a part of my rope at the top of the step in preparation for the descent."

Next came "a snowy step then a long traverse." Deep snow, wind, and storm hampered him. Finally the clouds parted, revealing the South Col and Everest, with Cho Oyu farther west. To the south was a sea of clouds. He described the last section by writing, "I had to dip a bit into a saddle and then up to the very top. It was 2:20 p.m. I called camp on the walkie-talkie."

Below were Dr. Jankl Kokalj, a support member, and Tomaz Ravnihar, who was making a film about Cesen. Clouds prevented them from seeing Cesen, but Ravnihar recalls his broadcast. "There's nowhere else to go! It seems that I've reached the summit!" Cesen had blitzed the wall in 46 hours.

He had previously decided to descend his route rather than escape down the easier, yet, for him, unknown west face and the notorious Khumbu Icefall, and had left his gear at the second bivouac. He reversed the crux rapidly, and gives no details in any of his published accounts of the climbing from the

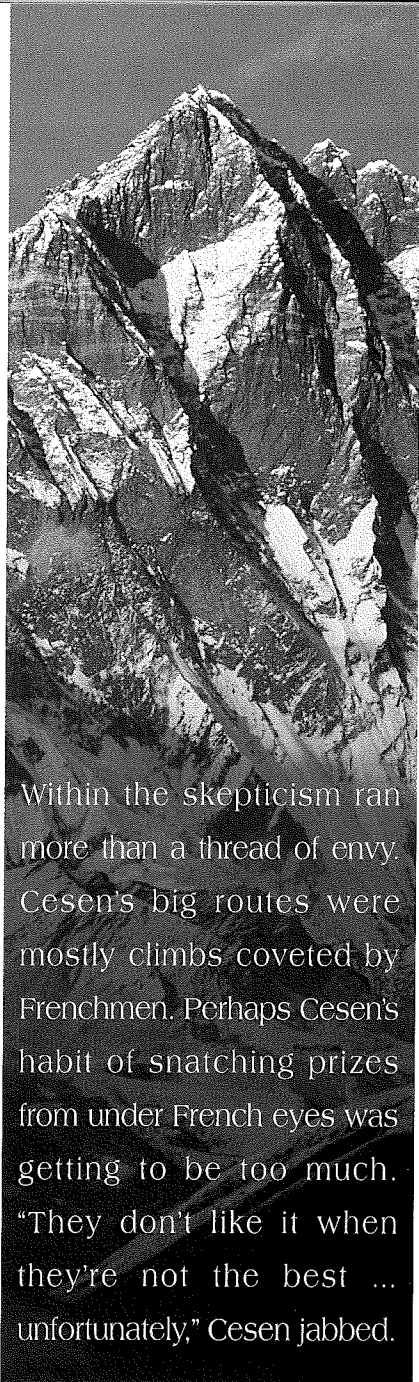
summit to 25,600 feet. Amid worsening avalanche conditions, he located the piton anchors left from 1981, and rappelled into the night. His third bivouac was at 23,950 feet. Again he radioed camp, to check the weather. The forecast was for clearing skies, though Lhotse was engulfed in clouds and trembling from avalanches. "They say I'm cool headed but in that third bivouac my nerves nearly cracked," Cesen wrote in the *American Alpine Journal* of his terror of being swept away. At midnight, stars appeared and he continued down, reaching the bottom at 8 a.m. on April 25.

"I know that Lhotse has captured part of my soul, the part that yearns for uncertainty and true adventure," his article concluded. "It is a road where decisions have to be made and carried out constantly, a road similar to life, but where everything is happening on the very edge of life, an edge so sharp that it is often difficult to sense whether you are on the right side. For better or worse, from mountain tops you can see so much further, and the true limit is infinity. A man throws a rock — his desire — into the unknown, into the mist, and then he follows it."

THE HOMECOMING

Jannu had put Cesen on the map, letting him quit his job as a steeplejack to become a professional climber, but Lhotse made him. It earned him a Slovenian national medal. Messner nominated him for another Snow Lion Prize. Several Italian gear companies hired him as a technical advisor. His climbing club gave him a job. Cesen also wrote a newspaper sports column, appeared on sports shows, made a climbing documentary in the United States, and authored a glossy book about his career.

