Notes 1974 Equipment and Technique

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The equipment business Writing in the 'Canadian Alpine Journal' (1973, p 53) Eric Almquist contends in a very provocative article that 'the profit motive was one of the main causes of the post-War despoiling of the sport of skiing' and then goes on to claim that mountaineering is now in the same danger. 'One wonders', he says, 'how the European climbers of the thirties or the post-War ruffians in Britain ever got up a climb without all the so-called necessities that are sold today.' He suggests consideration of the following points:

(1) Schools and guide services should consider the issues involved in their activities; they are the major contributors to the deterioration of rocks from abuse and misuse.
(2) If climbing schools will not close down; they should at least curtail enrolment. The disadvantages and discomforts should be pointed out to would-be mountaineering enthusiasts as well as the romanticism and heroism.
(3) Clubs should encourage day hiking, 'the most ecological use of mountains', in place of overnight camping in mountain areas, though this would not be so profitable for mountaineering capitalists.
(4) Equipment manufacturers should re-examine products, particularly stopping the use of the more violent colours (such as orange) for tents and clothing.
(5) The equipment is not the sport.

Reference to the original may perhaps persuade some of our readers to agree or disagree. Certainly as time goes on less and less new gadgetry is being paraded for our consumption, while earnest appraisal of what we have and intercomparison of methods are being actively pursued. Perhaps the worst has passed for us in this country, but we have to keep an eye on some of the more disquieting features of the transatlantic scene.

Belaying techniques recommended by the UIAA The attention of our readers is drawn to a very important paper printed in Bulletin No 59 of the UIAA (dated June 1974); there are parallel texts in French—'Une technique d'assurage UIAA' and German—'Eine UIAA-Sicherungtechnik'. This summarises the work of an International Committee, which included a symposium held at Andermatt. It is up-to-date and authoritative in a field often bedevilled in the past by gimmickry.

When the full import of these recommendations has sunk in, we shall hope to print a critical review of this subject.

MSR climbing helmet This new equipment item is described in some detail in 'Mountain' No 32. It does not cover the ears, so that communication between climbers is easier, but ventilation problems have enforced the drilling of a series of holes round the upper shell and these have to be sealed with tapes when it rains. A good deal of user experience would seem to be called for before this design moves far towards ousting the more conventional types.

'New ice climbing techniques and equipment' In 1972 we published an article with the above title by John Cunningham and Bill March (AJ 77 75). An article by Allen Fyffe in 'Mountain' No 40 summarises the developments in Scottish winter climbing which have ensued. 'Things will soon reach the stage', the author predicts, 'when any summer route that holds snow and ice will be worth doing'.

Early Scottish step-cutting The following extract is from the diary of a Col Hawker and describes an ascent of Ben Lomond in November, 1812:

'To get to the most elevated point of the shoulder we found impossible, as the last 50 yards was a solid sheet of ice, and indeed for more than the last half mile we travelled in perfect misery and imminent danger. We were literally obliged to take knives and cut footsteps in the frozen snow, and of course obliged to crawl all the way on our hands, knees, and toes, all of which were benumbed with cold; and were repeatedly in danger of slipping in places where one false step would have been certain destruction. The going up, however, was comparatively nothing to the coming down, in which our posteriors and heels relieved the duty performed by our toes and knees . . . . We had some very providential escapes, and on our getting below the frozen atmosphere, and again in safety, my guide told us that "had we slipped nothing could have stopped us".'

Climbing walls Since our report last year on the climbing wall at Sale, Cheshire, other references have been made in various journals to the construction of similar facilities elsewhere. 'Off Belay' writes of Spire Rock in Spanaway Country Park at Tacoma, Washington, now nearly completed to a height of 26 ft. The rocks for the construction were removed from local quarries in masses up to 15 tons at a time. The same note refers to the existing Shurman Rock, formerly Monitor Rock, built at Seattle as long ago as 1939.

'Les Alpes' describes a new climbing tower in the Wiener Internationale Gartenshau. This is similar to constructions already existing at Berlin and Munich and provides exercise for climbers in those parts of Vienna remote from natural practice grounds. A further note gives details of the Berlin facility: it is 16 m wide and 3.75 m thick with 3 summits of 4.5, 7.5 and 9.5 m; built in steel and concrete at a cost of 100,000 DM, it gives training up to Grade VI.

Breaking stress of tapes Derrick Ellis tells us that he has begun a survey with Julian Dunster of the breaking stresses of tapes over karabiners of different radii. Only preliminary results are available at the moment, but he hopes to provide a full report for next year's Journal. One finding is that Stubai D5000 and RD karabiners failed far below their advertised breaking stresses in the tests so far conducted, whereas a Clog 2500 was stronger than its specification would have led one to expect.