

better the ideals of European mountaineering.’ So much so that Kosheenko made a valiant effort to climb Menlungtse’s north face in alpine style.

The inaugural award went to Marko Prezelj and Andre Stremfelj who had climbed in impeccable alpine style the south-west ridge of Kangchenjunga South Peak – as original and committing a climb as the founders could have wished for. The problem was to keep the *Pioletts* on course and that would depend upon the judgement of the jury members and the integrity of the sponsors. There needed to be eternal vigilance to ensure the award structure never lost the plot: was never diverted from the ideal for one reason or another.

If there is inappropriate motivation behind this award, or any award for that matter, because it has fallen into the hands of those who are ignorant of its *raison d’être* or with hidden agendas to gain power, wealth, fame, praise, increased status or to compete with other awards’ organisers, then it will fail. If a recipient is chosen for political or financial reasons then the award will lose respect and create disharmony during the award ceremony and beyond. One thinks of Steve House lambasting the *Pioletts* jury a few years ago for having chosen the Russian siege of Jannu over other more committing climbs including his own solo ascent of K7. This, and other controversial decisions have led to passionate debate. This is all to the good of the game for this constant scrutiny out in the public domain will help foster inspirational climbs well into the future. In 1998, Marmier resigned his patronage of the *Pioletts d’Or* as he considered its original ideals had been compromised and devalued. Now that the award is back on course perhaps Jean-Claude would consider rejoining in some capacity?

Twenty years on from its inauguration, the *Pioletts* organisers must ensure that they have full confidence in all those nominated for the award so it can be given with a full heart. It should also be presented without too much fanfare and razzamatazz from sponsors that would detract from highlighting the main reason that the award was set up in the first place – to celebrate the spirit of alpinism.

‘Praise shames me, for I secretly beg for it,’ wrote Rabindranath Tagore in his poem *Stray Birds*. Think about it.

Postscript: Shortly after filing this feature, Doug Scott received a further accolade in the form of 2011 *Piolet d’Or* ‘Lifetime Contribution Award’. Previous recipients of this mountaineering Oscar are Walter Bonatti (2009) and Reinhold Messner (2010).

LINDSAY GRIFFIN

Playing The Game

What do we define as trad climbing in the UK? Until quite recently there was simply *climbing* and also sport climbing. The BMC, the representative body for climbing, mountaineering and hill walking in the UK, feels it is represented by a route with little or no in-situ protection or main belays. However, on certain trad routes extra protection (occasional pegs or bolts) will have been placed (and left in-situ) because of the perceived extreme difficulty of protecting the route with nuts and cams. This fixed protection will not significantly alter the character of a route. Even that can never be a clear statement, because it will be down to the first ascensionist to decide whether the natural pro on his or her creation is satisfactory, marginal or unsatisfactory.

Within the UK there are many areas, and indeed crags themselves, that have sport climbs and pure trad climbs – and even some crags that are a mixture of both styles. Two of the most well known venues featuring both are Malham in Yorkshire and the Llanberis slate quarries in North Wales. By and large, climbers in the UK are pretty comfortable with this and respect the different styles.

Before the 1960s climbers used to carry piles of little stones, which they placed in cracks and threaded, or used jammed knots like the Czechs on their sandstone towers. Then there were large machine nuts with the threads drilled out so they could be used on rope slings. John Brailsford, a blacksmith, made the first purpose-built nut in 1960, and a poor version of wired nuts followed a little later. Placing pitons on our crags has always caused ethical debate. But even when I was climbing in the early 1970s, many climbers would habitually carry a peg hammer and a few pegs for main belays. It wasn’t ‘the done thing’ to place a peg for protection on a pitch, but establishing a good belay seemed acceptable.

In those days there was a lot more in-situ pro on the crags. Most of this rotted or rusted away and was never replaced, because equipment became more sophisticated in the form of small wires, RPs, cams etc. But as the gear was still generally poor compared to today, there was rather more jiggery-pokery; a bending of ethics that was rather glossed over at the time. However, the adventurous nature of the climb itself was not compromised.