Journalists flocked to Cesen, too. When David Roberts visited his home in the foothills of the Julian Alps in 1990 to write an article, "Sweetheart of the Himalaya," for *Outside*, he found Cesen exuding "confidence and serenity," and described him as "movie-star handsome: six feet tall, lean but muscular." Writing for the British press, the climber/writer Stephen Venables found Cesen "reserved, dour and intense," yet "quite genuine." Nic O'Connell, author of *Beyond Risk*, a book of interviews of



Within the skepticism ran more than a thread of envy. Cesen's big routes were mostly climbs coveted by Frenchmen. Perhaps Cesen's habit of snatching prizes from under French eyes was getting to be too much. "They don't like it when they're not the best ... unfortunately," Cesen jabbed.

climbers, was impressed by Cesen's generosity and his "Mr. Mum" devotion to his children, wife, and parents, as well as his rock climbing talent. (O'Connell watched him nearly flash a 5.13c sport route.) Echoing the feeling of many who know Cesen, O'Connell also remarked, "He's the kind of person you'd never imagine could lie."

THE DOUBTS BEGIN

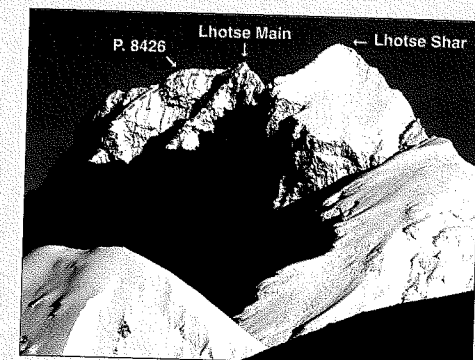
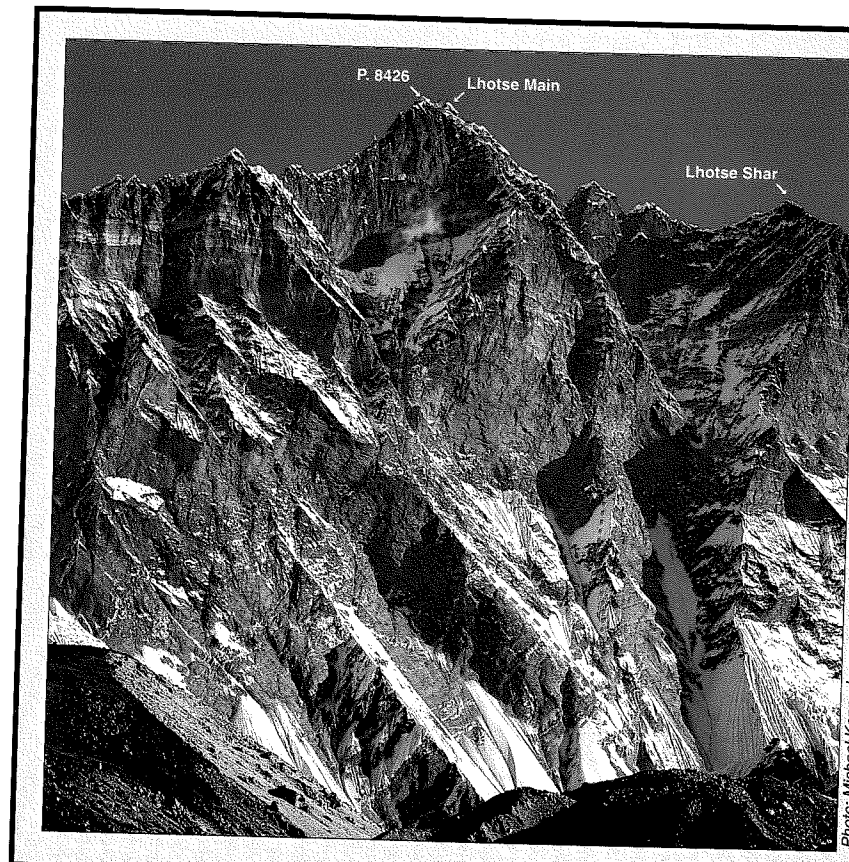
Gossip that Cesen's ascents could be fakes started in the alpine huts and bars of Chamonix soon after his return from Lhotse. Some people couldn't accept that Cesen could climb so fast, so hard, so high, and so alone, and get so famous without proof. Who had seen him do the Alpine Trilogy, or his other solos in the Alps, they asked? Where was the photographic proof?

On Jannu his camera had frozen, and no one from basecamp saw him on top. (Kokalj, who accompanied Cesen to basecamp on Jannu and Lhotse, was unavailable for comment.) On K2 he had soloed the south face to the Abruzzi Ridge, then descended that route on a day when many climbers were going up and down, yet none saw Cesen. As for Lhotse, aside from

some unremarkable photographs showing hard-to-pinpoint views of the wall, and a summit photo showing Everest and the icy basin of the Western Cwm, all published in July 1990 in the French magazine *Vertical*, his only proof was his word.

