

# Climbing Cracks

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Photographs by TOM FROST and TOM ROSENZWEIG

*"... no one needs to be taught to climb; one merely needs reminding of something one knew even before going to school."*

—Tom Patey, "Apes or Ballerinas," *Mountain*, May 1969

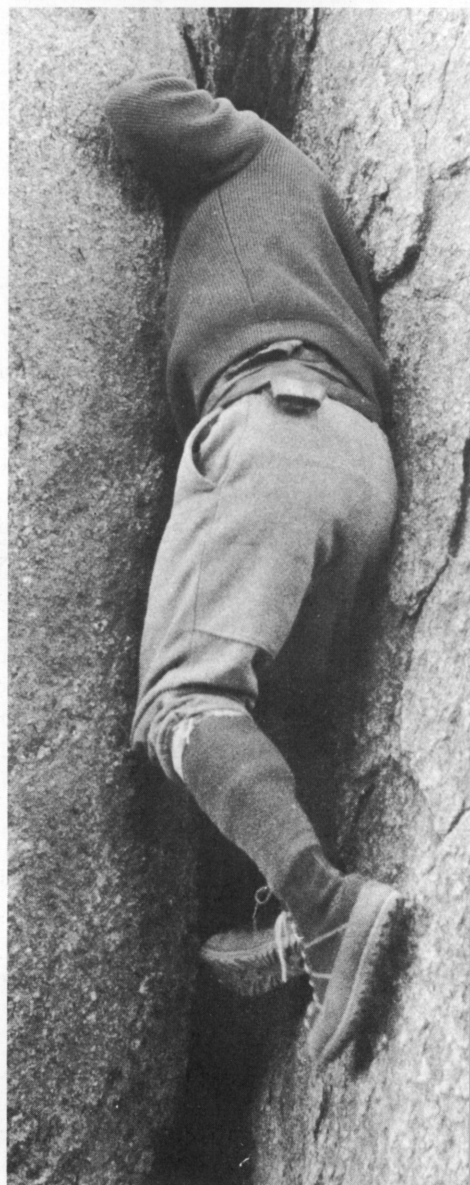
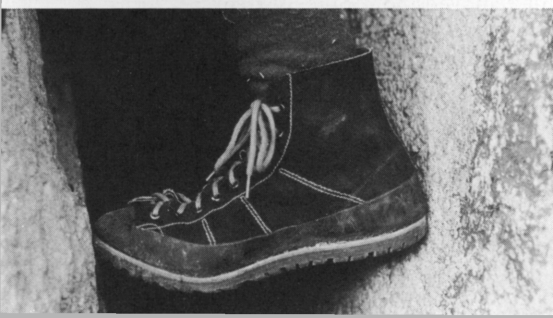
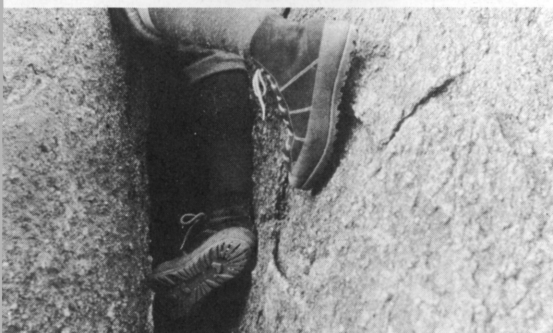
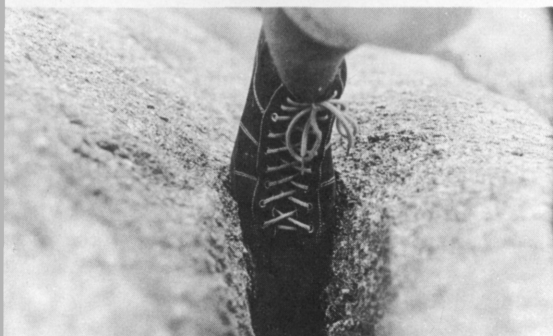
WHILE the theory of crack climbing is simple, the practice can be quite difficult — particularly in Yosemite. You cannot verbally impress upon the average climber the severity, the complexity and the purity of the new — yet already classic — Yosemite cracks. Words won't do it. You just have to attempt one of these climbs to learn the meaning of names like the Crack of Doom, the Crack of Despair, and the Final Exam.

The difficulty of the climbs now being done has no parallel. Although the technique has not changed in twenty years, the difficulty has. The higher standards can be attributed to better protection and the superior fitness of the climbers.

From 1964 to 1966 was the Golden Age of Crack Climbing in America. Chuck Pratt and Frank Sacherer, along with a few others, pushed the standards of Yosemite cracks up to where they compared with the Saxon Schweiz and the English Gritstone climbs. For a time, this group was specializing in jam-cracks and chimneys, and keeping in superb mental and physical condition by climbing nearly every day of the season. Bong Bongs and the new British jam nuts afforded more protection and a wider margin of safety that allowed them to go all out. The use of the nuts is especially significant. They can often be placed and removed more quickly than a piton while hanging in a tight situation.

