
KEN WILSON

Traditional Climbing Values: Addenda

An interesting letter-exchange with Lutz Bormann (an Editor of the magazine *Berg*) was left out (through lack of space) from my article on bolting in last year's journal (*AJ103*, 175-188, 1998). Bormann did a quick survey of the retro-bolting of classic climbs in the Eastern Alps. This made it clear that a situation was developing where Eastern Alpine activists – no longer carrying pegs and hammers and being insufficiently trained in nut techniques – were becoming less capable in dealing with insecure and ageing belays and runner points. As a result accidents were beginning to increase. This in turn was triggering a wave of re-equipping of classic climbs. Thus far it appears that the great Eastern Alpine rock traditions have prevented the growth of Swiss *plaisir* climbing (bolted easy routes – that often take no logical line). Bolting traditional rock climbs is also taking place on the valley cliffs of the Ecrins at the western end of the Alps.

The general European trend is clear: the processing of hitherto demanding multi-pitch rock climbs into predictable exercising excursions for those seeking climbing without the 'awkward bits'. It is therefore likely that with the exception of a few well-established climbing areas in America, Norway, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, plus most of Britain and Ireland, rock climbing elsewhere will soon rely on bolted or semi-bolted protection and belay systems. In the fullness of time, unless checked by international opprobrium, this trend is likely to spread to the highest Alpine rock climbs (eg the Walker Spur, the Frêney Pillar, the Phillip/Flamm) and places like Greenland, Baffin, Lofoten, Mt Kenya and the Karakoram; so that any sought-after rock climb will soon be equipped for fast ascents and speedy retreats.

2 August 1994

Dear Ken Wilson,

Last evening I had a long phone interview with Klaus Hoi, President of the Austrian Mountain Guides Association. After this interview I am completely on your side. Some of his statements:

1. Even in Austria they start bolting in the mountain areas and he is fighting against it. They talk about it in the Gesäuse and Dachstein, but so far nothing has happened. Discussions usually start after accidents. One party died in Tennengebirge on *Pipeline* because the guy at the belay didn't protect [back up] the sling around the rock. When the leading guy fell, the one at the belay got lifted off and the sling got

loose and the party fell down. *Pipeline* is a serious alpine climb for experienced climbers only, who should know about protecting a sling. Hoi provoked a discussion by proposing to bolt one of the most famous routes which was done by Hans Pfannl without protection in 1895 and see what happens. Even today that route is respected, but after bolting hundreds of inexperienced climbers would go there and spoil the route. It would get polished, the rock would turn into marble and get slippery by the overuse or whatever you call it.

2. Hoi respects bolting from below on hard routes done by experts (grades 8-9). But he hates bolting of classic routes. He said it is like slapping the face of the first ascender. He had to get together all his experience and guts to do this with a handful of pegs, find the route, scrutinise every inch of rock. With all our modern equipment it is a shame to turn it into a clipping highway, to bring it down to *Klettergarten* standard.

3. Bolting deteriorates the climbing standard, because lots of beginners go onto routes which are too hard for them. They rely on passive protection without having the capability of active protection. And active protection makes the climber. Self-responsibility, full awareness of all difficulties, the mastering of orientation are the peculiarities of mountaineering. The result is counter-productive of the bolting intention.

4. Inexperienced climbers are lost when they miss the bolt. He has experienced horrible scenes in the Dolomites at the Vajolet Pillars where sport climbers missed the route and tried to work their way back. He pulled out pegs with his fingers from where they retreated because they didn't know how to place pegs. He is quite sick of rescuing people from routes just because they had only learned about bolted belays and had no idea of the basics of Alpine climbing. He is not happy about the developments in the Kaisergebirge and the Oberreintal.

5. Bolting spoils the routes and is the end of alpinism. In the Dachsteingebirge there are hardly any climbers any more. They forsake serious climbing and prefer sport climbing in bolted districts. So with most of his clients he is alone in the mountains and sees no one else on unbolted routes. The few bolted classics, like Steinerweg, are always crowded and the rock deteriorates from year to year.

6. Bolting is very often done by private people who do not consult local climbers. And they bolt wherever they want to, sometimes even with faulty materials.

