30 Years of Climbing MAGAZINE

Coonyard Mouths Off — Part II

Affairs of the states

By Yvon Chouinard

There is a spontaneous and light-hearted quality in a sport which vanishes as the sport matures."
— Sir Arnold Lunn

Between 1915 and 1932, the Swiss guide Hans Lauper knocked off 18 major first ascents in the Alps, including the North Faces of the Monch, Jungrau, and Kamm, and the East Face of the Eiger. During the 1930s most of the great north faces in the Alps were climbed, including the "last great problem," the Eigerwand in 1938.

In 1947, John Salathé and Anton Nelson, wearing sneakers and driving pitons directly into decomposed granite, climbed the *Lost Arrow Chimney*. They placed expansion bolts on the smooth summit knob.

In 1957, the first Grade VI in North America was put up on the North Face of Half Dome, and if you found a Vibram track on any trail in America, you knew it was made by a climber, who was a friend of a friend of a friend.

By 1960, gas was 25 cents a gallon and for 50 bucks you could get a decent car. With a couple of hundred dollars more you could spend April to November climbing all over the country. This was the beginning of the age of specialization. You climbed and that was it. Robbins was the only one we knew who also skied and we never really trusted him because of that. In Yosemite you climbed cracks or you were a face climber. The first 5.10s were put up beginning in 1960, and by the end of the decade it was possible to effect a rescue on El Cap from the top.

In November 1964, finding 15 inches of snow on the summit after making the first ascent of the *North American Wall,* Robbins, Pratt, Frost, and I threw off a duffel bag and watched helplessly as someone jumped out of a car, ran to the base of the wall, and made off with all our down jackets and bivouac gear.

In May 1970, *Climbing* No. 1 was hot off the press, definitely slanted toward Colorado climbing; but the Northwest had *Off Belay,* Southern California had *Summit,* and the Gunks had the *Vulgarian Digest.* The free standard was now 5.11, and the *Dawn Wall* was marathoned in 29 days for the ultimate in big-wall living; they blew it, though — two days more and they could have inked a big promo deal with Baskin-Robbins.

More and more people were getting into climbing and backpacking, but you couldn't leave your gear at the base of a wall or even in your tent any more. The *Wall Street Journal* advised corporate America to invest in the "high growth" specialty outdoor industry. The Park Service was busy setting up reservation systems for backcountry use. The Yosemite Master plan was being formulated to eliminate automobiles in the Valley by the year 1990.

In 1972, the Chouinard Equipment Catalog came out with the "Whole Natural Art of Protection," and almost overnight the game changed, most of America switching over to natural protection. People attempted to de-piton routes in Europe, like the *Walker Spur* but democracy wouldn't allow it; the lowest common denominator prevailed, and within weeks they were pegged up again.

Sometime around 1973 the rate of growth in outdoor sports peaked. Some companies diversified into soft goods, some didn't even see the change until was too late. Gas prices shot upward and suddenly there was less fat in the system to support those on the bottom end of the social spectrum. The draft card burners of the 1960s were getting older, having kids, and looking to upgrade their lifestyles.

Enter the 1980s. You can't "out-rebel" your parents — they were the wigged-out, drug-crazed hippies of the 1960s. So change the rules. Drive them crazy by going to law school. Join the Boy Scouts, don't take any risks, and, above all, it's very uncool to be passionate about anything. Instead of marathon weekend drives to the Valley, you jog around the block every day and put in a nice 10-miler on the weekend, with maybe a little session of Nautilus or aerobics here and there. The heroes are Eastwood and Stallone, who both chickened out of going to the Cannes Film Festival for fear of being terrorized.

It's the "me-now" generation, and narcissism is the game. You can't even get your picture in the British mags without your shirt off (and I've never seen a day in the Isles when I've even wanted to take off my sweater)! Pink hair, pierced noses, lycra with codpieces, its all good fun and doesn't hurt anybody. After all, we used to wear all white on the walls.

But the mountains are strangely empty. Backpackers are now car camping, and the only ones you see in the woods are redneck survivalists who jump out of the trees to scare the shit out of you before they "camo" back into the bushes. The only people in the Winds are kids or executives, sent there to wrest some

sort of character building or moral out of confronting the wilderness.

