

DEGREES OF FREEDOM

From dry tooling to figure fours, M-climbing in the mountains is redefining the vision of what's a climbable line.

RAPHAEL SLAWINSKI



Is it mixed? Rock? Ice? Neither? Routes like Mixed Monster on Mt. Wilson push the boundaries of how much (or how little) ice it takes to make a mixed route. Raphael Slawinski drytooling toward the dagger. *Eamonn Walsh*

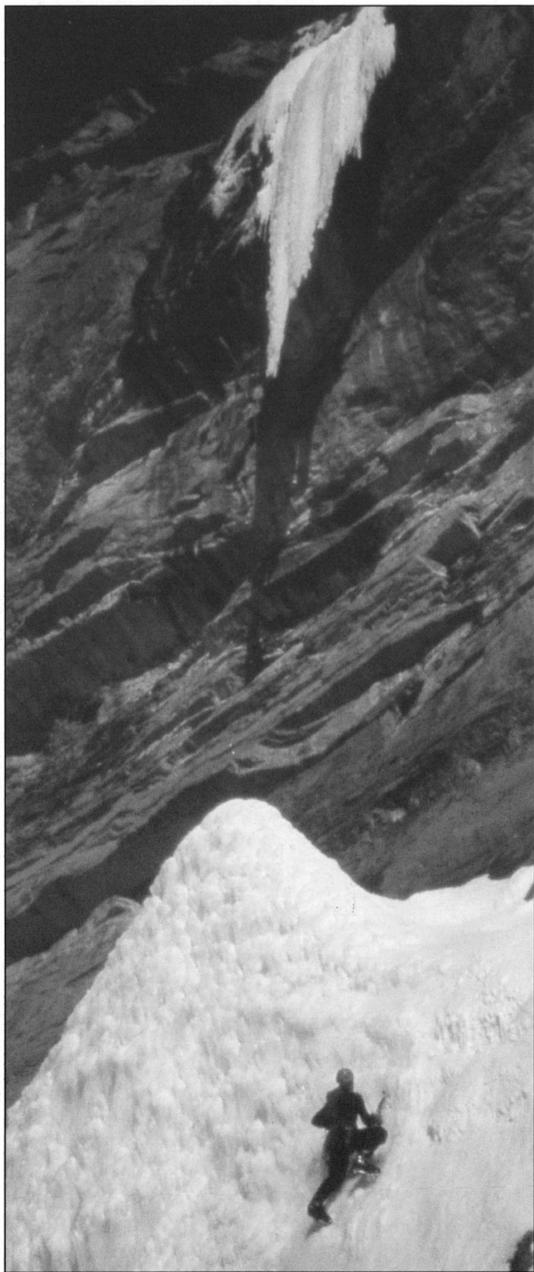
"We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."—Albert Einstein

Mixed climbing has come a long way from its beginnings in mountaineering. The early mountaineer with his nailed boots "providing an equally good grip on rock and ice" (Heinrich Harrer, *The White Spider*, 1959) seems barely recognizable in the modern alpinist making rapid ascents of huge mixed walls from Alaska to the Himalaya. Certainly the pioneer seems to have little resemblance to the "M-climber" figure-fouring their way across an icy roof. In fact, aside from the fact that they both use some form of ice axes and crampons—and even this basic equipment is becoming increasingly specialized—do the alpine and M-climbers have anything in common? By recalling some milestone climbs, I will trace the evolution of mixed climbing into the multifaceted activity it has become.

THE BEGINNINGS: SCOTS AND NORTH WALLS

"It was half superb rock-technique, half a toe-dance on the ice—a toe-dance above a perpendicular drop. [Heckmair] got a hold on the rock, a hold on the ice, bent himself double, uncoiled himself, the front points of his crampons moving ever upwards, boring into the ice."—Heinrich Harrer referring to the first ascent of the north face of the Eiger, in 1938, *The White Spider*.

