

ment. Representation is sometimes not cheap and I think this is an area that needs to be monitored closely going forwards.

Achievements

Three years ago I said that I wanted to increase membership numbers and particularly the number of young members. The latest statistics show:

- There are now over 1500 members, which is 20% more than 3 years ago.
- c25% of current members have joined in the last 3 years.
- Most pleasingly we have over four times as many members under the age of 30 as we had 3 years ago.
- About 8% of our members are now under the age of 30 (compared to about 3% under 30 in a certain major British rock climbing club).
- After a tightening up of subscriptions collection the number of paid-up members is now 35% higher than it was 3 years ago.

The above is of course just a brief summary of what has been achieved by the combined efforts of a large number of people. When I look back over the last three years I am proud that so much has been achieved by the remarkable people who work tirelessly for this Club on a completely voluntary basis.

On that note I would like to thank those Committee members who have moved on during the year or whose terms end at the end of 2103: Andy Cave, Jamie Goodhart, Steve Goodwin, Pete Holden, Anna Seale and Stuart Worsfold. For 2014 I would like to welcome to the Committee Lindsay Griffin as your new President, Amanda Beddows, Charles Burbridge, Susan Jensen, Kimball Morrison, Bernard Newman, Victor Saunders and Jonathan White. And I would like to extend a special personal thank-you to John Town who I was lucky enough to have as Honorary Secretary throughout the duration of my presidency. John has served a very full three years and achieved a tremendous amount during his tenure. He intends to stand down on 31st March and will be a very difficult act to follow.

And of course I too have served three years and will be handing over to Lindsay Griffin. Not only is Lindsay a popular figure and all-round good chap, he also knows more about mountaineering and has more influential mountaineering contacts than just about anyone else in the mountain world.

I hand over having no doubt that the leadership of the Club will be in safe hands.



2014 Piolet d'Or winners (l-r) Ueli Steck, Ian Welsted and Raphael Slawinski on stage in Courmayeur with their 2014 awards (*Pascal Tournaire*)

The 2014 Piolets d'Or

At the 22nd Piolet d'Or, held at the end of March in Chamonix and Courmayeur, a six-person jury selected two very different ascents to represent the spirit of modern mountaineering and the various aspects of the ethical charter that forms the basis of these awards. Prior to the event the technical committee had provided over 70 significant ascents from 2013 that more or less met the Piolet d'Or criteria. The committee and the jury then spent many days choosing the most representative, finally deciding to make five nominations and one Special Mention.

The nominated climbs were: the first ascent of Kungyang Chhish East (7400m), formerly one of the highest virgin summits in Pakistan, climbed via the 2700m south-west face by Simon Anthamatten (Switzerland), Hansjorg and Matthias Auer (Austria); the first ascent of K6 West (7040m), also in Pakistan, by Canadians Raphael Slawinski and Ian Welsted, via the north-west face and west ridge, a 2700m rise from base camp; the first ascent of the 2000m north face and descent of the west face of Talung (7349m), a summit situated in Nepal immediately south of Kangchenjunga, by Czechs Marek Holecek and Zdenek Hruby (the latter sadly killed on Gasherbrum I a few months later); a new route on the 2700m south face of Annapurna (8091m) by the 'Swiss Machine' Ueli Steck; and the first ascent of the north-east buttress and north ridge of Mt. Laurens (3052m) in Alaska by Mark Allen (USA) and Graham Zimmerman (New Zealand/

USA). Whilst this year no British were nominated, a tenuous link is that Welsted has a Welsh mother still living in Cardiff!

This year's jury was a diverse group, ably presided over by George Lowe (first ascents of the Kangshung Face of Everest, *Infinite Spur* on Foraker amongst many others, and part of the well-known Lowe dynasty). Other members were Kazakh high altitude specialist Denis Urubko, Catherine Destivelle, a well-known Italian author Erri de Luca, German alpinist and author Karen Steinbach, and Lim Sung-muk, a mountaineer and editor of the Korean magazine *Man and Mountain* (one of the organizers of *Piolets d'Or Asia*).