The wheels of doubt turned further. In Italy's *AlpiRando*, an interviewer, Mario Colonel, asked Cesen about Lhotse: "Your friends, did they see you reach the summit?" Caught off guard, Cesen bridled, saying, "You ask as if you considered there was some doubt in the matter." Within the skepticism ran more than a thread of envy. Cesen's big routes were mostly climbs coveted by Frenchmen. The French take their alpinism seriously. Perhaps Cesen's habit of snatching prizes from under French eyes was getting to be too much. "They don't like it when they're not the best ... unfortunately," Cesen jabbed.

He remained aloof from the speculators. "I know what I have done. I have always climbed for myself. It doesn't matter to me if you believe me, or if you don't," he said defiantly in a 1991 interview in *Vertical*.



After their ascent of another line on the south face of Lhotse in fall 1990, the Russian team expressed doubt about Cesen's solo earlier that year, citing, among other things, the 1000-foot corniced ridge that lies between the top of Cesen's route and the summit. Cesen says he climbed below the ridge crest on the south face in order to avoid the wind. Shown at the left is the view of Lhotse from the southwest (the dashed line indicates Cesen's route; the dotted line shows the Russian route), with the true summit and intervening ridge hidden. Above, a telephoto taken from Makalu basecamp almost due east, with the upper part of both routes marked.

THE RUSSIAN ASCENT OF LHOTSE

Doubts increased in November, 1990, after a Russian team climbed the south face via a direct line, right of Cesen's route, to the summit. Harder and steeper than Cesen's line, it was done in heavy style: it took 25 men, two months of climbing, seven camps linked by thousands of feet of rope, and the use of oxygen after 23,000 feet to place Sergei Bershov and a severely frostbitten Vladimir Karatajev on top. After a press conference in Kathmandu, European magazines carried the news that the Russians had dropped a bombshell on Cesen by claiming the first ascent of the wall.

An incredulous Pierre Beghin, France's most respected Himalayan alpinist, who was there to try the wall that winter, reportedly exclaimed to Bershov at the press conference, "But what about Cesen?"

"He didn't get to the summit," came the reply.

"But what about his photo of the Western Cwm?"

"You can't see the Western Cwm from the summit of Lhotse."

The photo Beghin referred to had appeared in *Vertical*, in the article "The Ascent of Tomo." Its caption read, "On the summit Tomo had just enough time to photograph the Western Cwm of Everest to authenticate his ascent." Surely the fact that Cesen possessed this picture proved he had surmounted the south wall? For only from the top of Lhotse can one look north and see Everest. The Russians also noted that between the point where Cesen's route hit the summit crest and the actual summit was a 1000-foot corniced ridge, an obstacle they doubted Cesen had climbed, and something barely mentioned in Cesen's published accounts.

Bershov was cagey about accusing Cesen of lying, saying at the press conference, "I don't say he did not reach the top, but if he did he is a superman." (Bershov repeated this comment to me during a phone interview, aided by an interpreter, in 1993.) In addition to Lhotse, Bershov has climbed a new route on Everest and has traversed Kangchenjunga, the world's third highest peak. He remains adamant about what he saw from Lhotse's summit: Everest's southern faces and tents on the South Col. He didn't see the icy basin of the Western Cwm, which from Lhotse's summit, he says, is blocked by the curvature of Lhotse's west face.

As for the traverse, I was surprised when Cesen told me that he negotiated the ridge by climbing below its crest, on the south face, to escape the savage wind. I had photographed this ridge in 1988, through a telephoto lens, from Makalu basecamp, and saw a steep and fluted snow wall, overhung by house-sized cornices. Everything I've learned has told me to avoid climbing beneath cornices or on slopes on the lee side of the prevailing winds; such areas are prone to windslab avalanches and are often covered in deep snow. But that is where Cesen says he climbed, rather than taking the hardpacked snow on top of the ridge.

THE ACCUSER

In September, 1990, when Cesen was nominated for membership to the exclusive French climbing club the Groupe de Haute Montagne, several members blocked his entry over the matter of proof. The most vociferous doubter was Ivano Ghirardini, a leading alpine soloist in the 1970s and early 1980s who achieved the first Alpine Trilogy (spread over a winter),

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Reasonable Doubt

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Messner said later. In earlier statements, Cesen had said he had left his pitons behind as anchors. When the audience asked Cesen how he acclimatized so quickly (he summited nine days after reaching basecamp, while most alpinists need a month to adapt to 8000 meters), Cesen said he had earlier been in Tibet. Messner later learned that Cesen has never visited Tibet.

