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Alpina

A semiannual review of mountaineering in the greater ranges

The Strange Science of Grading Climbs

How hard was that climb you just did? Hard? Easy? Wouldn't repeat it? Or, as the last page of the *American Alpine Journal* might report, A₃ W1₄+M₅/6? Describing a climb's difficulty leads one into describing not only crags but also snow- and ice-covered hills. The climbing world has therefore invented ratings for all sorts of terrain and levels of risk. The result resembles the Tower of Babel. Countries, organizations, and regions have devised their own terminologies.

When I started climbing in the Shawangunks in 1952, we rated the routes all either 4 or 5. We had no guidebook. Traditional ratings of 1, 2, and 3 required no ropes, 4 and 5 demanded gear and strategy, and 6 was so difficult that climbers needed direct aid, usually rope loops attached to pitons driven into cracks. The system dates to the 1930s for rating hikes and technical climbs in the Sierra Nevada but is widely used throughout North America.

Finer distinctions were inevitable since so many of our climbs were rated similarly; we started to talk about easy 5s and hard 5s. Because nearly all the routes were 5s, we followed the practice of subdividing the 5 rating from 5.1 to 5.8, after the Yosemite Decimal System. It calls for adding a decimal point to distinguish them: 5.1 and up as they get harder. In those days the Gunks had almost nothing beyond 5.7. There was a tantalizing 5.8 at the Skytop crag, initiated by the great Fritz Wiessner. A single carabiner 20 feet up showed where he had been, but it was some time before anybody else got up there.

New equipment, more climbers, and competitiveness pushed limits higher. After 5.8 came 5.9, at one time considered about as hard as any climb available. It wasn't. Defying the conventions of mathematics, the next grade was 5.10, not 5.91. We are now up to 5.15, with sub-designations (a, b, c, d) for the harder ones. Even these are imprecise. They do not, for example, distinguish between a segment that has only one 5.9 move and one that is 5.9 all the way. Direct-aid sections have a scale of their own: A1 through A5.



Trekkers who see this view of Dhaulagiri from Pun Hill in the Annapurna region will now find public toilets. See "Sanitation," page 125. STEVEN JERVIS

These terms are now used only for climbs purely on rock. Other scales use M on mixed snow, ice, and rock and WI for water ice. Bouldering (ropeless climbing near the ground) has grades all its own.

How far can these ratings be pushed? Records are made to be broken. The fastest mile run in the nineteenth century was about four minutes and twelve seconds. It wasn't until 1954 that Roger Bannister broke the coveted four-minute mark. Since then, the record has dropped another sixteen seconds. Even high schoolers have run four-minute miles. Whatever one can do, another can some day do a little better. There is doubtless a limit, but no one knows what it is, although it is safe to say that no one is likely to manage a 3:30 mile.

Climbing is more subjective than running. Psychology plays a larger role. Climbers debate how to rate degrees of difficulty. Some climbers excel on slabs, others on chimneys, and others at overhangs. Rating risk, or danger, is another category. An easy rock climb can be hazardous if there is no way to thread the rope through protection; a gentle mountain may be prone to avalanche. American rock guidebooks have borrowed from the movies for a risk rating: G, PG, R, X. G is very safe; X means if you fall you may die.

International ratings have developed independently, producing the confusion outlined in the *American Alpine Journal*. The British, who for many years

eschewed pitons and declared that “the leader must not fall,” used such terms as “severe” and “hard very severe” (HVS). By today’s much loftier standards, HVS is pretty moderate, so the Brits have devised EI through EII for the newer climbs.

Whatever the scale, ratings will rise, at least for a time. Last September the 24-year-old Czech climber Adam Ondra claimed the first 5.15d, in a sea cave in Norway. 5.16 is coming!

But, finally, the best way to anticipate a climb is to talk with someone who has done it. That person should preferably be the same height, weight, gender, and temperament as yourself.

In Memoriam: Norman Dyhrenfurth and Fred Beckey

Climbers who survive the mountains often have long lives. Noel Odell, who had the last glimpse of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine before their disappearance on Mt Everest in 1924, died at 96. The great Italian mountaineer Ricardo Cassin made it to 100. Autumn 2017 furnished two more names: Norman Dyhrenfurth, 99, and Fred Beckey, 94.

