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Virtual Climbing

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‘There are only three sports: bull fighting, mountain climbing and motor racing. All the rest are games.’ (Ernest Hemingway)

Hemingway makes the point that the possibility of death or serious injury distinguishes ‘sports’ from ‘games’. Most climbers I know regard climbing as a superior kind of sport and one that is, for various reasons, a particularly meaningful sport. We have come to believe, because we risk life and limb when we pit ourselves against a rock face or mountain, that climbing has some value beyond the demands of athletic sports and certainly of ball games; that in some metaphysical way climbing helps us to elude our Sisyphian fate rather than compound it.

Climbing requires us to bring together a combination of skill, strength, bravery and commitment that often goes far beyond the requirements of most sporting activities. Until recently, this aspect of danger and adventure has always existed in the games that climbers have invented for their amusement.

The new game of ‘Sport Climbing’ – a real misnomer by Hemingway’s definition – was invented by European climbers who lack our British game-playing tradition, a tradition which is not only part of our national culture but one that is required in order to amuse ourselves on the little crags and small mountains of our island.

Sport climbing has emerged from a European tradition – the alpine tradition of ascending high mountains and big cliffs. The acceptance of pegs to make an overall climb possible, has always been justified for technical climbing in the Alps, as much by the British as any other nation. So when the Europeans belatedly started to play ‘little crag’ games on their own abundant smaller crags, it was quite natural for them to adopt their own traditions and use of ironmongery. Their game takes the physical, gymnastic and aesthetic elements of rock climbing but removes the danger. But by eliminating the serious consequences of falling, sport climbing takes away the main ingredient, that element which makes rock climbing ‘special’, rather than just another game.

Sport climbers ask why climbing has to be dangerous. It is a good question which should be answered. The short answer is that adventure climbing need not be, and is not, particularly dangerous – but this avoids the question. There is no doubt that the most prestigious routes have an element of danger and those that bring the highest esteem, such as the Indian Face, where a mistake could be fatal, have a high danger factor. The bolted Tuolumne classic, Bachar Yarian, widely recognised as one of the greatest free routes anywhere in the world, is another such route. On this awesome, vertical, knobly wall, the bolts are 40 feet apart and the leader contemplates a flesh-ripping, 80-footer whilst climbing the 6a crux – not exactly a clip-up.

Dedicated sport climbers resent having to defend what they do. They argue that theirs is just another game and that high technical difficulty is enough justification for bolts. What is interesting is that those sport climbing specialists who have successfully done hard adventure climbs such as Indian Face or Master’s Edge, have received more kudos than any transient fame they might have received as the result of some desperately overhanging, bolted, red-point ascent. The truly
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hardest climbs, those great routes that get the fewest ascents, are not bolted routes. In ten years time the hardest of today’s sport climbs will no doubt have seen many ascents, but it is the unprotected adventure climbs that will remain as seriously hard challenges.

Climbers have always pushed the limits and modern sport climbers are no exception. Their routes are technically far harder than any routes climbed without bolts. The uninhibited use of bolts enables good climbers to do unbelievably hard routes. They also allow the average climber to do harder moves on routes he or she would not normally contemplate. In this respect, those who are most anti-bolting see bolts as ‘a pact with the Devil’ – something that is fundamentally wrong, though most climbers are ambivalent in their attitude, coy about their own indulgence and frequently dismissive, referring to sport routes as ‘clip-ups’. There is no doubting that sport climbing is seductive in its expediency and easy promise of difficulty without danger.

Sport climbing’s emphasis on pure difficulty has had an influence on ‘real’ climbing by raising the standard of what is seen to be possible. At its most extreme, on the overhanging and unprotectable faces at Buoux or Oregon, the few have pushed the impossible whilst at Pen Trewyn or Sella we mortals have found we could do harder moves than previously, without the tug of a top rope. Yet climbing such routes rarely results in the lasting memories of real adventures. The biggest difference between sport climbing and adventure climbing is intellectual. The sport climb, however good, tends to be a physical event and its pleasure is ephemeral. Great classic climbs live on for ever – adventures to be mulled over, written about, revisited and talked about in the pub with those we did them with, and boasted about to those who were not there.