But a film clip of Cesen returning to camp after the climb troubled Messner the most. "I've never seen a climber so fresh after an 8000-meter peak," Messner told me in autumn 1993. "You can see in the eyes and face when someone has done something difficult at high altitude. Here I saw a fresh young man coming down a hill."

After the lecture Messner suggested to Cesen that he could escape all the doubts about his ascent by climbing a major route with partners, "to show the world you can do it." Cesen replied, "Nobody [else] can do these things, I must do them alone."

"From all his answers I had the feeling there was something wrong," Messner says now. He decided not to award Cesen the Snow Lion prize.

THE LHOTSE PHOTOS

With 10 of the world's 8000-meter peaks under his belt, Viki Groselj may soon become the third man to climb the 14 highest peaks. In February, 1993, he was preparing an exhibit of climbing literature for his climbing club when he came across the three-year-old issue of *Vertical* featuring Cesen's Lhotse article. Groselj hadn't seen the issue before. Slovenians, he said, usually look to German and English magazines for information.

Groselj was surprised to see the Lhotse photographs because when Cesen returned to Slovenia in 1990 he publicly announced that he had none. "My word is my only proof," he said, and, being a national hero, he was believed. Accordingly, no meaningful photographs from Lhotse ever appeared in Slovenia — not even in Cesen's autobiography, *Solo*. This book shows only staged shots of Cesen climbing the glacier near base-

camp, and telephoto shots of him low on the wall, on easy terrain, possibly on Lhotse Shar. Since the wall is sunlit in these photos, and he embarked on his climbs late in the day when the wall is shadowed, it seems to me unlikely that these are from his Lhotse climb.

Groselj, who regarded Cesen as "the genius child of mountaineering," knew that Cesen had told journalists at the time of Ghirardini's attack that he had taken photos, but, trusting Cesen, Groselj had never probed this apparent contradiction. He experienced a feeling of déjà vu about the photos in *Vertical*, though. At home, he sorted through his slides and made an astonishing discovery: two slides attributed to Cesen were his. "I nearly fell down," Groselj told me.

One photo showed a fog-shrouded cliff at 27,000 feet, snapped by Groselj on the 1981 south face attempt. The other was the shot of the Western Cwm. *Vertical* had accidentally printed both images in reverse. "I took this picture," says Groselj, "500 feet below the summit, on April 30, 1989, when I climbed the west face [of Lhotse]."

How did Cesen get the slides? Two days after Cesen returned from Nepal in 1990, he borrowed them from Groselj's wife, Cveta, while Groselj was climbing in Russia. Cesen wanted them to show his Italian sponsors where his route went, he said. At no time did he suggest he would portray the slides as his own.

"Since I trusted him as a good acquaintance of our family, I let him choose whatever he required. He returned them a few days later," says Cveta.

Now Groselj's faith in Cesen was shattered. Groselj also suspected that a third photo, of a cornice described by Cesen as being at 24,600 feet, did not belong to Cesen. "It isn't my photo, but I am sure that Tomo got it from one of the other 1981 expedition members," Groselj told me.

Indeed, in 1981 Groselj had taken a nearly identical shot on the south face. He found it inconceivable that this lump of snow had not changed shape in nine years. He also noted that Cesen had described his route as being 150

feet left of the 1981 attempt, meaning that he could not have photographed the cornice from the position implied in the image. "This means that Tomo doesn't have any photo that is his, above 23,000 feet," says Groselj.

WHISTLE BLOWER

Groselj confronted Cesen and demanded an explanation. Cesen admitted he had borrowed the photos, but maintained that he had never claimed them as his own. Cesen blamed *Vertical's* editors for wrongly attributing his name to the pictures. Why did he submit the photos to *Vertical*, without Groselj's permission, in the first place? And, if it was a mistake, why didn't he alert anyone when they appeared in *Vertical*? He had excuses — the same he would soon tell others — but they did not convince Groselj.

Groselj told his climbing club of his discovery, but his compatriots urged him to keep quiet. Cesen was the unofficial climbing ambassador of Slovenia, and embarrassing him would shame all Slovenian climbers. Still, despite the criticism of his club, Groselj went public with the story in April, 1993, prior to his departure to climb K2.

Cesen had to respond. In newspapers, on TV, and in a letter to the Mountaineering Union of Slovenia, he denied any foul play regarding his ascent or the use of Groselj's photos. He told the Slovenian public, "I have no photographs from the summit. I have said clearly from the beginning that I don't possess any."