Mixed climbing as an activity practiced for its own sake originated in the early 1900s in Scotland. Seeking added challenge, Scottish mountaineers attempted summer rock routes in winter, a startlingly modern concept. Around the same time, the development of crampons (initially not adopted by the nailed-boot-shod



Eamonn Walsh approaching Mixed Monster, which requires two pitches of bare rock to reach the ice. Raphael Slawinski

Scots), helped inaugurate the golden north wall era in the Alps. On large alpine routes, mixed climbing was—and often still is—a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Nonetheless alpine climbs of the 1930s, such as the north faces of the Eiger and of the Matterhorn, defined the state of the art in mixed climbing for decades to come due to their unprecedented length, sustained difficulty, and fearsome commitment. Not until the 1960s were mixed climbing standards raised again, on routes such as the Orion Direct on Ben Nevis and the Bonatti-Zappelli on the Grand Pilier d'Angle of Mont Blanc. By the end of that decade existing equipment and technique had likely been pushed as far as was possible. For an advance to occur, both would have to be reinvented.

THE INTERLUDE: WATERFALL ICE

“Apart from the looming obvious Cascade Icefall [...], nothing was done until the full potential of modern ice climbing equipment was realized...”—Bugs McKeith, Canadian Alpine Journal, 1975.

The breakthrough came in the late 1960s with the introduction of the curved pick by Yvon Chouinard and the Terrordactyl's radically drooped pick, by Hamish MacInnes. The new technology revolutionized ice climbing and paved the way for free-climbing on vertical ice. The revolution in ice climbing eventually would also alter mixed climbing beyond recognition. But ironically, the explosion of interest in waterfall ice initially distracted climbers from mixed climbing. By the early 1980s ice climbing, from being merely one of the techniques in the alpinist's arsenal, had evolved into a full-blown technical art. The skills gained on waterfalls also gave rise to a whole new generation of alpine climbs. Slipstream in the Canadian Rockies blurred the distinction between waterfall ice and alpine climbing; the Moonflower Buttress in the Alaska Range applied the highest levels of ice climbing skill to a major alpine first ascent; and the list goes on. Waterfall ice climbing, though initially pursued for its own sake, ended up revolutionizing alpine climbing.

AHEAD OF THEIR TIME: MIXED CLIMBING IN THE 1970S

“Without the Terrordactyl, we'd still all be swinging.”—Duncan Ferguson

For most winter climbers of the 1970s and 80s, vertical ice was the end of the rainbow. The one place where mixed climbing continued to advance was Scotland. Duncan Ferguson recently commented to me that, “even though credit for much of the impetus for modern ice climbing has gone to Chouinard and his curved tools, I strongly feel that it is the Scots and MacInnes in particular and [his Terrordactyls] that ushered in the birth of modern mixed climbing.” Indeed modern mixed climbing in the Alps was not a native development, but arrived only when Rab Carrington and Al Rouse exported Scottish attitudes to establish their now classic route on the north face of the Aiguille des Pelerins in the winter of 1975. In North America Ferguson, who was years ahead of his time in his pursuit of mixed climbing, was likewise influenced by Scottish climbing: “I started ice climbing in about 1971.... After [a] short-lived fascination with steep and thick ice, I got frustrated with the clumsy and brutal nature of ice climbing....” But it was only after reading about Scottish climbing, “that I sorted out what I wanted to do with my ice



Suffer Machine, on the Stanley Headwall. The 1991 first ascent of this “unformed” ice route, which involved aid climbing to gain the hanging ice, represented a breakthrough in a climbable line. *Dave Campbell*

climbing—forget the ‘thick ice’ part of it and see how far I could go with a pair of Terrors and a new attitude and vision. A redefinition of what ‘ice climbing’ was.... Spent the entire rest of the season wandering around by myself and bouldering and traversing and soloing short mixed climbs. Rock climbs really, with a set of Terrors and crampons. Thin ice, snowed up rock, rock moves between patches of ice and pure rock....” It would be over a decade before Ferguson’s redefinition of ice climbing would gain widespread acceptance.

HARD AND FAST: ALPINE MIXED CLIMBING INTO THE 1980S

“The wall was the ambition. The style became the obsession.”—Alex MacIntyre, Shisha Pangma: The alpine-style first ascent of the South-West Face, 1984.

“Winter alpinism is hard enough without the added dilemma of free-climbing ethics.”—Barry Blanchard, Climbing #117, 1989.