Frank Sacherer had a unique technique that virtually eliminated even the tight situations. He always climbed on the verge of falling over backwards — using no more energy than was necessary to progress and

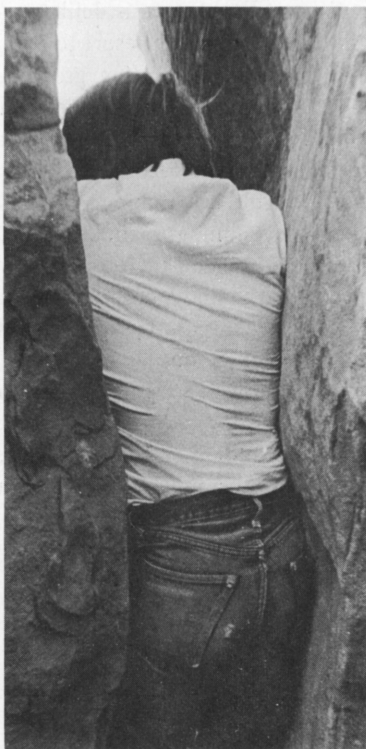
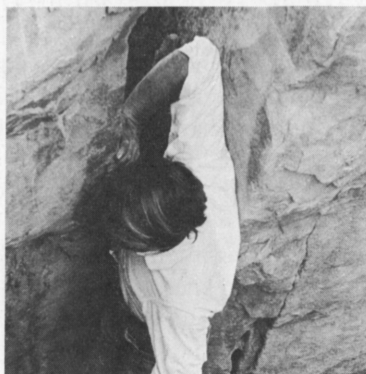
*Bent ankle inside the crack and a knee/sole on the outside.*



- ◀ Top to Bottom 1. Utilizing friction from the toe rubber to stick in a right angle corner. A good case for using shoes with rubber around the sides. 2. *Toe jam.* Painful on the ankles. 3. *Foot jam.* Place with an eye toward removal. 4. *Bent ankle.* Often used in combination with the forearm wedge on the Yosemite horror chimneys. 5. *Toe and heel.* Again the rubber around the sides of the shoe helps give more friction.



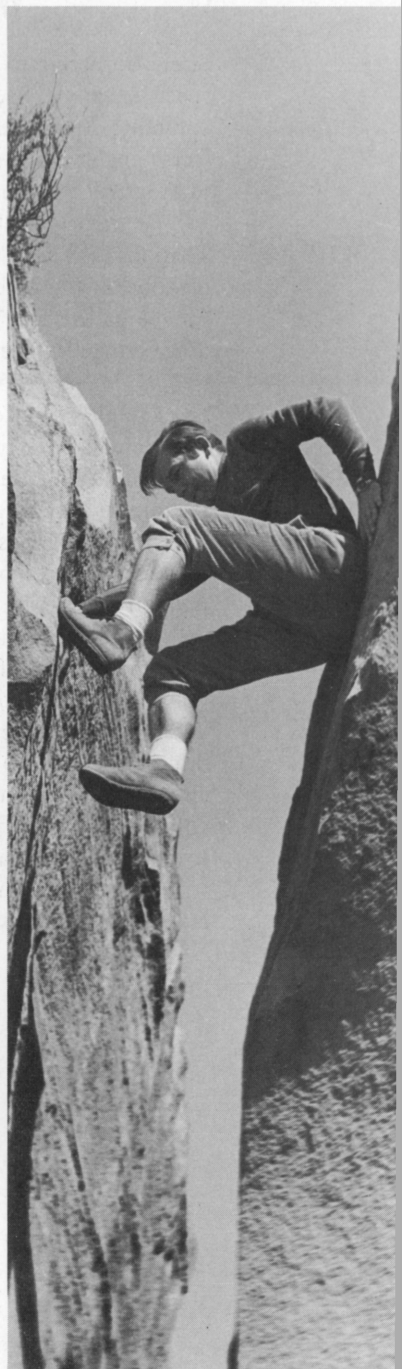
The *forearm wedge*. The more downward force, the more wedging there is. This is one of the most important yet least known jamming techniques.



*Body jam*



◀ *Knee and sole*



*Toe and back. Note the pushing with the hands.*

*Toe and toe. The largest expansion of your body.*

rarely bothering to stop and place protection. On dangerous alpine walls, speed is safety. Sacherer applied this maxim to his philosophy of crack climbing. Apparently his belayers have been so completely gripped they were unable to use a camera. I have not been able to find a single photograph of Sacherer on a lead!

*The theory:* Make a member of your body small. Place it in a crack. Then make it large, thereby lodging it. (While hands and feet are the more obvious, arms and elbows, legs and knees — any part or all of your body — can be as useful.) Your body moves upward and another part jams itself long enough for the first member to move higher.

*The practice:* To watch Chuck Pratt climb a difficult crack is to observe an example of perfect control. When he places a hand or foot, he uses it; there are no trial placements. Each move is deliberate and useful. In the same situation, a less skillful climber will resort to any number of dubious techniques such as: flailing, squirming, panting, groping, and thrutching.

You should push — not pull — your way up a mountain. Pulling is unquestionably more fatiguing. The most tiring handhold is a straight pull-up on a classic big jug while your feet are dangling. You should try to use your legs as much as possible in climbing. They are far stronger than your arms. We prefer to use stemming, mantle-shelves, and cross-pressure holds. They are *pushing* techniques and therefore less tiring.

You place a member of your body into a crack just as you would a piton: place it into a locally wider section of crack so that it gets stuck, or else expand the member so that it pushes against the sides of the crack with enough force to resist a downward pull . . . and place it with an eye toward easy removal.

Various techniques for expanding or enlarging parts of your body for crack climbing are shown in the accompanying photographs.