He had indeed told Slovenia this in 1990, but some people remembered his defence against Ghirardini and the Russians in 1991. In *Vertical*, the *Indian Mountaineer*, Italy's *Revista de la Montagne*, in Slovenian newspapers, and in *Beyond Risk*, he referred to a summit photo (now known to be Groselj's) that he said proved his ascent. "Many people have seen this photograph," Cesen

told an interviewer in *Vertical* then; "It poses no problem, it is at the disposal of all who wish to examine it ..."

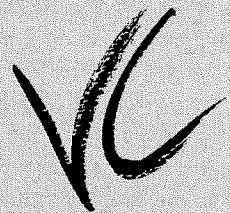
Among the few to see Cesen's photos was Stephen Venables, who visited him in Kranj in 1990, after Lhotse. Venables recalls that Cesen showed him about 20 slides taken on the Lhotse trip. None were action shots. Venables says that Cesen was "very vague" about the final day of climbing, but when he produced the photo looking into the Western Cwm, Venables assumed "he must have topped out from the wall." Throughout 1991 Venables defended Cesen against his detractors in Britain's *High* magazine. He had no idea that Cesen had announced in Slovenia that he had no photos from Lhotse, or that the summit photo would become so controversial.

ENTER VERTICAL

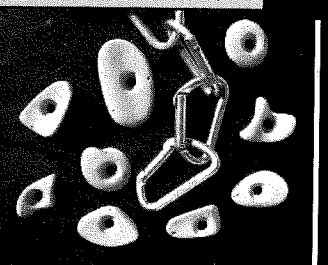
Dominique Vulliamy, a production assistant at *Vertical*, recalls Cesen as being distraught when he visited her home in Grenoble last summer. He had driven from Slovenia in the hope of

clearing up the mess by persuading Vulliamy that the fault lay with her. The problem was, he said, a "misunderstanding due to the language barrier," and he offered Vulliamy a complex scenario. In 1989, after Jannu, he had proposed to her an article about Slovenian climbing. One climber he suggested writing about was Viki Groselj. Cesen never wrote the article, but he said that Vulliamy had phoned him after Lhotse, and asked him to come to France with photos from his ascent, as well as photos for the story about Slovenian alpinists, in which she remained interested. That was why he submitted Groselj's slides, he said. He blamed Vulliamy for accidentally mixing them with his own.

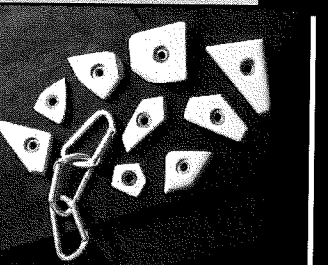
Vulliamy regards that account as a smokescreen. "The photos were never presented as being Groselj's. His name was not on them. And we never discussed, at that time, any other articles.



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How could it happen that the only photos he gave us by Groselj were from high on Lhotse?"

Vertical's editor, Jean Michel Asselin, also found Cesen's explanation hard to swallow. In January 1991 — six months after the controversial photos were published, and at the height of Ghirardini's attacks — Asselin says he had quizzed Cesen about an inconsistency in his Lhotse article: Cesen had reported fog on the summit, begging the question of how he could have photographed the Western Cwm. Cesen, Asselin says, explained that fog shrouded only the south side, and not Everest, "so I could take that photo." In Asselin's opinion, this could have been an opportunity to inform *Vertical* of the mistaken use of Groselj's photo.

Another thing troubled Asselin. In 1990, when he noticed that the summit shot was a duplicate, Asselin had asked Cesen for the original. Cesen, Asselin says, said it was stolen at a lecture in Milan. Yet after the revelation by Groselj, Cesen told *Vertical* that the lost photo was not the Groselj photo, but another one, which Cesen took just below the summit.

THE DOSSIER

Summer 1993 got worse for Cesen. In June, Messner announced that he no longer believed him, that he was retracting Cesen's Snow Lion award, and that he planned to "erase his name" from his books. Then, in July, a dossier of evidence against Cesen, stamped with the seal of a legal interpreter appointed by Slovenia's Secretariat for Justice and General Administration, began circulating throughout Europe. Its author was Viki Groselj.

The dossier compares Cesen's conflicting comments between 1990 and 1993. Citing print and TV sources, Groselj shows that in 1991 Cesen said he "spent much energy taking photographs on the face and on the summit." In 1993, however — after the outbreak of the controversy over the photographs — Cesen denied ever taking summit photos. In an interview with the Slovenian sports magazine *Ekipa*, Cesen was asked, "You did have a camera with you, why didn't you take photographs?" He replied, "I could go on explaining for an hour why not ... but I simply didn't."

"He is getting mixed up into new lies," said Cveta Groselj, who with her husband, is considering making an official submission of the dossier to the UIAA.

