

# Competition Climbing

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Mountaineering has always had a competitive element, man against mountain, man against man, but never until recent times has there been an attempt to develop organised competition. In the Eastern bloc there have been speed rock climbing competitions which have had little or no real impact on the sport, despite the fact that they were instituted and developed in the 1960s. However, developments in the past year on the continent of Europe, particularly in Italy and France threaten to make an impact which will bring about fundamental changes to mountaineering.

In July 1985 a major rock climbing competition was held at Bardonecchia in Italy. Some of the leading European 'stars' took part, and Stefan Glowacz of West Germany won the men's competition and Catherine Desteville of France the women's. Significantly this competition had the blessing of the Italian Alpine Club, was sponsored by Italy's leading mountaineering manufacturers and had a distinguished panel of judges headed by Ricardo Cassin. Before the competition reservations were expressed (and some still maintained these throughout) about the worth of such an exercise, but many persons who had previously publicly opposed such developments were won over by the Bardonecchia experience.

Thousands of spectators attended throughout the days of the competition and debates were held about possible future developments. Reports were that the whole affair was well organized, friendly and that the hospitality was superb. During 1985 many initiatives on competition developed in France. Pilot competitions and trials were organized but such was the strength of feeling that it has left bitter recriminations amongst the French climbing establishment. This has led to a possible split, and perhaps a separate Federation will organize competitions there in the future.

These events have so far had little or no real impact in Britain but it is inevitable that they will effect our climbing scene. A feature of the developing competition structure on the Continent has been the involvement of commercial interests and a quickening of interest by the media. The climbing world is now too international for developments in one major country not to affect others. Thousands of British climbers visit France each year and are aware of developments there. Already the style of climbing favoured on French limestone, with pre-placed bolt protection is finding favour on certain British cliffs.

Is competition eventually going to split British mountaineering, dividing the old tradition of amateur, club and group orientated climbers, from new, thrusting, youthful, but rule orientated participants? For, make no mistake about it, competition climbing will mean accepting some form of rules, written down, with sanctions against those who break them. Everything is still in a state of flux but it is likely that the rules accepted on the Continent will, unlike Soviet speed competitions emphasize style and difficulty.

I believe it is essential that we avoid any split in British climbing. We need to oppose organized competition climbing developing in Britain and try to use such influence as we have abroad to do the same. Our arguments must be logical and make sense or they will not carry the day and we must make sure our young climbers understand and agree with them. If they do not, if they cannot support them, then we must for the sake of all our futures in mountaineering re-consider our position.

Our first concern must be the protection of our sports environment and access to it. We have not the unclimbed cliffs where competitions could take place, and the obvious venues are all so popular that to increase the pressure on these areas does not make sense. To develop competitions in our mountains will mean denying access, for if we are to hold such events, then whilst they are in progress non-competitors will have to be debarred. If a kind of league of teams was developed, or an individual 'super-star' table, then there would have to be a lot of money to make the thing work, and this could only come from two sources (I do not think it would have big spectator appeal but I might be wrong); commercial sponsors and/or the media — television, films, newspapers. I realize that the arguments that I am putting forward can be shot through with holes, but big money *will* make climbing different, it *will* rob the sport of its most special appeal, and it *may* destroy its soul.

Other competitive sports have been beset by evils the like of which we have never had to face in climbing; bribery, corruption and drug abuse. Where big money appears they are likely to follow. In a sport which has remained unfettered by rules and regulations, the introduction of these elements must have a singular effect.

It could be that all competitions will have to take place indoors on the network of artificial climbing walls that have been developed throughout the country in the last two decades. For one thing that France and Italy definitely have not, is our unreliable weather. One can hardly imagine the Peak All Stars playing the South Audley Street Casuals at Cloggy last summer, it probably never dried out. No sponsor or media company would take a risk on that! Indoor climbing wall competitions might be more acceptable but how one would develop rules and regulations which were fair for all, is hard to understand for the locals would have such an advantage that they would almost certainly have to be handicapped.

The whole business takes on a degree of farce and one could easily pass it off as a seven day wonder, but I think not. Ever rising standards, particularly in rock climbing, has meant an ever keener group of dedicated core of young climbers, often unemployed, who are in the process of developing a training methodology in parallel with other developed competitive sports. To climb now at the top standards needs total dedication and it is almost impossible to follow a profession or gainful employment. Organized competition would appeal to many such climbers. It would give them a chance to earn a living and mean even for some of them perhaps stardom with all its rewards. No one is currently making any real money from the sport, so the blandishments would be there.

The thing that is missing at the moment is an entrepreneur, someone who could package the sport in a way that appealed to the media but which did not

offend too much against the ethics and attitudes of mountaineering as they have developed over the last century, and which did not prostitute the sport to such a degree that it became too boring. It would for instance still need to remain a high risk activity, with potential for leader falls and injuries. But really serious or fatal accidents might need to be guarded against by bomb proof protection. Certainly you could not have deaths regularly on the box, or Aunty might get a bit too alarmed!

Bouldering has also developed a competitive event, the 'Great Californian Bouldering Competition', which is held each year in the USA. This is a fun event, but nevertheless some take it seriously and there was a feeling of pride when our own Ron Fawcett won the event at his first attempt. Points are awarded for each problem climbed with a time limit for each ascent. The largest number of points at the end of the competition wins. There is no doubt that there are many bouldering areas in Great Britain where you could stage such an event, particularly in Derbyshire and Yorkshire on the gritstone. But if it did not attract a sponsor or media interest it would have only limited appeal and limited effect on the sport.

Where do we go from here? It is any one's guess. The BMC has decided to oppose any attempt to develop competition climbing, but it has agreed to keep this policy under review. The worst thing that could happen would be a split, and the two schools of thought to be so opposed as to be irreconcilable. My own view, for what it is worth, is that organized competition is not needed in British climbing. The possible detrimental effects on our sport are such as to be not worth the risks. But young climbers might feel differently and if we estrange them with paternalistic well meaning, but from their point of view out-dated, out-moded viewpoints, then we will drive them into the very path we do not wish them to take. Competition will be a major issue in our sport from hereon. Each of us will have to decide how we feel about it and whether we wish to be involved or to opt out, but whatever happens I do hope we manage to preserve the unity of British climbing.