The Valley now has a video store and the Merced is open for commercial boating. Many of the environmental gains of the 1960s are wiped out by an over-zealous Secretary of the Interior who believes that "Jesus wants us to drill for oil in the wilderness."

The dominant environmental policy of the 1980s is that we should drill all our oil, cut down the forests, and dam the rivers right now. Go for the short-term goals, and let the future generations worry about reforestation of acid-rain killed forests, cleaning up dead rivers, and bringing back extinct species. Like in Vietnam, we may have to destroy the earth in order to save it.

Climbers are polarized into socio-geographical areas: Eldorado, Joshua Tree, Hueco Tanks. In the Tetons, they are all on the Grand, sometimes 100 a day on the top, but the other peaks are empty. Everest is in vogue with overachieving attorneys, doctors, and businessmen. Oh, there are still a few geeks around like Stump and Lowe doing risky alpine climbing, but the system doesn't recognize, understand, or reward this kind of abnormal behavior. Which is why they do it, I guess.

Ice climbing is dead — the tools are so efficient anyone can climb vertical ice on their first day. So what do you do the next day? Sport rock climbing is the rage, but is has as much spiritual relationship to the mountains as modern agriculture has to the earth — the dirt holds the chemicals and plants in place so they don't fall to middle earth.

It's tough making a name in climbing today. So you climbed the *Nose* and Half Dome in one day? Didn't even make the sports page in the Fresno Bee. You can try and follow Bachar but there's too good a chance of getting snuffed. It's a lot easier to be an asshole. Make a name by being "controversial." Piss off the locals and they won't forget who you are. Infamy is better than no recognition at all.

On the positive side there is less specialization. Climbers ski, kayakers climb — the unbalanced ones are the specialists who have only one trick, the 5.13 climbers who can only look forward to a self-destructing body with its muscle tears and inflamed ligaments.

Now, for 1987 and beyond. The recent elections sent a clear message to those turkeys in Washington. The people would rather have clean rivers and be able to drink out of the tap than have MX missiles. The freshman in some schools are now considerably more liberal than the sophomores. Reagan and his lamer-than-lame trickle-down economy is in deep shit. The mood is changing.

Risk sports which thrive only during politically liberal times may be on their way back. There could be a resurgence in the geek sports like alpine climbing, backcountry skiing, and whitewater kayaking. Alpine touring is coming on especially strongly.

Americans have no background in true winter climbing. The Europeans made winter ascents of all their north faces back in the 1950s and 1960s, while our best alpine climb, the North Face of the Grand Teton, has had only one winter ascent. American climbers in the Himalaya have a real gap in their experience because they've missed out on this winter-climbing stage. Our mountains are not as accessible as the Alps, and perhaps this new interest in backcountry skiing will give access to the thousands of American mountains awaiting first winter ascents.

Hangdogging, chipping holds, placing bolts on rappel, climbing competitions — the great debate continues. Who is right and who is wrong? I say it's pretty simple. There are ethics and there is style. Ethics are so you don't screw it up for the next guy, and style is so you don't delude yourself into thinking you're so hot. Here's all you need to know about ethics:

The Climber's Bill of Rights: You have the right to climb anywhere in any style you wish, as long as it doesn't alter the medium or infringe on the next person's experience. It's simple. You use chalk, place a bolt, leave fixed pro, shit on El Cap Tower, it's all bad ethics. I don't care if Everest is climbed by an expedition of 100 Rotary Club members all sucking O's from basecamp, as long as the mountain is not altered and it doesn't bother the other groups on the mountain.

Style is another story, and it's mostly a matter of degree. We need to establish a cornerstone.

Let's call it:

Perfect Climbing Style: A naked human free soloing a new route on sight. If you put on shoes you get docked one point, chalk one to three points depending on the climb, the heat, and the humidity. Previewing or reading a guide book another point, placing one piece of pro, another point, and so on into infinity. The farther you get away from this Perfect Style, the less proud you should be of yourself. With this criteria, the best climber in the world today is probably Berndt Arnold of Dresden, with his nearly bare feet, no chalk, and long runouts.