Without sounding old-fashioned, because there are some fantastically bold young climbers around in the UK at present, the average climber in the early to mid 1970s was much happier on bolder climbs than the average climber of today; back then ‘bold climbing’ was simply the norm. You have to remember that this was the ’70s when climbing was dangerous and sex was safe.



63. Aiguille des Pélérins: A bolt placed here in 1980 by Michel Piola for protection on *Nostradamus* heralded a sea change in climbing in the Mont Blanc massif. (Lindsay Griffin)

In Britain, up until the mid '70s you rock climbed. If you progressed, you winter climbed in Scotland, and to continue further meant the Alps. That was it; with the exception of those with a surname such as Bonington, alpinists appeared unable to make the upward step to the Himalaya because (a) it was before the days of 'cheap' air travel and the entire cost of an expedition seemed prohibitively expensive, and (b) there was a huge psychological barrier, as few understood what was involved. That's a rash generalisation of course: there were certainly several people going to foreign venues, such as Yosemite, to rock climb. But it wasn't until the late '70s, when France was changing its philosophy from adventure to recreation, that a lot of top British rock climbers started to go to France and climb hard routes on fixed protection, mainly pegs but increasingly bolts. And they brought the idea back to the UK in order to push climbing standards.

So why did UK climbers preserve their trad climbing when the rest of Europe was overtaken by sport? It's a good question. It helps that we've always been a bit mad, but I think the main reasons reflect our very limited resource in the UK, and that virtually all mountain rock, certainly at the standard of the time, lends itself to natural gear. In addition, we seem to have, in general, a huge tradition and a great respect for the pioneers, both of which are perhaps not so strong in other countries. Certainly in the '80s and '90s the good sport climbers were, by and large, also good trad climbers, and realised that to improve the level of trad climbing, they had

to work on bolts to better their ability and fitness.

At the close of the 1970s, with a growing acceptance in Europe of protection bolts and the incredible rise in free climbing standards, it was perhaps inevitable that someone would decide to take this new attitude into the mountains.

And where better than that crucible of alpine climbing, the Mont Blanc massif? In 1980 two young lads from Geneva climbed a new route on the north pillar of the Pélérins. Previous rock climbs had more or less followed crack systems, where pegs, then latterly nuts, could be used for protection and aid. But in places the new Swiss climb involved very difficult (for the day – F6b+) steep open face climbing, with several sections of compact granite. On one of these they hand-drilled a protection bolt.

This was certainly not the first time bolts had been used in the Mont Blanc massif: in 1956 that great traditionalist Gaston Rébuffat placed one for a belay on his classic route up the south face of the Midi. A couple of months later a Swiss team used four bolts on a smooth wall near the top of their new route on the Petit Clocher du Portalet. But the drilled hole on the Pélérins was more or less the first time a bolt had been placed solely for protection. The author, perhaps somewhat brashly, felt he was making a prophecy, and called the route *Nostradamus*.

And he was correct, because after Michel Piola placed that bolt in *Nostradamus*, climbing in the Mont Blanc massif would never be the same again.

Two years later the whole direction had changed. People were no longer looking at natural lines defined by crack systems but were purposely launching out onto compact slabs. Piola realized that an ideal venue for this was the knobby rock of the Grand Capucin. And so we got *Gulliver's Travellers* – still one of the great Mont Blanc classics – with a very minimal number of hand-drilled bolts.

This type of climbing needed an entirely different approach from traditional alpine work. These were hard technical climbs, levels unheard of before in the high mountains of the Western Alps, and the days of climbing in big leather boots and rucksacks were gone. These routes required a lightweight crag-climbing attitude. Again, this was not entirely original: Martin Boysen used rock shoes when he made the second ascent of the south face of the Fou in 1968, but at the time everyone said he was cheating. The lightweight approach would need leaving mountain boots and sacs at the base of the route. So how would you get off the summit?