Perhaps because most alpine routes require some mixed climbing, the development of waterfall ice climbing had a more immediate impact on the sort of mixed ground being climbed in the mountains. It was only later that climbers began to seek out hard mixed ground at the crags. Thus in 1974 in the Canadian Rockies Jeff Lowe and Mike Weis applied the lessons learned on waterfall ice climbs such as the first ascent of Colorado’s Bridalveil Falls to set a new standard



Raphael Slawinski attempting the second ascent of the direct start to Suffer Machine (M8) in 1997. This bolted variant was symptomatic of the next step in the evolution of mixed climbing: sport climbing with tools. *Dave Campbell*

of mixed climbing difficulty on the Grand Central Couloir of Mt. Kitchener. On the crux pitch, “with only knifeblades between frozen blocks for protection, the climbing was extremely nerve-racking. Seldom would the tools penetrate more than half an inch before meeting rock” (Jeff Lowe, *Ice World*, 1996). The bar was raised again in 1978, when Jim Logan and Mugs Stump made the first ascent of the Emperor Face of Mt. Robson. Typical of alpine climbing with its overriding emphasis on getting up, they had no qualms about resorting to aid, yet the runout nature of the climbing also required free-climbing at a high standard. For three days they surmounted pitch after pitch of difficult, poorly protected mixed climbing, with considerable exposure to objective hazards and scant possibility for retreat. On the final day Logan took eight hours to lead the crux pitch, “at first around a roof with all tied-off pins, then onto a tied-off screw, then a bit of ice climbing. . . . At the top of the pitch I ran out of piton placements and ice, and set off for 30 feet of rock climbing on overhanging loose snow-covered rock with no protection” (Jim Logan, *Climbing* #52, 1979). The Logan-Stump remains unrepeatable to this day, a testament to its difficulty and seriousness.

In the Alps the north face of the Grandes Jorasses was a forcing point for advances in alpine mixed climbing. In 1975 Nick Colton and Alex MacIntyre climbed a line of icy runnels and chimneys on the right flank of the Walker Spur. While the Colton/MacIntyre also comprises difficult ice and rock climbing, the main difficulties are mixed. When it was first climbed, the route was undoubtedly one of the hardest of its kind in the world. The Grandes Jorasses remained at the forefront of alpine mixed climbing into the 1980s with a number of difficult new routes: the famous No Siesta in particular was likely ahead of its time. Established in 1986 by the Slovak climbers Stanislav Glejdura and Jan Porvaznik, it featured much thin vertical ice, and difficult free and aid climbing on often poor rock.

One of the first routes to bring a higher standard of mixed climbing difficulty to the greater ranges was the Infinite Spur of Mt. Foraker (5304m) in the Alaska Range, established in 1977 by George Lowe and Michael Kennedy. In describing how they were motivated to attempt the route in pure alpine style in keeping with the new Alaskan idiom of “speed, commitment and technical competence,” Kennedy could have been writing today. They encountered much 60-degree ice and rock up to 5.9. The crux was three pitches of mixed climbing high on the route: “My mind was clear and surprisingly calm as I visualized the way ahead, keenly aware of the chalkboard-screach of crampons on rock, the rattling thud of an axe in too-thin ice, a sling on a frozen-in spike, the dull ring of a bad piton behind a loose block, calf muscles screaming for relief, choking spindrift in eyes, throat, down the neck” (Michael Kennedy, *American Alpine Journal*, 1978).

In the Himalaya, large and technical mixed faces were also beginning to be climbed in alpine style. To name but a few: the Hungo Face of Kwangde (6100m) in 1982 by David Breashears and Jeff Lowe; the south face of Annapurna (8091m) in 1984 by Nil Bohigas and Enric Lucas; the Golden Pillar of Spantik (7027m) in 1987 by Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders; and the list goes on. The ultimate achievement in completely committed alpine mixed climbing was Voytek Kurtyka and Robert Schauer’s 1985 first ascent of the west face of Gasherbrum IV (7925m). As described by Kurtyka, “the conditions on the face proved very difficult and dangerous.... Altogether, we climbed four pitches of [5.6]—two of them at 7100 and 7300 meters [...] without a single belay point. The real nuisance was the very deep snow on the mixed ground through which we tunneled vertically...” (Voytek Kurtyka, *American Alpine Journal*, 1986). The compact rock and light rack meant that retreat was not an option. Finding the difficulties of the lower face greater than anticipated, and trapped by a multi-day storm on the upper face, they ran out of food and fuel. Reaching the summit ridge on the seventh day, they spent another three descending an unclimbed ridge.

BOLTS AND FIGURE-FOURS: THE M-REVOLUTION

“It appeared to us that ice climbers had reached the limit of technical difficulty. After all, water can only drop so vertically, and ice can only be so rotten before it can no longer support the weight of the climber. So what was to be next?”
— Jeff Marshall, *The Polar Circus No. 2*, 1987.