Diverse as they are in personality and mountaineering background, the six jury members were also completely different in their opinions of which ascent, or ascents, should receive an award. Consequently, a consensus was not possible, deliberations took several hours, and the final decision a democratic compromise, awards being made to Annapurna and K6 West.

The two ascents chosen represented different forms of exploration (a much climbed face on a well-known mountain as against an unclimbed peak), and extremes in the management of risk. Steck knew he was accepting great danger, and is very conscious that he will probably not put himself in a similar situation again: the Canadians timed their ascent perfectly, minimized exposure to rockfall, and planned days to get enough rest at each bivouac. The jury also noted that as regular visitors to Pakistan, these two decided to continue with their expedition immediately after the Nanga Parbat massacre, realizing the need to show their support for the local people, and as encouragement to other mountaineers not to paint all Pakistanis with the same brush.

Uncontested were the Sixth Piolets d'Or Lifetime Achievement Award, presented to the legendary American mountaineer John Roskelly, and a Special Mention made of the second ascent of Steck's route on Annapurna by Stéphane Benoist and Yannick Graziani. This endeavour was cited as a wonderful example of 'brotherhood of the rope'. Benoist suffered from a lung infection high on the face, making the descent very taxing, and he has since undergone severe amputations to both fingers and toes. However, the fact that they managed to return alive demonstrated that there are occasions where a partnership can be greater than the sum of its components.

Over and above the general subjectivity of giving these awards, this year there was added controversy: did Steck really solo the south face of Annapurna? There is considerable belief, largely centred in the Austro-German quarter, that he did not.

Whilst there is still no definitive proof that Steck went above the base of the rock band, there is absolutely no evidence that he did not. Is his ascent a plausible scenario? Some argue that the times simply don't add up, failing to accept the fact that Steck may have reached the performance level of a world-class Olympic athlete. Graziani, a superbly fit, active guide, and one of France's top mountaineers, knows Steck well and says he is simply in a completely different class.

Patricia Jolly, a journalist with *Le Monde*, and one who takes her work seriously, went to Nepal, hired an interpreter, and sought out the two Sherpas who were at Advanced Base during the night Steck was on the mountain. One stated categorically that he saw the light from Steck's headtorch 'about 200m below the summit'. Did he dream it? Could this be a giant conspiracy? Remember that earlier in the year Steck had alienated himself from many Sherpas due to an incident on Everest. Benoist has chatted extensively with Steck about their various lines through the rock band, which Steck was able to describe in some detail, giving the impression that at the very least, the Swiss Machine got high on this section of the wall.

Steck set off up the face with little or no intention of climbing it: his partner had declined to follow at the bergschrund, but as the weather was good, Steck decided to climb to below the rock band for further acclimatization. It was only there, when he realized the exceptional nature of the conditions, that he elected to continue, but only as long as he felt able to climb down. Once above, on the easy summit slopes, he also knew he had to move fast; when the sun hit the wall the névé-covered passages on the rock band would likely melt, making descent very difficult. In the end he made eight rappels from Abalakovs, threading his light, 60m rope directly through the holes.

People cite obvious parallels with Cesen, but when the Slovenian claimed the south face of Lhotse more than 20 years ago, it was a huge leap into the future, probably more so than Bob Beaman's 1968 Mexico long jump. Whilst not denying that Steck's ascent took mountaineering to a new level, a number of alpinists, including Benoist and Graziani, agree that the time was right; we were almost waiting for something like this to take place.

The 22nd edition might be the last of this genre of Piolets d'Or, as the event tries to move more towards being a celebration of alpinism, rather than being seen as some sort of 'Oscars' of the climbing world. It may have a different format, it may have different partners, but the charter will remain the same, though no doubt, given the current world of mountaineering professionals, with the requirement for some form of proof and transparency for each ascent.



Ueli Steck. (Bernard Newman)