The answer, of course, was sound, double-bolt belays.

This style proved to be very much the start of convenience climbing – people now wanted to enjoy the climbing without the awkward bits. I want to give you just one classic example, the west face of Petites Jorasses. I think when I climbed this face at the beginning of the 1970s, the classic *Contamine* was the only route. We took bivouac gear – because we were generally slow and incompetent – not so much for the ascent but more because the descent was complex and time-consuming. From the top



64. The Brouillard Face of Mont Blanc with the Right Hand Pillar centre stage (Bonington, Harlin, Baillie, Robertson, 1965). But where should the route actually end? “Did we really climb it?” asked Baillie. (*Antonio Gian*)

you first had to rappel into a stone-swept snow couloir (which nowadays must be in dreadful condition throughout the summer), descend this while dodging rocks, make a difficult rappel over a large *rimaye*, cross a contorted glacier, and finally reach the remotely sited Gervasutti Bivouac in the dusk. Next day involved a long descent to the Val Ferret, a walk and hitchhike down to Courmayeur, and then back through the tunnel to Chamonix.

In the 1970s rappelling was always considered dangerous, something you did as a last resort when you were forced to retreat. A change in mindset was needed for the modern routes. But when Piola added *Anouk* – the first route in the Mont Blanc massif to use a hundred bolts – alongside the *Contamine*, it took away all the commitment. Now there was not only a rapid rappel on secure anchors from the summit but also the option of escape on route, at points where it was possible to reach *Anouk* by a traverse or diagonal rappel. I’m not saying this is worse; I can’t say that it’s better: it’s just different.

This in turn led to a changing attitude as to what constituted a route. Traditionally a route had a ‘logical conclusion’, which was originally the summit, then the crest of a ridge, because the descent was different. Now the focus became the climb and the traditional values of a logical conclusion went out the window. For instance, many people climbed the Supercouloir on Mt Blanc du Tacul by what would become an accepted method: climbing to the end of the difficulties and then rappelling. But both before, and in the year or two after Gabarrou’s first ascent in 1975, several parties climbed, more or less, to the end of the difficulties, which is not quite

halfway up the face, before retreating in a storm. None of those felt they had climbed a route.

So, alpinists began to ‘move the goalposts’, in order to cut out the awkward bits. Most will feel this began in the ‘80s, but did it? No, actually you have to go back to at least 1965 and the first ascent of the Right Hand Pillar of Brouillard on the great south face of Mont Blanc.

In that year Rusty Baillie and Chris Bonington made two attempts on the pillar, which at that time was one of the ‘last major unclimbed formations’ in the range. On the latter they got to within a handshake of the top. They returned for third attempt with American John Harlin and Scot Brian Robertson. This time these four reached the ‘end of the difficulties’ and started up the mixed ground above to the crest of the Brouillard Ridge (unlike the Red, the Right Hand Pillar has no ‘summit’, it just merges into easier ground). A storm moved in, they descended, bivouacked, and next day rappelled their route. And they have always been credited with the first ascent. Nobody, even back in 1965, argued (part of this may have been to do with their status; at the time they were amongst the best alpinists in the business). And it was hard to imagine Baillie and Bonington having the motivation for a fourth attempt. However, as Baillie wrote, ‘but did we really climb it? Does the Right Hand Pillar end at the summit of Mont Blanc, or on the Brouillard Ridge, or at the top of the Right Hand Pillar, or anywhere?’

The knock-on effect was interesting. When Roger Everett and I made the second recorded ascent in 1973, we got maybe 50m higher than the first ascensionists before bivouacking. I can’t now remember how our discussion evolved, but when next day we started towards the Brouillard Ridge and saw an ominous bank of thick cloud moving in from the west, it was fairly easy to convince ourselves that we could go down from this point for tea and medals, happy with our ‘ascent’, because the precedent had been set. Bonington, innovative as always, had been ahead of the game in climbing ‘to the end of the difficulties’.