“There are very, very few ice climbs in the world that are actually hard, but these mixed climbs, on the other hand, they were hard. You could pitch on them....”— Will Gadd, *Rock and Ice #89*, 1998.

Though mixed climbing had been going on in the mountains for decades, M-climbing, the new wave of technically extreme mixed climbing, grew chiefly out of waterfall ice climbing. Bored with the predictability of thick ice, climbers turned their attention to lines previously considered to be unformed. In 1991 in the Canadian Rockies Jeff Everett and Glenn Reisenhofer aided up a ropelength of rock to reach the hanging ice of Suffer Machine (200 m, WI5 A2); the following year in the Alps Jeff Lowe and Thierry Renault also used aid to connect the ice features on Blind Faith (400 m, WI6+ A2). Though initially such discontinuous ice smears were linked up with little regard for the style in which the rock was ascended, it nevertheless took a visionary attitude to even conceive of these mixed lines as potential routes. Lowe in particular was inspired by the possibilities and, with his 1994 ascent of Octopussy (20 m, M8) in Colorado's infamous Vail amphitheatre, the style in which a mixed climb was accomplished returned to the fore with a vengeance.

"Let's get real here. No one does a figure-four ice climbing." –Karl Nagy, Canadian Alpine Journal, 1997.

"The third time, however, was magic. This time I did a second figure 4 immediately following the first one, which allowed me to get a good stick higher up with my right tool." –Jeff Lowe, Ice World, 1996.

With its pre-placed protection, redpointing tactics, and exotic moves, Octopussy signaled a radical departure in mixed climbing. Technically, it was by far the hardest mixed climb yet made. The easy access, reliable protection, and lack of objective hazards freed climbers to pursue pure technical difficulty. This was of course similar to what happened in rock climbing some 10 years earlier, when the acceptance of bolt protection paved the way for sport climbing and, ultimately, higher technical standards. Vail continued to be a crucible for M-climbing with Will Gadd's 1997 first ascent of Amphibian (40 m, M9). Stevie Haston was at the cutting edge of M-climbing in the Alps, with routes like 009 (M8+) in 1997 and X-Files (M9+) in 1998. As the dry tooling craze took hold, mixed climbing began to look increasingly like rock climbing with axes and crampons. The athleticism of the new wave of M-climbing also attracted a new breed of participants, often superb rock climbers. With routes like Tomahawk (M11-) and Mission Impossible (M11) in the Alps, and Musashi (M12) in the Canadian Rockies, Robert Jasper, Mauro "Bubu" Bole, Ben Firth, and others are pushing dry tooling into a realm of previously unimagined technical difficulty. With the added catalyst of competition in the three-year-old Ice World Cup, the movement skills required for hard M-climbing have evolved far beyond the static positions of traditional mixed climbing: dynos, figure fours, heel hooks.... The equipment is evolving just as quickly: leashless tools, lightweight boots with integrated minimal crampons....

So what?

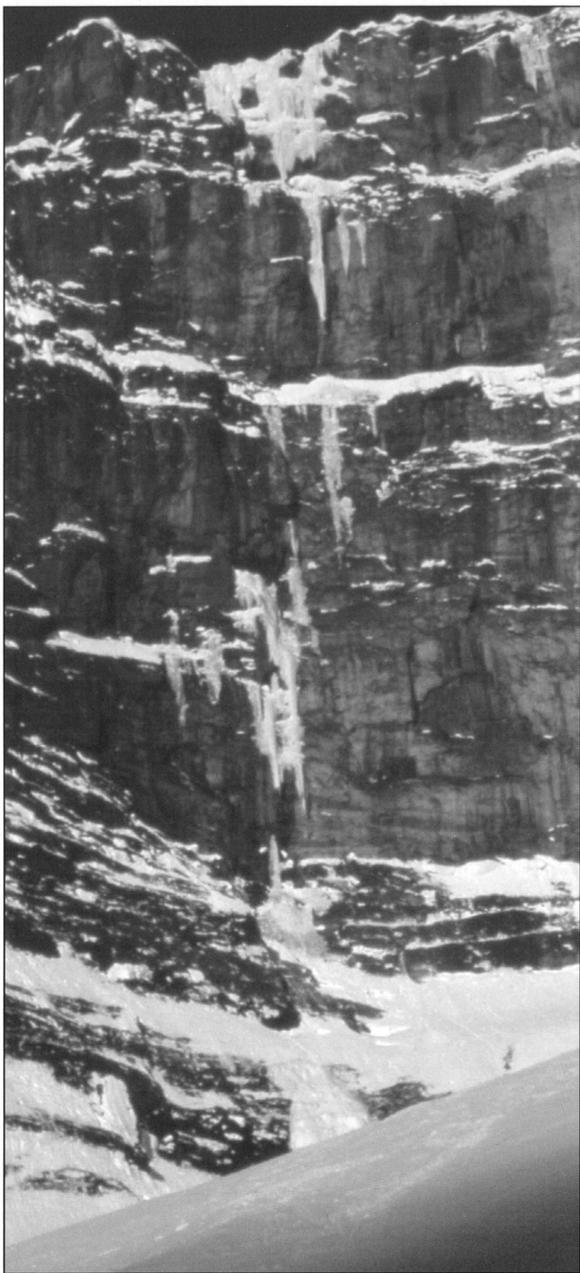
"The hype pretended that M7 or 8, or 12 for that matter, had never before been climbed until the current practitioners rap-bolted some overhanging choss heap, rehearsed it, climbed it, did photo shoots on it, and treated it as commerce." –Mark Twight, Climbing #178, 1998.