Is climbing, as a passion and as a sport, better off now that it was in the past? We can do harder climbs now in faster times — techniques are more refined and equipment more sophisticated — but are we really any better off?

On the plus side we have the free climber soloing rock that was unclimbable 10 years ago, the alpine climber in Europe who is so incredibly competent and fit that he needs to knock off three or four big north faces to feel like he's had a good day, and those applying alpine techniques to Alaskan and Himalayan walls. There is still a lot of room in these games for adventure, spontaneity, soul, and art.

On the negative side we have the ice climber hacking his way up the *Black*

Ice Couloir with his three tools, the El Cap climber with his full rack of chocks, full racks of pitons, and a full rack of Friends, and the specialist sport climber who chooses to become better and better at less and less. I'd say we are small winners.

As a sport matures, it doesn't necessarily get better. Look at alpine skiing. In the 1936 Olympics they painted your skis to make sure you used the same pair in the slalom as in the downhill. Now you can't tell the winners without the aid of electronic timers accurate to the millisecond. The specialists are the ones who take the soul out of any sport.

It's a great thing to run a marathon. You train a bit, maybe change your diet, give up smoking, and you knock it off in three-plus hours. If you want to do one in two-plus hours, that's another story, and if you want to do one in sub-two hours, you have to kiss off sex, your job, your friends, all the "non-essentials," and devote your entire life to the effort.

I say the last 10 percent of the way to perfection takes so much of your life that it isn't worth the effort. This overzealous attitude is what creates religious fanatics, body nazis, and athletes who are exceedingly dull to converse with, unless you want to talk about their particular specialty or their bodies.

Specialization, when indulged in by true geniuses like Mozart, Babe Ruth, or Berndt Arnold can create great art that elevates mankind above the lowly beasts. But you and I can evolve more quickly by putting that energy into more than one direction.

It's unrealistic to think we can go back to what climbing was in the 1930s, but we do need to constantly change the rules of the game to keep the sport evolving. When basketball players are all over seven feet tall, you need to raise the height of the basket. When the thrill is gone from alpine skiing, you just free up the heels and re-invent the telemark turn. Any activity, whether sport, business, or love, needs constant change, even revolution to keep it from degenerating.

Hangdoggers think they are the revolutionaries who are going to save climbing. But bad ethics in the name of raising the standards or making American rock climbers more internationally competitive is twisted zeal. Remember, these are really the arch-conservatives of the 1980s, because they want to minimize the risk factor in climbing at the expense of the rock. They are the super-patriots that believe American climbers shouldn't be second to anyone. And like James Watt, they are the ones who believe the old Christian ethic of having dominion over the beasts and fishes (and rocks).

In the greater scope of things, how important is it that Americans climb 5.14? The grading system has to be flawed anyway, when an out-of-shape, 48-year-old surfer can now do some 5.11a's, when in 1960 he could barely do 5.10a's — and that when he was in his prime and could do one-arm pullups!

At this rate he will be a 5.13 climber when he's 90!

It's bloody tough to beat anyone at their own game. Climbing and similar individual sports like solo around-the-world sailing are a strong European tradition. They have much more accessible rock, many more climbers, and greater public acceptance of the sport. The Europeans don't have the National Safety Council and insurance companies not allowing them to take risks. It's crazy for us to think we can beat them at their own game. Do you see the French sending over a team to play in the Super Bowl?

I say change the rules! Let's play our own game. In America, we have one thing going for us that the Europeans used to have, but they've already used it up. We still have a bit of wilderness left, a few grizzlies, a couple of condors, and some still-virgin mountains and rocks. We also have a strong tradition, going back to Thoreau, Muir, and Bob Marshall, of loving and wanting to preserve wilderness.

Are we going to allow a few "me-now" hangdoggers to be the spokesmen for American climbing? Are we willing to compromise our ethics and style, all for the sake of raising the standards? If so, the climbers coming after us will have to grind off our chipped holds, plug up our bolt holes, and wash away our chalk marks in order to raise their own standards. It seems to me that climbing would be better off if we just learned to hold back a bit, and take an attitude of "each climb has its time."

First published in Climbing *No. 100, 1987.*