Moving to the Greater Ranges, where traditionally it was assumed that people went for adventure and wilderness, what is the ethic concerning the use of bolts? Some while back the BMC came up with a statement that the UIAA subsequently adopted:

The UIAA believes that in the interests of protecting the future of World mountaineering, parties visiting remote mountain and wilderness areas should strive to minimise their use of drilled equipment and certainly refrain from using a power drill.

You can argue that a hole is a hole, but if you know it is going to take at least half-an-hour laboriously to hand drill and place a bolt in granite, then you think very strongly before doing so. The process is self-regulating.

Conrad Anker wrote the following concerning his 1998 first ascent of the west face of Latok II, at the time hailed as a landmark ascent – a pointer – in Himalayan climbing. I admit it’s not the best example: firstly there are always two sides to a story and some of these details are disputed; secondly



65. The 2300m south face of Annapurna with the 7.5km east ridge forming the skyline: a forcing ground of exemplary high-altitude alpinism. (Lindsay Griffin)

it involves Alex Huber, who is undoubtedly one of the very best big wall free climbers around.

Anker envisaged leading up this wall with traditional gear, honouring the philosophy of Shipton or Mugs Stump. 'Alex said no. He'd failed in 1995 climbing in alpine style. Without the proceeds from a successful climb, he could lose his house. We'd take every guarantee we could find: fixed ropes, bolts, a power drill.'

And then later ... 'the fine orange granite seemed to welcome our gear, our portaledge, our camps. But when a hook blew, Alex got out the power drill, and "with a little hole, the move was outwitted". We lived on the wall for eight days and the hole count grew to 70. But in my mind we were killing the dragon.'

Contrast this with the ascent one year later of the *Norwegian Route* on the 1500m east face of Trango Pulpit at VII 5.11 and A4. Alright, it's nearly 1000m lower in altitude but the difficulties are far longer. The Norwegians spent 38 days in capsule style on the wall and placed only a minimal amount of bolts using a hand drill. Consequently the standard was very high, probably the hardest big wall route above 6000m at that time. Has it been surpassed? I don't know.

Recent years have seen a huge increase in 'goalpost moving' in the

Greater Ranges. Many climbers now simply seem to remove the awkward bits from the equation. We want to go into the wilderness, we want to have adventure, but essentially we don't want the commitment this entails; we want a compromise.

In the words of Rolando Garibotti, who is very much the guardian of ethics in Patagonia, these become 'valiant attempts' or perhaps 'superb efforts' that deserve widespread recognition. In the *American Alpine Journal*, that still champions traditional values, they are reported as incomplete ascents and, generally, any assigned route name goes unmentioned.

In some cases it might be logical to look at the question of intent. Did the climbers plan only to climb to the top of, for example, the pillar, or the middle of a long ridge, and then descend? Let's take a recent 'new route' in the Karakoram, claimed as such and given a name by its first ascensionists. The line lay on an unclimbed rock feature, but some distance below the top the leader fell and broke his ankle, so the party retreated. Their intent was most definitely not to descend from this point, so how does one define their attempt?

And what about the various styles of ascent? Intuitively, the purest is alpine style, an ethic now embraced by the new criteria of the *Piolets d'Or*. At really high altitudes this style is perhaps still best exemplified by the 1985 ascent of the west face of Gasherbrum IV. We don't really know in today's currency how hard it was technically; what we do know is that it was totally committing, precarious, had long sections with either little or no pro, and then a difficult descent on unknown ground. Almost as significant was the 1984 *Catalan Route* on the south face of Annapurna. Both are now one quarter of a century old, and although they may have been equalled, I'm not convinced they've ever been surpassed.

