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The Great Alpine Theme Park

The scene, almost anywhere in continental Europe. You want to get into climbing so you start off on your local crag. You learn to make the moves and to clip the bolts. A year later you can make much harder moves and you are really slick at clipping the bolts. You travel around to bigger and better crags, making the moves and clipping the bolts in different surroundings, wonderful surroundings. Anywhere is fine as long as it is 'equipped'. But you're not just a crag rat. You dream of the lofty granite walls of the high Alps and even further afield, maybe Patagonia or Trango. And you want to climb them the only way you know how.

Hence there exists a pressure – a pressure from thousands of European climbers who have never climbed rock in its natural state to equip Alpine faces just as if they were Buoux or the Verdon. It is happening now and will happen much faster now that there is an organisation apparently willing to supply the means to equip climbs free of charge. They tell us that people don't want to go to the mountains for adventure any more, they go for enjoyment. And believe it or not there are people calling themselves mountaineers who have come to see these two concepts as being mutually exclusive.

Sport Climbing was born when someone made the startling discovery that they could make a much harder move next to a fat shiny bolt (especially if they had practised it for a month beforehand) than they could make five metres above a piece of hand-placed protection. Impressive new technical grades started to appear in the countries (most notably France) where sport climbing developed. I couldn't claim to be an expert on the history of French cliff climbing, but it's my impression that for the most part there was little free climbing tradition to worry about. The crags were training for the mountains, and if the style in the mountains was big boots and étriers, that's what you did on the crags. This was not only true for France but for much of Continental Europe, with the result that Sport Climbing spread, sensationally and unhindered, with not a murmur of resistance from 'traditional' climbers save the odd remark by Jean-Claude Droyer (one of the few Frenchmen to have climbed in Britain at a high standard).

Sport Climbing did wonders for the morale of French rock climbers, who had been somewhat outclassed on their own crags by the likes of Livesey and Fawcett in the mid-seventies. By the early eighties French sport climbers led the world in technical standards and acquired an almost superhuman

aura. No wonder the rest of the world were tempted to follow suit. When missionaries like Jean-Baptiste Tribout went to the States and created *To Bolt or Not To Be* at Smith Rocks, surpassing top American standards by at least a full grade, obviously the thing to do was to emulate, and despite passionate resistance by many leading US climbers, Sport Climbing spread through the traditional climbing grounds of the States to a far greater degree than has happened in Britain. 'They just caved in,' as Ken Wilson put it to me once. Why? Because American climbing had an Achilles' heel – hand-placed bolts placed on lead were always acceptable and the distinction between this and 'rap-bolting' was too subtle for a lot of climbers. It makes a big difference for first ascents but not for subsequent ascents.

Slowly at first, but more rapidly now, the fixtures and fittings of Sport Climbing are appearing in the high mountains. They started on places like the Capucin, protecting sections of climbing that would be unthinkable without them. They sprouted on the crags around huts, because of course no hut these days can afford to be without a sport-climbing venue on its doorstep. A hundred and twenty of them sprouted on one route on the Petites Jorasses, and more routes like this appear each summer. The idea that you only bolt where there is no natural protection went out long ago.

I have heard the argument many times, most shamefully from the current mouthpiece of the Swiss Alpine Club, that bolts are just a natural step forward in making climbing safer, like Friends, and that the leading climbers of the past would have used them had they been available. This argument is as spurious as it is historically inaccurate. There is NOTHING NEW about bolts – they were used extensively in the Dolomites on the 'Directissimas' of the fifties and sixties, and in Yosemite on almost every El Cap route from The Nose onwards. British climbers followed suit to aid their way up cliffs like Malham, High Tor and Cheddar Gorge. The free-climbing movement in the States and Britain (in the late '60s and '70s) attempted to sweep away both pegs and bolts, and as protection techniques improved, the free climbing movement became a Clean Climbing movement, where the ideal was to climb leaving nothing behind in the rock – a 'hammerless ascent'.

About this time Reinhold Messner published his influential article 'The Murder of the Impossible' to address the issue of bolting in the mountains. Here the bad old ways of bolting were condemned as killing the essence of the sport – you packed your drill rather than your skill and courage. So BOLTS HAVE BEEN REJECTED BEFORE by a whole generation of leading rock climbers and mountaineers. In rejecting them climbers felt that their sport had made some progress. Were we so wrong then?

Why is it that Sport Climbing tends to envelop traditional climbing areas so decisively? Is it because of some irresistible public clamour for bolts? Not at all. I have observed it happening because of three types of individual who together form a small minority in a typical climbing fraternity:

1. The Greedy New Router

To understand this guy its crucial to appreciate the intoxicating power that a climber armed with a power drill has compared with his predecessors (even with those prepared to use hand-drilled bolts). Suddenly there are no constraints upon the amount of protection he can give himself nor upon where he puts it. First ascents become relatively simple because you've thrown away the most basic rule. You dictate to the rock, rather than the rock dictating to you. This change is absolutely fundamental to our approach to climbing. Some people put their bolts in five metres apart, some three metres, and we've all heard of the bolt-a-metre routes. Designer climbing.

2. The Misguided Philanthropist

'Sport Climbs are more popular, they're fun for all the family' (just like a zillion non-bolted climbs I can think of), so this chap takes on the onerous task of equipping whole crags to rigorous safety standards. With born-again zeal, he retro-bolts existing routes (which soon come to be seen as 'too dangerous' compared with the newly-created sport climbs), showing no respect for the style of the first ascensionist or for the significance of such routes in the evolution of the sport (not usually out of any malice, these issues just wouldn't enter his head). The crag may indeed become more popular – like fast food – so he is vindicated and packs off his power drill to 'enhance' the next climbing area. In a growing number of cases the final ironic twist comes when the cliff's new-found popularity causes such trampling and erosion of its environment that it is closed to climbers by the all-powerful environmental lobby (our new priesthood – another suspect bunch).

3. The Ruthless Professional

A lot of classic Alpine routes are being equipped by guides. As a guide myself this puzzled me for a while. Surely they were doing themselves out of a job, making their mountain skills redundant? I now realise it means that clients with few climbing skills can be taken up more routes/peaks swiftly and safely, and these people greatly outnumber the clients who take the time and trouble to learn skills properly.

There is sense in accepting a few sacrificial lambs, like fixed ropes and stanchions on the Matterhorn (where otherwise there would be chaos and carnage every day). But should there really be bolt protection and belay chains on the Schreckhorn, perhaps the most elusive and difficult of all the four-thousanders? Or bolts drilled into the side of perfect spikes on eighty-year-old routes like the Jägihorn at Saas?

Between them, the above team are drilling away to create the Great Alpine Theme Park (projected completion date around 2003). Number one equips the new routes, number three the popular classics and number two takes care of the rest.

I am not arguing against bolted climbing *per se*. I am arguing for its containment. No one should deny that Sport Climbing has had a crucial role in raising climbing grades or that it provides a very enjoyable and accessible dimension to the activity we used to be able to call 'climbing' (a term applying to crags and mountains). But too much of a good thing can kill. If we allow the Sport Climbing approach free rein in the mountains (not just the Alps, the threat is worldwide) we may wake up one day to realise that we've sold out our unique, centuries-old sport for the proverbial 'mess of pottage' – a synthetic substitute offering 'virtual adventure' where once we had the real thing.

In wild places, bolts are litter. At a time when there is so much pressure on our remaining wilderness, climbers should not assume that they have the right to treat the high mountains like an urban construction site. A vigorous revival of the Clean Climbing ethic is overdue. I don't want to climb in a theme park, do you?