Cesen's plight inspired Ghirardini to pen a blistering I-told-you-so attack on Cesen published in September in *Vertical*. In it he charged that Cesen also lied about the Alpine Trilogy and K2. Ghirardini claimed that the weather was bad on the dates when Cesen said he soloed the Eiger and Matterhorn, and he did not believe Cesen could make such rapid solos at night under such conditions. He also said that Cesen had altered his story about the times and circumstances of the routes. As for K2, Ghirardini regarded it as "totally unlikely" that Cesen could have eluded the many climbers ascending and descending the Abruzzi Ridge.

Ghirardini accused Cesen and his sponsors of profiting from fraud. Cesen should be "placed in the hands of the Slovenian police," Ghirardini said, and any photos he has from Lhotse should be "examined by a criminal laboratory," to check the frame numbers against the sequence of events. He fur-

ther charged that Cesen is accountable for the lives of less experienced climbers who try to emulate his alleged feats and get into trouble.

While Ghirardini's questions about the Alpine Trilogy deserve answers, Cesen did provide an alibi for K2. Tomaz Jamnick, co-leader of Cesen's K2 expedition, confirmed to me that he saw Cesen nearing the Abruzzi Ridge on K2 at 10 a.m. on August 4, and spoke with him by radio.

CESEN'S LAST STAND

With his support lagging and the press turning against him even in Slovenia, Cesen raised his last defence in his claim of climbing Lhotse by citing an entry in the 1993 *American Alpine Journal*. A month after Cesen's ascent, two Americans, Wally Berg and Scott Fischer, climbed Lhotse's west face. Afterward, Berg was interviewed by Elizabeth Hawley, a Reuters news correspondent, in Kathmandu. The meeting led Berg to write a "personal note" to the *American Alpine Journal* editor, H. Adams Carter, which Carter published.

The note says that after the interview

with Hawley, "We were sure he [Cesen] had been there based on his description of the summit area, which Liz related to us a few days after she had interviewed him. Among other things, he described seeing an old orange oxygen bottle on a small platform just below the summit, which is a small snow cone." He also noted that the final snow cone was so precarious that he and Fischer belayed each other up it. Cesen told Hawley he had decided against standing on top of it, which Berg thought was a smart move for someone without a rope.

Cesen says Berg's observations prove his ascent. *Vertical* magazine called them "good news for Cesen." Messner dismisses the interview. "There have been 50 ascents of Lhotse. Cesen could have asked someone what was on top. Why didn't he take a photo of the oxygen bottle?"

Unfortunately for Cesen, neither Fischer, Berg, nor Hawley kept notes of those conversations about the summit, and today their memories are hazy. Fischer no longer recalls seeing an oxygen bottle at all. Bershov, who followed Cesen's final 150 feet to the summit six months

later, says he saw no oxygen bottle.

Berg stands by his original statement, though, saying that he walked out of the conversation with Liz Hawley "feeling I had confirmed Cesen's ascent." And Carter, who visited Cesen in Kranj in 1990 after Lhotse and saw his photos, says that despite the controversy since then, he still has great faith in Cesen's integrity. "I have known him from well before the time he became famous," says Carter. "He made a bad mistake using Groselj's photos, by I think he completed the Lhotse climb."

CESEN SPEAKS

When I spoke with Cesen in October his tone was calm, although he had endured weeks of bad press. He spoke convincingly, though his version of events suggests that many people I interviewed are involved in a conspiracy to discredit him.

When I asked him to explain how Groselj's photos had ended up in *Vertical* with his name on them, he repeated his story of being requested by Dominique Vuilliamy to bring some slides of Groselj's to illustrate an article