With other styles, when the going gets tough, things inevitably will get abandoned in the interests of safety – obviously. It's now no longer possible to make a true, committing, alpine style ascent of the *West Face Direct* on K2, or the north face of Jannu. Both are outstanding climbs and it would be very easy to argue that in the present state of our development there was perhaps no other way in which these could have been completed by climbers today. But it would be arrogant to assume that a two-man ascent in pure alpine style would not be possible in 10, 15 or 20 years' time. Let's hope there is still respect for those who have gone before; it would be the ultimate sacrilege in mountaineering if a team was to batter to death the north ridge of Latok I with a fixed rope ascent, a route that has been the goal of around 30 parties to date using a committing alpine or capsule style approach.

Our little game doesn't have rules, and of course the freedom to make our own choices is one of the reasons we all climb. But we have a sort of code of honour to protect the spirit of our activity, at least I think we do... I hope we do.

We live in an increasingly achievement-oriented world, and for a growing number of mountaineers, and climbers, winning the game seems



66. West face of Gasherbrum IV (7925m). In 1985, after making the first, highly committing, ascent of the 3000m face, Voytek Kurtyka and Robert Schauer descended the left skyline, exhausted and on totally unknown ground. (*Oriol Baro*)

to have become more important than how it is played.

Why we climb is completely personal, how we climb is communal. How we climb defines the future of mountaineering and also the mountain environment. Leave no trace, alpine style, doing more with less: many people can see intuitively that even if they can't climb this way themselves, it is progressive mountaineering – the way to go.

Part of this essay formed a presentation given at the 2010 International Trad Climbing Meet in Orco, northern Italy. It examines 'traditional values' in climbing; from Great Britain through the Alps to the Himalaya.

ROB COLLISTER

Cri de Coeur From The Alps

*How many times can a man turn his head
And pretend that he just doesn't see? – Bob Dylan*

The Aletsch Glacier, which flows out of the Bernese Oberland into the Rhone valley in western Switzerland, is the longest glacier in the Alps. It is fed by a number of ice streams emanating from peaks like the Äbeni Flue, Jungfrau, Mönch, Fiescherhorn and Grünhorn, most of them over 4000 metres. The point at which these tributaries merge to form the Aletsch is a plain of snow two kilometres wide known as Konkordiaplatz. At the geographical heart of the Bernese Oberland and of a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site, it has attracted mountaineers since the middle of the 19th century. The first hut was built here on a rock shelf a few feet above the ice in 1872 and it has been periodically enlarged and re-built ever since to cater for growing demand. Nowadays it accommodates up to a hundred people a night, especially during April and May when it is a popular base for ski mountaineers, and the term 'hut' is something of a misnomer. Materials for the original building would have been carried all the way up from the Rhone valley by porters or, conceivably, mules. Now, it is re-provisioned on a weekly basis by helicopter, and for the hut guardian and his family it is only a 30-minute ride on a skidoo uphill to the Jungfrauoch where the railway from Grindelwald terminates.

However, the biggest change has been to the glacier. There is nothing new about glacial recession: it has been going on for 150 years, but the process has accelerated recently. In the case of the Aletsch, the glacier has not actually retreated very much, but its surface has dropped dramatically as its volume shrinks. Konkordia in the summer becomes by midday a swamp of rotten snow cut by rushing melt-water streams. Where once climbers could walk onto the ice, there is now a metal staircase zigzagging almost 100 metres up a vertical rock face. At the end of a long day, it comes as a sting in the tail, especially at 2800 metres above sea-level. Every few years, as the glacier level falls, the Swiss Alpine Club is obliged to fit a new section of staircase. In the 30 years since I first visited the hut, the ice has dropped as much as it did in the previous 100. This is not my imagination. At bends in the staircase small signs indicate the year in which this was the surface of the ice. About 10 years ago I counted the number of steps out of curiosity. There were 360. Two years ago I counted again. This time, there were 433, 450 including a ladder lashed to the bottom. It is a graphic illustration of the effect of global warming on the landscape, but it is far from unique. The same story is being repeated all over the Alps, indeed all