"009 had a crux dyno on it that [...] will, by its very nature, eliminate 98% of the old ice climbers." –Stevie Haston, High Mountain Sports #184, 1998.

Hard mixed climbing at the crags is nothing new. Scott Backes recently commented to me, "the

routes at the crags [are] why I am able to go into the mountains and do what it is I do. I've been climbing at two 27-meter quarries since the 80s. The quest for pure difficulty mostly on top-rope has led me to know as well as can be known the limits of adhesion and made the routes done high over gear thinkable...." What is new is the attention devoted to what before was considered mere practice. While some have deplored turning "ice climbing into sport climbing," it is worth recalling that the 5.12, 5.13, and 5.14 barriers were not broken by mountaineers rock climbing on rainy days for something to do. They were broken by climbers single-mindedly pursuing pure technical difficulty for its own sake. Similarly, M8, M9, M10, and beyond were climbed only when climbers divorced mixed climbing from alpinism and started mixed climbing for mixed climbing's sake. M-climbing has yet to approach the physical demands of the hardest rock climbs. But it has made a good start by jettisoning the traditionalist baggage of its mountaineering roots.

Nonetheless, one might question whether the pursuit of technical difficulty for its own sake is not missing the point. As Duncan Ferguson recently commented to me, "I strongly feel that the heart and soul of climbing, rock or ice or mixed, have to do with intimate adventure and challenges to the vision and spirit and are not necessarily fed by pure technical difficulty." More pragmatically, one might question whether extreme M-antics at the crag have any relevance for what goes on in the alpine realm. Certainly, after spending time at an M-crag witnessing the dynos,



The nine-pitch drips of Rocketman, 1999, an early application of new-wave mixed to a long route in an alpine setting. *Raphael Slawinski*



The seven-pitch *The Day After Les Vacances de Mr. Hulot*, on the Stanley Headwall, was the hardest traditional mixed route in the Rockies for years after its first ascent in 1994. It begins left of the lower dagger, traverses snow ledges, then finishes up the curtains.
Raphael Slawinski

the figure fours, the leashless tricks, it is hard to believe that any of it will ever be used in the mountains. But even if not all of these techniques find their way onto alpine routes (some of them already have), the main import of M-climbing might be in breaking down psychological barriers regarding what is and what is not climbable. To quote Ferguson again: “I see the move onto modern mixed climbs (bolt protected or not) as being a healthy part of the process of raising standards—of forcing new lines of *vision*. The M12 [at the crag] directly translates into an ‘impossible’ M10 pitch way off the deck...” Or, as Mark Twight recently commented to me, “those mixed climbers participating at the highest levels of the discipline are too consumed by its demands to apply their skills in different arenas.... That said, ‘new wave’ mixed climbing must influence alpinism. Just as high levels of rock climbing ability obtained by sport climbing ‘stars’ raised overall standards for everyone, high levels of mixed climbing ability will raise the general level of every climber simply by existing.”