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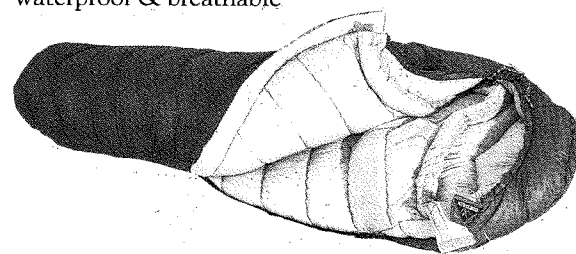
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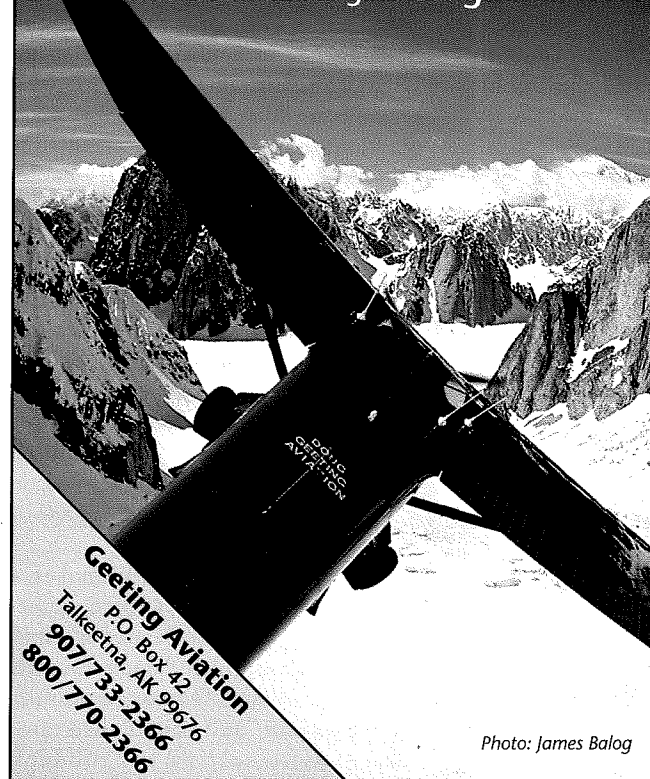
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separate from Cesen's Lhotse piece. Cesen claims he told Cveta Groselj precisely the same thing at the time. He took the slides "to help Groselj" get published in *Vertical*. He also says the slides were marked with Groselj's name. Whatever happened next was due to mistakes by *Vertical*, which, Cesen says, the staff refuses to admit.

Asked why it took three years before he admitted that *Vertical* had erroneously included Groselj's pictures with his article, he said, "This was my mistake." He said that at the time he was worried by Ghirardini's accusations and thought it would look bad if he raised the matter then. Did he take photos from the top of Lhotse? "No," he said, then added, "not directly from the top."

As for Messner's contention that Cesen had told him in Vienna that he'd acclimatized in Tibet, Cesen replied, "I never said this. I have never been to Tibet." Cesen attributed his spectacular speed on Lhotse and his ability to acclimatize to 8000 meters in nine days to rigorous training, which he says most alpinists don't do. His acclimatization technique is, in fact, supported by other ascents. Viki Groselj himself reached the 26,398-foot summit of Shishapangma in Tibet just 12 days after reaching basecamp.

Cesen was enigmatic about the origin of the 1993 controversy, blaming it on "the fact that I don't have a good relationship with the expeditions commission in Slovenia." He said the trouble began when he appeared on a TV sports show and criticized Groselj's plan to climb all the 8000-meter peaks, saying it was not at the forefront of alpinism. Cesen suggested that Groselj and Tone Skarja, who are big wheels in the expeditions commission, have a mafia-like monopoly on the funding of Slovenian expeditions, and that Groselj was trying to silence Cesen by publicly accusing him of stealing his slides and faking his ascent.

As for the burden of proof, Cesen said, "I'm satisfied with this," citing Berg's letter in the *American Alpine Journal*. Otherwise, he said, "the future will show I climbed Lhotse."

ASSUMPTIVE REALITIES

Tomo Cesen is not the first climber to be accused — rightly or wrongly — of lying. The more I explored this affair,

the more it reminded me of the controversy surrounding Cesare Maestri, the Italian who claimed the first ascent of Cerro Torre in 1959. Climbers have long contested this climb, and subsequent expeditions to the route — none of which have succeeded — have found no traces of Maestri's ascent.

Nevertheless, Maestri still insists that he and Toni Egger battled their way up and down a futuristic route on the north face of that wind-lashed Patagonian tower. Like Cesen, Maestri lacks witnesses and photos, as Egger disappeared in an avalanche during the descent, taking the camera with him. Maestri cannot prove he climbed Cerro Torre, nor can anyone categorically prove he didn't. Maybe, for Maestri, the ascent has entered the realm of assumptive reality — he has said he climbed Cerro Torre for so long that he believes it, regardless of what the truth is.

Closer to home, I remembered the case of a friend who became caught in a web of deception. He and another climber got high on a Himalayan peak, yet did not make the summit. Afterward they decided it would enhance their careers to say they had succeeded.

This tormented my friend's conscience, but once the lie was uttered publicly, there was no turning back. When they published photos, they added a shot of them standing gloriously on the summit of a peak not in the Himalaya, but in the Alps. People sensed something was amiss, and asked questions. Finally my friend admitted to his wife — he had lied even to her — that the claim was a fiction. Although there was a flap at the time, few people remember the incident now.

