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ERIC WHALEN

## RON SKELTON

Valley trad dad and cancer survivor

**RON SKELTON, 67, FIRST TRIED CLIMBING** in Yosemite when he was 33, to overcome his fear of heights. Despite an August 2007 diagnosis of stage IV bone-marrow cancer, Skelton, a former mechanic, is still at it. Throughout his chemotherapy, he kept to the rock, seconding pitches in the Valley; just two weeks after finishing treatment, Skelton was leading again.

Perhaps you know someone like this: a true-blue climber who's jumped huge hurdles but flies under the radar—they're the Keepers of the Psyche, the local heroes. The Yosemite climber Sean Jones, 38, sums up the Skelton mystique best: "Here's a guy who's ripping despite having cancer—ripping smooth on 5.11+ cracks that have 20-something climbers crying for their mommies." —*Suzanne Hurt*

### How were you diagnosed?

I was having a harder and harder time getting up climbs. I went to the doctor [in August 2007]. They took blood and found a protein that shouldn't have been there—my [marrow] was making protein instead of red blood cells.

### How have you fought it?

We started chemotherapy immediately. They

Two months post-chemo, Ron Skelton leads the 5.10a first pitch of *Outer Limits*, Yosemite.

sit you in a La-Z-Boy and infuse you with four of the planet's deadliest poisons. You lose your hair. Your skin gets rougher and more tender, and changes color slightly. You have no energy. You're hurting. You do eight treatments, three weeks apart. After four, they couldn't find any cancerous cells but, to be safe, they did four more. [My doctor] said my cancer was so aggressive he didn't think I'd survive. *And your mindset throughout?* I was very ill the first week. The treatment kills all your white blood cells. It was a pretty bleak feeling, but I wasn't afraid. Basically, I turned off my mind and thought, 'There are going to be two outcomes: either I'm gonna survive, or I'm not gonna survive. I'll do my best, and we'll see what happens.' Then the fear wasn't there. Your goal is to live that day. You survive one day, and then concentrate on the next.

### Did you keep climbing?

The doctor gave me instructions not to climb. I did it anyhow, the whole time. I got up *Crack-a-go-go* (5.11c), *Red Zinger* (5.11d), and

the first pitch [5.10a] of *Outer Limits* after my third treatment. I didn't lead anything, because I didn't want to fall and get hurt. I also didn't have much strength or endurance.

[Climbing] takes your mind off what you're going through. There's an exhilaration from the risks you overcome. Climbing is a celebration of life.

### Tell me about your new Yosemite Blue Butterfly Inn, the Valley's only climber-owned B&B.

It's been a lot of work but a lot of fun, too. Last summer, we had a young Irish couple who'd just gotten married. They were the cutest pair you've ever seen. I asked him if he wanted to climb, and he said, 'I don't want to go climbing on my honeymoon.' But she said, 'I really think you should.' So all three of us went. They want to come back next year.

### What's next?

I'm trying to get my strength and endurance back. I'm 67—I don't have a lot of time to recover. I want to do *Astroman* next spring or summer. I'm not sure I'll be in good-enough shape. Whatever your age, you have to have a goal. You have to keep thinking maybe your best climb is still ahead of you. 🪨



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