# A Day at the Races—Snowbird

MICHAEL KENNEDY

"YOU AMERICANS are selling out too easily," an English friend told me on the eve of the finals at the International Sport Climbing Championship, held last June at Snowbird, Utah. He elaborated in earnest on how competitions, with their big media hype and big purses, would inevitably destroy the spirit of climbing.

My English friend was not the only skeptic in Snowbird that weekend. I was a bit doubtful myself; to be honest, I'd rather have taken the time off to go climbing. A broad range of people did show up, curious about how the first European-style climbing competition to be held in the United States would turn out. Climbing industry leaders and outdoor journalists, trendsetters and hangers-on, American Alpine Club representatives and weekend climbers—we all wondered what we were in for.

Attitudes changed rapidly as the weekend progressed. It soon became obvious that these climbers weren't just good—they were really good. The artificial wall on which the competition took place looked very difficult, and it was both exciting and inspirational to see such superb athletes perform at close range.

There were problems as well: disagreements about the rules and their interpretation, technical difficulties with the wall, and a few petulant tantrums when competitors didn't climb as well as they wanted to. But while both organizers and competitors took a serious approach to the game—after all, prize money, sponsorships and reputations were at stake—the weekend felt more like a community celebration than a no-holds-barred contest.

Wednesday and Thursday had been devoted to open qualification rounds, which allowed climbers not on the invitation list a chance to vie for six spots in Saturday's semi-finals. (The event's organizers had invited the majority of the competitors based on previous contest results.) Canadian Dave Lanman and veteran American climbers Merrill Bitter, Pat Adams and Dan Michael qualified for the men's semi-final, and Lieija Painkiner and Melissa Quigley for the women's.

Meanwhile, the international superstars had trickled in, even as contest organizers finalized the wall for the weekend's event. After a late start on

Saturday morning, the first of thirty-nine climbers was led to the wall, cheered on by a modest but enthusiastic crowd; nine hours later, ten men and six women advanced to Sunday's final. Along the way were some brilliant performances.

The French men all seemed to do well, perhaps not surprisingly considering their success on the international circuit, but Americans Christian Griffith, Jason Stern, Scott Franklin and Ron Kauk gave them a run for their money. Among the American women, Lynn Hill was predictably strong, as were Catherine Destivelle and Isabelle Pâtissier of France; American Mari Gingery's effort was as good as any, although having touched out-of-bounds well before falling, her results didn't reflect the high point she actually reached.

Sunday morning dawned cool and cloudy, forcing the first few competitors to warm their hands frequently while climbing. I shared a photographer's balcony that day with Henry Barber, one of the most influential rock climbers of the 1970s. We discussed our changing perceptions, how our guarded skepticism had given way to qualified approval, and eventually to unbridled enthusiasm. We even began to speculate about the potential competition in a Masters' division! For two of the old guard, it seemed particularly interesting that the standard of excellence in competition is a traditional one: the on-sight lead.

We saw some superb climbing as competitor after competitor cranked by just a few feet away. But even the best efforts were stymied by a hard section below the roof at two-thirds height. Tension mounted as the afternoon wore on; had the organizers made the wall too difficult? The women, in particular, had a rough time on the route's long, technical reaches, and none of the men even came close to getting to the roof. Eventually, only two contestants had yet to climb, but what a pair: Patrick Edlinger and Catherine Destivelle, both from France and both well-known for their competitive prowess.

As Edlinger prepared for his climb, Henry recounted a conversation with the French superstar the previous evening. Steeped in European climbing tradition, Edlinger first visited the United States in 1977 as an impressionable 17-year-old. During that trip, he had seen a film in which Barber soloed a number of difficult English sea-cliff routes, and here at Snowbird he told Henry how much it had impressed him. Indeed, Edlinger said that Barber's films, and watching Ron Kauk boulder in Yosemite that same year, had inspired his climbing from that day on.

Soon, Edlinger stepped up to the wall. His performance was nothing short of astounding as he danced past all the previous competitors' high-points, climbing like a super-flexible spider. Pulling over the lip of the roof as the sun broke through the overcast, he was lost from our sight on the slab above. The rope inched upwards with agonizing slowness as we gauged his progress by the reaction of the crowd below.