But what about Tomo Cesen? Does it matter if he was a fraud? If he had claimed any climb other than Lhotse's south face it probably wouldn't, but great climbers have died vying for it. Messner dubbed the wall "a climb for the year 2000," and *Vertical* termed the awaited ascent "an orgiastic highpoint in the history of alpinism."

Tomaz Ravnihar, the filmmaker at Lhotse basecamp, who has been accused of being part of a pro-Cesen conspiracy to fake the ascent, explained away the scandal by saying, "Tomo's success was too enormous, and this is the reason why mountaineering has suddenly

become a matter of business and the reason Cesen needs evidence." Whether one believes Cesen or not, the statement holds true.

Climbing has changed since Maestri and my friend told their stories. Back then, only honor was at stake. Today, climbing is more commercial. Reputations must be sustained to impress sponsors. For a handful of climbers, there is money and glory to be had. It may not be much money, and the glory is fleeting, but it can mean the difference between climbing for a living, or digging a ditch.

AFTER THE STORM

By the time the Cesen affair played itself out a couple of months ago, the players were tired from a long feud. *Fokus* magazine in Slovenia had called Cesen's climb "a swindle." The BBC had reported it as a potential hoax. Cesen remained adamant that he had made his climbs. "I really don't care anymore," he sighed to me on the phone. "If people don't believe me, that's their problem."

Groselj was frustrated that the Slovenian Mountaineering Union, blaming *Vertical* for an editorial error, had exonerated Cesen of intentional wrongdoing. "I feel I am in a lonely place," Groselj said, wondering if the criticism he endured for trying to topple Cesen, Slovenia's icon of alpinism, was worth it.

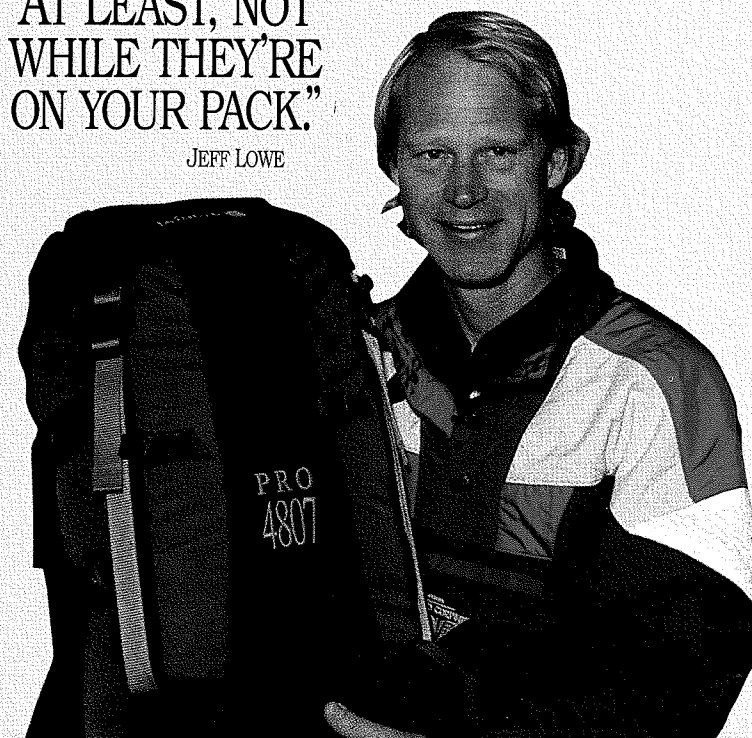
Maybe Cesen summited on Lhotse, and fearing that his lack of proof would undermine his claim, he tried to pass other people's photos as his own. Or maybe he only got high on the wall, and made the claim anyway. Or maybe he sat behind a rock beneath Lhotse and tricked his friends at basecamp with a false radio message. Or maybe an elaborate conspiracy is afoot.

There really is no way of knowing, short of climbing that awesome wall and searching for the pitons Cesen told me he left above 27,000 feet. And I'll be damned if I'm going to do that.

Wall rat, free climber, and Himalayan veteran, Greg Child has written for Climbing since 1982. His most recent book, Mixed Emotions, was published in fall 1993 by The Mountaineers Books.

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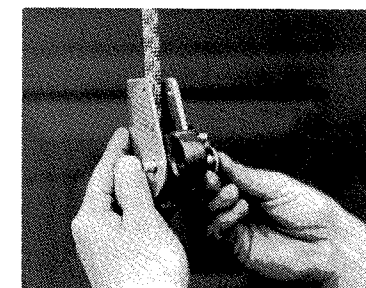
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