

# Rock!

Eric Blair

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Went rock climbing last weekend with Ms DH of Ann Arbor, MI. It wasn't at all what I'd expected based on what I'd seen on the X Games.

The main surprise is that the entire structure of the process is built around the safety equipment. We start with the bolts. Times used to be, you'd have to find a crag in the rock somewhere, and then stick a cam or screw or something in there to hold up a clip. This was damaging to the more popular rocks, and I imagine there was a good risk that if your cam placement isn't great, you could go falling to your doom. So instead, concerned climbers have drilled permanent bolts into the rock, at about two meter intervals. So already, as you approach the rock [climbers use the term 'approach' instead of 'hike to'] you see the human interpretation (a climbing route) superimposed on the natural, meaningless formation.

It's sort of a two-person sport, since the climber has a harness around his/her ass, which is connected to a rope which is connected at the other end to the harness around the ass of the assistant on the ground, known as the belayer [I'm told it's French, but that's the preferred Anglicized spelling there]. The pairness of the thing makes it a supremely heterosexual sport, and there were many a girl, a boy, and their dog at the climber hangout. It is often the case that the girl is the better climber, by the way, since the sport is not very upper-body intensive and being light is an asset.

The plot from there is as follows: the lead person climbs to the first bolt and reaches up to attach a rope. The belayer takes up any slack, so the furthest the climber could fall at this point is a couple of decimeters below the clip. Climber then goes a meter or two over the bolt; if she falls here, then she'll sail a meter or two before the rope catches her, so it's a little nerve-racking. But then, she clips in to the next bolt, and the tension is resolved. Repeat until the anchors at the top of the rock which indicate the end of the climb. At this point, the climber can remove all the intermediate clips on the way down, leaving a rope hanging from the rock. Then the weaker climbers (such as myself) can haul themselves up the rock knowing that there's zero risk of hitting the ground.

More cuteness: the belayer attaches the rope to his harness using an ATC: air traffic control. Get it, the person falling from the rock is air traffic. Ha ha. Ha.

Now, the rope never touches the bolts or the anchors, since this would wear down the bolts due to rope friction, so there's always a piece of hardware con-

necting the rope to the bolts. When everybody's had their fun, somebody has to climb back up to the top to get back the clips left at the top. This involves climbing the rock, clipping the harness directly to the anchors, removing the rope, attaching to her ATC, and then letting herself down slowly. The rope doesn't move, so no rope friction on the anchors, and then the rope can be pulled down nice 'n' easy (again, no weight so no friction).

With four or five teams climbing the face of a rock, it feels a bit like a military operation, with equipment everywhere and the sound of aluminum clips filling the air. There's a presumption that the equipment is there just in case, and the whole thing could theoretically be done with none of it, but it's clear that the equipment defines the climb, both in terms of marking the route and defining what exactly needs to be done. Those who climb on top rope don't have much to do: they get to the top, touch the anchors, and then come down. Without placing pieces or engaging in some operation up top, it's almost anticlimactic.

You can also see that it's not truly an extreme sport. The only time you can possibly hit the ground is placing the first clip, before the rope is on the wall, and for that, you can even get a clip stick, which is basically a curtain rod with a clamp at the end, to eliminate even that risk. When on the wall, you spend most of your time planning the best route and checking your body placement to put weight in just the right places. It's much further on the cerebral end than the grunty strength and speed end. I'm told that it thus attracts a lot of geeks. As an added bonus for the geeks, there are little call-and-responses that need to be made all the way along, so you're set for conversation. Awkwardness is also minimized because, since screwing up the easy stuff could kill somebody, you're allowed to state the obvious. No need to worry about the whole 'did she remember to take her ATC, and should I remind her, or would that be redundant?' sort of calculations. Everything gets double-checked.

So there are my thoughts about rock climbing. As for me, by the way, I did OK, and managed to pull myself up most of the rock, with a whole lot of help from my belayer. When my arms totally gave out, we just pulled me up by the rope.

The roller-coasteresque part of the ride was also pretty good. There's a saying or something that the approach is the most dangerous part of the climb, which fast turns into a joke like 'the post-climb swim is the most dangerous part of climbing' or 'operating the camp stove is the most dangerous part of climbing' and I do believe that all those activities really do give you a higher risk of winding up dead than a properly-done climb. But, like when riding a roller-coaster, our brains are not trained to rely on machinery, ropes, and harnesses to keep us safe. When sitting on the harness ('taking'), my brain was significantly more at rest when I still had a pinkie against the rock. 'Look, brain, I'm clearly safe because I'm holding myself up by this pinkie!' Hanging by the rope definitely made me sweat and feel like I was involved in something truly x-treme, even though the system is well-designed to guarantee a safe return.

**Reader comment:** Ms. DH of Ann Arbor writes: That was a nice summary. However, I think you might mention that the non-extremeness is pretty much just the way we climb. A one pitch sport route is the safest thing out there. Some people climb “trad” (where you put little things into the cracks in the wall and attach your rope to those little things.) Those people can create their own route and the little things in the rock might really come out, sending you plummeting to you death. Then there’s “multi pitch,” where people go up higher than 1/2 a rope length (ideally to the summit). We were only doing “single pitch.” I think that your experience might speak more to my wimpy climbing style than to the entire sport itself. Plus, overall boys are still better at the sport. However, I do like the idea of thinking about the space between each placement as its own story, moving towards a tense climax of risk, resolved when you clip. Cute.