This brings us to the thorny issue of bolts. Much of the recent push into extreme technical difficulty in mixed climbing seems

inconceivable without them. Yet they remain controversial, particularly in the mountains. In the words of a staunch traditionalist, “[bolts] do not require any weakness in the rock or any skill to place, and they destroy the traditional challenge of mountaineering” (Mick Fowler, *American Alpine Journal*, 2000). Whether one considers bolts to be justifiable, particularly in the mountains, hinges on what one believes constitutes a route. Mark Twight recently summarized the dilemma to me thus: “The person who chooses to bolt insists that because he can climb a particular passage, a route exists, regardless of the natural opportunities for protec-

tion.... The person who chooses not to bolt insists that a route does not exist simply because he can physically climb there, natural opportunities for protection must exist also if the climber has need of same." Part of the reason why bolts have become an issue in mixed climbing is that rising standards have expanded our notion of what is climbable. Where it used to be that climbable and protectable lines more or less coincided, the new dry tooling skills have expanded our notion of climbable terrain far beyond what may be naturally protected. Conversely, it is absurd to pretend that mixed climbing standards would have risen as high and as quickly as they have without wholesale acceptance of protection bolts. Having said that, it would seem a pity if the challenge of mixed climbing were reduced to merely executing a sequence of difficult moves. As demonstrated by routes such as Robert Jasper's 1998 Flying Circus (145 m, M10), which only used bolts at belays, truly hard mixed climbing and bolts are not always inseparable.

Another criticism often leveled at M-climbing is that, as Topher Donahue recently commented to me, "most modern 'mixed' climbs have maybe one true mixed move on them, the rest [...] being dry tooling or ice climbing." While this characterization of M-climbing is certainly accurate, I would argue that M-climbing has given us a new perspective from which to look at the mountains in winter. It is also a perspective that is more relevant for alpine climbing. Rock that because of adverse conditions cannot be "rock climbed" often presents the greatest difficulties on alpine routes. Dry tooling skill acquired on M-climbing testpieces adds an awesome weapon to the alpinist's arsenal. From the new perspective, ice climbing, "true" mixed climbing, and dry tooling are all just different aspects of winter free-climbing.

Of course, unlike in rock climbing, the notion of "free" in mixed climbing is controversial. Mixed climbing involves the use of tools: whether or not leashes are used, one still brandishes a skyhook in each hand. To turn our backs on dry tooling and use our hands no matter what the conditions in the name of free-climbing seems a backward step, as dry tooling is an extremely effective winter climbing technique. But the use of tools does make it difficult to be dogmatic about free-climbing. (On the other hand, hazy though the free versus aid distinction might be in theory, attempting a sustained overhanging mixed route quickly makes clear the difference between relying on one's axes, crampons, and skill alone, and making progress by resorting to aid climbing tactics where one can rest on the gear.) Ultimately, the stand one takes on such issues hinges on what is thought to be "good" style. In alpinism, a climb was traditionally considered to be in good style if it was executed with limited means and, generally, "... with little of the frigging around normally associated with a major [...] ascent." (Dave Cheesmond, *The Polar Circus* No. 1, 1986). However, remarkably little attention has been paid to free-climbing ethics: on large alpine routes such considerations have usually taken a back seat to simply getting up. But alpinists have traditionally placed limitations on themselves to prevent "the murder of the impossible." If by placing a bolt one does not face up to the full "challenge of mountaineering," so also by pulling on gear one evades that challenge. (Seen from this perspective bolts are not an absolute anathema but just one more crutch, such as aid climbing, that we occasionally lean on.) By borrowing from the strict free-climbing ethos of rock climbing, the new generation of M-climbers has the ability to redefine what constitutes good style in alpinism. And finally, whatever one's stance on the importance of free-climbing ethics in mixed climbing, free climbing is almost always faster. And speed in alpine climbing is both good style and good sense.

INTO THE FUTURE

"I wanted one-arm pull-ups, big swings, speed, and see-through frozen lingerie."—Stevie Haston, High Mountain Sports #184, 1998.