Dyhrenfurth was a major explorer of the Himalaya. In 1955 he led a post-monsoon attempt on Lhotse (8,516 m), then the world’s highest unclimbed peak. The effort failed in cold temperatures and wind. But in 1963 Dyhrenfurth led the triumphant Everest expedition. It placed five Americans and a Nepali on the summit by two different routes, one of which remains unrepeated. Dyhrenfurth returned to Everest in 1971 as head of a large group composed of climbers from nearly ten countries. It was an idealistic venture that dissolved into nationalistic acrimony and did not reach the top.

Fred Beckey was the most prolific of American climbers, making many hundreds of first ascents and new routes. Although he rarely ventured overseas, he left a mark on virtually all the major ranges of North America. For many years every issue of the *American Alpine Journal* featured Beckey’s numerous ascents. He started early; in 1942, at age 19 he and his younger brother Helmy made an astounding second ascent of the highest peak in British Columbia, Mt Waddington (13,186 ft), following in part the route pioneered by Fritz Wiessner six years before.

After serving in the 10th Mountain Division in the Second World War, Fred returned to college, but mainly to climbing. For years he roamed the

country in his car, at one time a pink Thunderbird. He was fiercely possessive of his anticipated routes and was said to have stashed provisions at the base of some them. Said one climbing partner, "He had this mysterious thing that everyone called his little black book. This was a highly touted document of the mountains, climbs, and various routes that hadn't been done. He was always going through his book, setting up these trips." Among his greatest successes were the 1954 first ascents of Alaska's Mts Deborah (12,339 ft) and Hunter (14,573 ft) with Henry Meybohm and Heinrich Harrar.

Beckey always wanted to be there first. In 1959 Bob Page and I established a new route on Table Mountain (11,106 ft) in the Tetons. The very next day Fred did a much harder line. Don't tell me this was a coincidence. He must have somehow found out about us. Certainly he was single-minded about his climbing. He was famously flirtatious but never married, asserting that domesticity would be a distraction from the peaks. He was described as an "ornery old cuss"; I suspect he was the same way when younger. He was no expedition man. When he was on Dyhrenfurth's 1955 Lhotse venture, Dyhrenfurth was unhappy with his performance. "He risked the life of Dr. Bruno Spirig. Fred left him at Camp 4 without adequate assistance. Bruno was snow-blind and nearly died of cerebral edema.... Dr. Spirig didn't even have a sleeping bag, he didn't have down clothing.... The next morning, we got Spirig down and he recovered. From then on, people had no confidence in Fred Beckey, I'm very sorry to say." Unsurprisingly, Dyhrenfurth did not invite Beckey on his Everest expeditions.

Beckey scoured the United States and Canada, in his thirst for new climbs. A documentary film is being made about him called *Dirtbag*.

Fred was indefatigable; he was climbing and planning almost to the day he died.

In Memoriam: Hayden Kennedy and Inge Perkins

We are accustomed to young climbers dying, but a special poignancy attaches to the deaths of Hayden Kennedy, 27, and Inge Perkins, 23. Kennedy had great achievements, including same-season ascents of K7 (6,934 m) and the Ogre (7,285 m) in the Karakoram in 2012. Earlier that year he made a controversial climb of the Compressor Route on Cerro Torre (10,262 ft) in Patagonia. He and his partner destroyed many expansion bolts they had not used,

thus making the route a lot harder. Last October 7 he and his girlfriend/partner Perkins set out on skis for Imp Peak (11,202 ft) in Montana. They were caught in an avalanche. Kennedy survived; Perkins did not. After a three-hour search, Kennedy left the scene. He gave rescuers a detailed search map, which aided the recovery of her body. The next day Kennedy took his own life.

This devastating story received wide coverage in the press and on blogs. Consider a few points about that coverage:

- The accomplishments of Inge Perkins seemed slighted. She had climbed up to grade 5.14 and was a long-distance skier.
- The articles devoted much discussion to the hazards of the mountains and the morality of suicide.
- Perhaps most significant, they underscored the need for safety. The pair had not done a check of their avalanche beacons. Perkins's was found, turned off, in her backpack.

No matter how you look at this story, it is just terribly sad.

Yosemite

That soaring granite in Yosemite Valley is daunting, but it usually seems solid. That is not always so. Late last September a chunk of rock “the size of an apartment building” fell off El Capitan, killing one and injuring a second. (Neither was climbing at the time.) Yosemite National Park released a statement calling rockfalls “a common occurrence in Yosemite Valley,” estimating 80 per year, “though many more rockfalls go unreported.” And, as if to prove the park correct, another occurred the next day.