7. This point is my own additional opinion. The equipment industry must be happy about this development because it leads to mass climbing and therefore to mass consuming.

Christine Kopp, who is working for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and editing the page on alpinism said that it may already be too late. The famous Salbitschijen ridge is bolted. I found the Göll West Face in the Berchtesgadener with bolted belays. It used to be a classic route of 450m VI (done in 1943). I experienced climbing in Norway. Every route was like a first ascent. What a delight to climb there. Once in your life you are truly awake working your way up, thinking about the equipment very carefully, etc.

I just had Kaspar Ochsner on the phone and he said that he likes bolted belays even on classical routes. But in every route it should be done with care, and not overdoing it like the Remys do. I will try to get more opinions from other people like Albert Precht, Rudi Lindner and Swiss climbers.

Sincerely

Lutz Bormann

8 August 1994

Dear Ken Wilson,

Here is some more information on bolting I collected over the last few days. Over the weekend I stayed in the Oberreintal which is of course a famous climbing area boasting the North Face of the Wetterstein. This climb has been completely bolted by the DAV. The bolting was done by **Pit Schubert** in a very careful way. On the easy routes only the belays, on the classical routes belays and sometimes the crux, only the hard routes are bolted between the belays also. The effect is that this area is very attractive now again. The hut is crowded now, everybody is happy and they are climbing like hell, abseiling easily after the third pitch when they realise that grade 7- is too hard for them, which they should have known earlier. Good sport climbers are happy about it because they can do up to two or three routes a day.

I also talked to **Bernd Kullmann**. He was a companion of Reinhard Karl and he is still a strong climber. He appreciates bolted belays after one heavy fall which left his ankle stiff. He hates bolting new routes in the mountains from above. But he does not chop off bolts any more, which is what he did for many years on all routes that he could climb free or protect with nuts or Friends. He climbed the Predigtstuhl-Direttissima *Redpoint* (8+) and asked Pit Schubert for permission to protect it with bolts because the bolts of Heinz Mariacher

from his first free ascent were in a horrible condition. He thinks that it started with the good sport climbers. Why should the climbers in grade 9 have all the protection and all the other ones risk their lives? That's what all the other people think, and in a way they are right.

Kaspar Ochsner, a very strong Swiss climber, thinks that this discussion is [taking place] after the facts have been placed. While we are discussing, lots of climbers are drilling and he thinks that one day people will get sick of it just like a stupid fashion and pull the bolts out again. History as a turning wheel.

Peter Geyer, President of the German Mountain Guides, shares the opinion of Klaus Hoi and he had the same experience with his guide aspirants. As long as they see the next bolt they climb up to grade 8. When they have to protect everything, even the belay, they slow down to immobility.

My last phone interview was with **Albert Precht**. He seems to be frustrated because they started bolting in his area also. He hoped so much to save his area for the next generation, because he thinks it is unfair to stronger generations who could do the route by protecting it with nuts or Friends. He thinks it is very important to write about this discussion because it is going on and spreading at this moment. He does not cut off the bolts, first because of the fines and also because he thinks that his fight against bolts all over the years only attracted the drilling climbers. He is not against bolts but he hates the guys who do it. No first ascents by bolting, he says. If you think afterwards that the crux might be dangerous for the lives of repeaters, even if they are strong, then you can place a bolt. There was a rumour that Albert Precht started bolting himself. I asked him and he said that he just did some first ascents again, all without bolting, and that he would stop climbing before touching the machine. It kills the adventure – not knowing whether it will turn out good and where you come up. He wants to save this adventure for himself and for others, too.

I think that Albert Precht is right to speak in favour of further discussion, as the only chance for the future of alpinism.

Yours sincerely,
Lutz Bormann

These letters give a telling insight into the dilemmas faced by German and Austrian climbers, particularly where the incomes of guides and hut wardens are involved. Pit Schubert has thus become a champion of 'responsible' and 'minimalistic' retrobolting of belays and abseil points in the Eastern Alps. Indeed, Pit Schubert is so influential in the UIAA that his 'minimalist' policy is quite likely to be adopted as EEC law and will surely be supported by outdoor centres and insurance companies.