"... I found myself back on the south face dry tooling some M5/6 pitches in the death zone at about 7600 meters."—Tomaz Humar, American Alpine Journal, 2000

Andy Parkin and Mark Twight's 1992 first ascent of Beyond Good and Evil on the north face of the Aiguille des Pelerins was an important milestone in alpine mixed climbing. They took 26 hours to climb 14 pitches of thin vertical ice and rock up to French 5+ and A3. As Twight recently commented to me, "when we started working on it [...] there had not been many, if any, routes of that level of sustained difficulty combined with inobvious protection done in the Alps." The route's reputation kept it from being repeated until 1995, when taking advantage of good conditions Francois Damilano and Francois Marsigny made the second ascent. However, within the span of the few years since the route was first done, standards have risen to the point that the second ascent was quickly followed by further repeats, all parties completing the route in a day and dispensing with most of the aid. Even accounting for the fact that the original finish to the route is still rarely done, the quick transformation from feared testpiece to modern classic is remarkable nonetheless. Stevie Haston has also done much to bring hard mixed climbing to the mountains, with a strong emphasis on free climbing. His routes on the east face of Mont Blanc du Tacul, the 1994 Pinocchio (M6+) and the 1995 Scotch on the Rocks (M7), were both groundbreaking achievements. While they are not routes of the stature of No Siesta or even Beyond Good and Evil, they are nevertheless sustained multipitch offerings (around 350 meters in length) in an alpine setting, and they were established without bolts (in the case of Scotch, without pitons). In 1997, Robert Jasper added Vol de Nuit (M7+) to the right of Scotch, again climbing the route all free and without bolts. Each of these routes, when it was first done, represented a significant step forward in traditional (if not exactly alpine) mixed climbing. Yet within the span of a few seasons they had become trade routes, sometimes seeing multiple ascents within a single day—yet another stark proof of the rapidly rising skill levels. It is then perhaps surprising that a route like Vol de Nuit remains one of the hardest (quasi-)alpine mixed routes in the Alps. This is but one example of the striking disparity between technical standards at the crags and in the mountains.

In the Canadian Rockies, rising standards fostered on M-climbing testpieces are also having an impact on alpine mixed climbing. For instance when in 1996 Alex Lowe freed Troubled Dreams (150 m, M7) on the Terminator Wall, it was hailed as a major accomplishment. Lowe admitted to being "really pushed" on the crux, and the route went unrepeated. In 2000 Rob Owens, employing many of the new M-climbing techniques including figure fouring on lead above natural gear, added a direct start to Troubled Dreams called Stuck in the Middle. This more sustained variation quickly received several repeats but, tellingly, went nearly unreported. For the new wave of M-climbers, skilled in dry tooling, it was just another day out climbing. Dry tooling where a few years earlier climbers would have tried rock climbing and, failing that, resorted to aid, has also helped turn some alpine testpieces, like the Andromeda Strain, into trade routes. To some extent, a new generation of mixed climbs in the Canadian

Rockies is blurring the distinction between M- and alpine climbing. In the past few years a number of long, quasi-alpine mixed routes have gone up, many of them the work of Dave Thomson. The combination of technical skill and bolt protection has redefined the vision of what constitutes a climbable line. One of the best of the new routes, Rocketman (350 m, M7+), situated in a high glacial cirque, has bolts protecting the technical cruxes yet the easier climbing is quite engaging. When I free-climbed the route in a long day, the effort and focus required were no less than on many alpine routes, and the technical difficulty significantly greater. In a more traditional vein Steve House, with his new routes like the 1999 M-16 (VI, WI7+ A2) on the east face of Howse Peak, and the 2001 Sans Blitz (V, WI7 5.5) on the east face of Mount Fay, has done much to bring higher standards to truly alpine routes.

Climbers are also taking the technical skills acquired at the crags to the greater ranges. In 1996 Jack Roberts and Jack Tackle established Pair of Jacks (M6 WI5) on the north face of Mt. Kennedy (4238 m) in the St. Elias Range with the explicit goal "... of establishing a difficult new standard of [mixed] climbing via a new route on a beautiful mountain" (Jack Roberts, *Canadian Alpine Journal*, 1997). Climbing in a hybrid of alpine and capsule styles they covered 36 pitches of hard mixed ground. Yet Roberts admits to misgivings about their tactics. He recently commented to me, "hauling of packs in a major way, and bivouacking in portaledges, this does not constitute alpine climbing." Although an ascent dispensing with these would certainly have been in better style, the tactics used on Pair of Jacks probably represent a necessary step in the evolution of alpine mixed climbing. At some point, perhaps soon, climbers will be strong and fast enough to climb such routes in lightweight style. But when Pair of Jacks was



Raphael Slawinski on the first ascent of Mt. Rundle's Animal Farm (M10+), in 2000. At the time it was the hardest mixed pitch in North America, fully embracing sport climbing means to mixed climbing ends. *Darcy Chilton*

first done, a heavier approach was likely instrumental in Roberts and Tackle getting up the route, and doing it almost entirely free. Significantly, a very strong team later attempted to repeat their route in a single push and failed.