There is a fine line between sport climbing and adventure climbing; a line drawn in the mind. There is an emotional and intellectual engagement with an adventure climb that a sport climb can never provoke. The sport climb is sanitised, emasculated, it is ‘virtual climbing’ that, at its worst, is not really climbing at all. The over-bolted clip-up gives an illusion of leading. The rope snakes down behind you, just as in real climbing. You go through the ceremony of clipping the rope into the bolts as you ‘lead’ upward – chanting the litany of the leader ....‘Watch me’.... ‘Slack, damn it!!’.... and as you clip the double-bolted lower-off chain, you shout down – ‘Safe!’ – as though you had ever been anything else! The contrast between the two types of climbing was brought home on a particularly fine traditional pitch in that heartland of bolted climbing – at Calpe in Spain. The magnificent, overhanging arete of Missing Link, with its massive threads and natural nut placements will remain a lasting memory long after much harder bolted routes have faded from memory. It is not surprising that a picture of this route graces the front of the English guidebook.

Bolts, as such, are not the problem. It is where the bolt is, or more importantly, where the bolt ‘is not’ that makes the distinction between a truly great climb and just another sport climb. Two or three well-placed bolts in Right Wall would make the route accessible to ten times as many leaders but totally rob it of its considerable distinction. One bolt in Faggott’s Great Slab would reduce the grade from E3 to Hard VS and destroy a classic. Such routes would no longer be in any way – special – just another virtual climb. They would no longer be routes that require character and fine judgement to lead, and this is the heart of the problem.
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Great Slab is a good example. The prospective leader, unable to muster the courage to lead the climb, could anchor a rope at the top and dangle a loop just in the right place to clip in for the crux traverse - no need for any bolts. But what would be the point? One might as well top-rope it. If one were to top-rope it with five feet of slack then it would probably be harder than leading it with a bolt! Extending this argument brings one to the conclusion that the use of bolts brings the sport route closer to being a top-rope problem which is exactly what some over-bolted routes in France and Spain have become, with every hard move having overhead protection.

Many, probably most, 'adventure' climbers enjoy doing clip-ups from time to time - but mainly as a foil to 'the real thing'. There is no doubt that being able to concentrate on a series of very hard moves without having to fight fear and expend energy fiddling with gear, can be great fun. But is it really much different from top-roping? Given enough bolts the leader 'leads' the route without ever being in danger of taking a real leader fall. There is a point where 'real' climbing stops and 'virtual' climbing starts. 'Virtual' climbing is just like 'real' climbing, except it just isn't as 'real'. It is a way of 'doing' rock climbing without the need for commitment - that commitment which characterises it as one of Hemingway's sports.

Sport climbing has been accused of failing to produce great climbs or great climbing literature. Does the lack of adventure mean that there are no stories to tell? Where is the classic sport climbing writing to be found? We know where the hard sport routes are but where are the classic sport climbs? Great classic free climbs tend to follow great features whilst 'great' sport climbs often avoid natural 'lines'. They are frequently just 'hard' - soon eclipsed by the next, even harder route. Is it unfair to suggest that sport climbs cannot be great routes or follow great features? There are some truly great sport routes. The four pitches of Pillar de Formis at Buoux create a wonderful line on this major sport crag. Because of its size, and with its very exposed and committing final pitch, this bolted classic is an adventure in the same way as the routes on the south face of the Aiguille du Midi are, to some extent, adventurous.

At the risk of falling into the trap of so many pontificators, I suggest that perhaps the end of technical difficulty is within sight. At present the technically hardest routes are short. With ten consecutive one-finger pull ups - so I'm told - Action Direct must be pointing the way to the limit. Surely no one could be so mindless as to contemplate more than one rope length of such moves, and if they were to do so, they would start to add an increasing element of adventure.

With the passage of time, climbers and alpinists have always applied stricter and more demanding rules to their games. Lito Tejada Flores referred to this tendency as 'the improvement to style' in his classic Games Climbers Play. It is difficult to contemplate modern, overhanging bolted routes succumbing to a purer, more adventurous style, but when the ultimate sport route has finally been climbed, then there can only be progress, either through 'improvement of style' thus making such routes more adventurous, or, through adding 'length', and with greater length, a corresponding element of 'adventure'. In the meantime we owe it to ourselves and to the integrity of climbing, to do everything in our power to ensure that our very real adventures not be diluted and sanitised into virtual climbs.