Despite such hazards, climbers flock to El Cap and climb it very fast. In October 2007 Jim Reynolds and Brad Gobright set a new speed record on the Nose route at 2 hours 19 minutes and 44 seconds.

Nepal Himalaya

Female Sherpas and women climbers from other countries have achieved a great deal in recent years. Here are a few of their feats.

Dawa Yangzum Sherpa has become the country's first certified female international mountain guide. In 2014 she climbed K2 (8,611 m) with an all-female Nepali team. Lhakpa Sherpa has now summited Everest (8,850

m) eight times, a record for women. News outlets widely reported that on May 21, 2017, Indian climber Anshu Jamsenpa became the first woman to reach the top of Everest twice within five days. She was the first Indian woman to climb Everest for the fifth time. The same day Vilborg Arna Gissurardóttir became the first Icelandic woman to summit Everest. Also on that day, Ada Tsang was the first woman from Hong Kong to climb the highest peak.

When George Mallory and his countrymen made their lonely attempts on Everest in the 1920s, they probably did not anticipate that one day it would be overcrowded. The summit has been reached more than 7,000 times, with most of the action in the last 25 years. Some expeditions have cleared garbage and empty oxygen bottles, but much of this waste remains on the great mountain. The grimmest signs of human activity are the corpses. Some 300 have died on the slopes of Everest, and most still lie there. The most famous is Mallory, whose body, with a rope still around his waist, was discovered in 1999, 75 years after his disappearance. He was left in place, with as fine a burial as could be improvised on that high, rocky terrain. Others have been treated less respectfully, left where they fell. Some of these bodies act as route markers. Friends and families would like their loved ones' remains, but retrieval of Everest bodies is dangerous and expensive. Three Indian climbers who died in 2016 were brought down a year later. The *New York Times* (December 19, 2017) devoted an entire sixteen-page special section to this effort. (See Sandy Stott's commentary, "The Big Meh," in Books and Media on page 147.) The achievement demonstrates that bodies can be retrieved, but that most won't be.

Since 1985, commercial guiding services have led clients up two of the many routes to the top. One is via the North Col (as attempted by the British expeditions of 1921 through 1938) and the other is the South Col route, first climbed in 1953. About 98 percent of Everest climbers use one of these. The most are done from the south in the last two weeks of May, which makes for considerable crowding. More than 500 ascended this way in 2017. The other lines are much harder, and there is limited incentive to repeat them. Only a few uncompleted routes remain. The most famous is the notoriously hazardous Fantasy Ridge on the Kangshung (East) Face. Most hard Himalayan climbing will likely be on lower peaks, some of which remain untouched.

Sanitation. The *Kathmandu Post* reports that public toilets are being built on Pun Hill (also called Poon Hill), a popular trekking area in the Annapurna

region. “Tourists arriving here are facing difficulty to answer nature’s call due to lack of toilets,” the Ghorepani Hotel Management subcommittee vice chair Sushil Pun said.

In Memoriam: Elizabeth Hawley, and a Note on Sources

Gone, alas, is *News from Nepal*, a newsletter out of Portland, Oregon. It was a one-man operation. Bob Pierce, the one man, died recently at age 92, leaving a message that “the entire editorial staff has been wiped out” and that there would be no more newsletters.

A great deal of information, often remarkably timely, can be found online. One of the best of the numerous blogs is that of Alan Arnette. But the prime source for Nepal Himalaya remains the *Himalayan Database*. Its vast data were first compiled by the redoubtable Elizabeth Hawley. Hawley was an American journalist who spent most of her adult life in Kathmandu. Although not a climber herself—she rarely ventured into the high mountains and never visited Everest Base Camp—she became fascinated by the expeditions that passed through Kathmandu. She interviewed their members and made meticulous accounts of their experiences. For many years, every issue of the *American Alpine Journal* featured her reports.

Hawley was a well-known and somewhat enigmatic figure. She did not marry and had no children. In Kathmandu, she drove around in her blue Volkswagen Beetle, relentlessly pursuing interviews. Her copious data were preserved in the *Himalayan Database*, thanks to the American climber and database expert Richard Salisbury and a Nepali woman who did data entry. This took eleven years. Salisbury now maintains the database, which is available online. It is an invaluable resource.

In January 2018 Hawley died in her adopted hometown, Kathmandu. She was 94. Read more about her in Bernadette McDonald’s 2005 biography *I’ll Call You in Kathmandu* (Mountaineers Books).

—Steven Jervis
Alpina Editor