Single push style was successfully applied by Scott Backes, Steve House, and Mark Twight on their 2000 ascent of the huge and technical Slovak Direct route (5.9 M6 WI6+) on the south face of Denali (6194 m). Inspired by Voytek Kurtyka's concept of "night naked" climbing, they carried no bivi gear and blitzed the route in 60 hours of virtually non-stop climbing; the previous alpine-style ascent took a week. The following year Stephen Koch and Marko Prezelj upped the ante by climbing a new route on the southwest face of Denali in this style. They warmed up with the first free ascent of the Moonflower Buttress (M7?), accomplished in a 36-hour round trip from base camp. Moving on to Denali, they established Light Traveler (M8?) in 51 hours round trip from a high base camp, with Prezelj free-climbing the crux pitch on sight.

Modern mixed climbing standards are also making their way into the Himalaya. Many noteworthy climbs have been made; the few selected below merely illustrate the state of the art. In 1996 a strong French team, climbing in alpine style, climbed Extra Blue Sky on the north face of Kwangde beside the then unrepeated 1982 Breashears-Lowe route. The new route was described as steeper and harder than the north face of Les Droites. In 1997 Andrew Lindblade and Athol Whimp completed the much-attempted direct line on the north face of Thalay Sagar (6905m). Their route, which involved thin ice up to WI5 and cold rock climbing up to 5.9, was also climbed in alpine style. The big news in 1999 was Tomaz Humar's bold solo of a new route on south face of Dhaulagiri (8167m) with mixed difficulties up to M7+.

A direct comparison of the difficulties of crag and Himalayan mixed routes is of course highly problematical. A more meaningful assessment of the evolution of standards in Himalayan mixed climbing is provided by the recent repeats of some of the testpieces of the 1980s, and it would appear that even the repeat ascents have done little to lessen their reputations. Thus in 2000 a strong international foursome made the second ascent of the 1987 Fowler-Saunders route on Spantik. Describing the difficult and poorly protected mixed climbing they encountered, one of the members of the team wrote: "The moves, which years ago I would have dared to execute only if protected at least at waist level, were dainty in spite of the rare air and protection" (Marko Prezelj, *American Alpine Journal*, 2001). In 2001 the 1982 Breashears-Lowe route on Kwangde finally received a second ascent. The second ascent party took six days for the round trip, the same as the first, and avoided the thin ice crux of the original route. While today there is undoubtedly a broader base of alpinists climbing at a high standard, the Himalayan testpieces of the 1980s were so far ahead of their time that arguably they have yet to be surpassed.

In spite of the great advances in mixed climbing made over the last quarter of a century, one is struck by how slowly the technical standards in the mountains advance relative to standards at the crags. Whereas in the 1970s mixed-climbing standards did not appreciably differ between crag and mountain routes, today the gap between them has grown to such an extent that they almost appear to be different disciplines. While on the one hand this points to the immense possibilities for applying M-climbing techniques to the mountains, it also underscores the degree to which the high standards of M-climbing rely on a controlled crag environment. While the gap between the two is likely to grow, perhaps the rising standards at the crags will contribute to a corresponding rise in the alpine realm.

Ultimately, the ideal in alpine climbing has always been one of doing more with less. Aiding, bolting, fixing, jumaring, and hauling are often necessary taints, but taints nonetheless. Just as the development of ice climbing gave climbers the skills to create new alpine testpieces and turn old ones into trade routes, so the greatest contribution of M-climbing may be to give climbers the physical and technical means to reduce a major ascent to simply climbing. In fact, I believe that this process is already well under way.

While I have tried to plug the many gaps in my knowledge of mixed climbing throughout the world by extensive reading, in the end there is no substitute for first-hand experience. Thus I want to thank Scott Backes, Topher Donahue, Ben Firth, Will Gadd, and Jared Ogden for sharing their insights into mixed climbing. I particularly want to thank Aljaz Anderle, Duncan Ferguson, Jack Roberts, and Mark Twight for taking the time to answer my questions; Tom McMillan for suggesting the title; and Scott Semple for many thought-provoking exchanges and for suggesting the opening quote.



Mt. Rundle's Terminator Wall, home of (left to right), The Terminator, The Replicant, and Sea of Vapours. Pat Morrow