Suddenly, pandemonium broke loose; he had completed the route and clipped the top anchors. As he was lowered down, Edlinger glanced over at our balcony. Seeing Henry there, he flashed him a thumbs-up and shouted an

PLATE 48

*Photo by Michael Kennedy*

**Scott Franklin in the SNOWBIRD, Utah Competition.**

exuberant, "For you!" It was a moving gesture of respect from one generation of climbers to another, and for me, at least, it helped bring the whole weekend into focus.

Destivelle's performance, tenacious as it was, could only be anticlimactic after Edlinger's, but it did give her first place among the women, followed by Lynn Hill, Mari Gingery, Isabelle Pâtissier, Corinne LaBrune (France) and Jennifer Cole (USA). The French — Edlinger, Jean-Baptiste Tribout and Marc LeMenestrel—swept the first three places for the men. Martin Atkinson of Great Britain was fourth, followed by the American trio of Jason Stern, Christian Griffith and Scott Franklin; Alex Duboc (France), Geoff Wiegand (Australia) and Ron Kauk (USA) placed eighth, ninth and tenth. Aside from the awards ceremony that evening, the first large-scale sport climbing competition in the United States was over.

* * *

In Europe, climbing competitions have become pretty big business; events there routinely attract large audiences and offer significant cash and merchandise prizes to winners. Big media—television, newspapers and magazines—cover them in depth. And good results in the competitions very often lead to lucrative sponsorship opportunities for individual climbers.

However, I don't think that the European model will work very well on this side of the Atlantic, largely for social reasons. Climbing is a mass-participation activity in Europe, and has been for many years. Mountain sports such as climbing, hiking and skiing are often an integral part of a child's program at school, for instance. And virtually every city-dweller in Europe is only a few hours from the mountains.

One result is that the European public views climbers as sports heroes. Thus, sponsorship of climbers by the climbing industry and sponsorship of climbing competitions by big business and the media make good economic sense there. In addition, the social-welfare systems in many European countries allow people to live fairly comfortably without working, a situation which climbers are wont to take advantage of.

In contrast, climbing in this country, while growing rapidly, is still a small and esoteric activity. Most Americans live far from the mountains, and the level of public interest in mountain sports is relatively low. A good example can be seen in ski racing. A recent World Cup downhill held at Aspen, Colorado, drew 1500 spectators at best; a similar event in Europe would see 15,000 or more people lining the slopes. To expect better for climbing competitions in America is dreaming.

In a larger social sense, Americans view climbers as people engaged in an interesting and somewhat off-the-wall diversion—not as sports heroes or role models for their children. Climbing is simply not a mainstream sport here, and it seems unlikely that this will change much in the near future. Largely because of this, sponsorship of climbers and climbing competitions doesn't make a lot of business sense for the companies involved. And our social-welfare system is not nearly munificent enough to support climbers in a realistic way.

All this could be seen in microcosm at Snowbird. The audience there was relatively small and consisted mostly of climbers and people with some connection to the climbing industry. Sponsorship for most of the American competitors meant free equipment and, perhaps, travel and lodging expenses; many, however, came on their own nickel. And while the event was well-covered in local media and in magazines like *Backpacker, Climbing, Rock and Ice* and *Outside,* as of March 1989 there was no firm air date for the film CBS made of the competition.

Snowbird offered a great opportunity to socialize and to see some of the best rock climbers in the world perform in a unique setting. Many, including me, found the competition very inspiring. However, a small number of informed spectators (i.e. climbers) is not enough to keep events like this alive. Realistically, I don't believe that we can generate enough public interest to support large-scale competitions no matter what we do.

Regional competitions will continue to thrive, largely because they are fun, community-oriented events, much like citizens' races in cross-country skiing. Eventually, these smaller ones may help create a large enough audience to support European-style competitions. But if ski racing in America is any indicator, I don't think we'll ever see competition climbing reach the same level of popularity here as in Europe.

No one is really sure what effect climbing competitions will ultimately have. Many feel that they will only encourage more greed, selfishness and commercialism in climbing, destroying the sport as we know it today; others see competitions as the wave of the future, injecting new energy into a stagnant scene. But if, like Patrick Edlinger in Snowbird, we can preserve a sense of our sport's history and continuity, I don't think we've got a lot to worry about.

Most American climbers, I suspect, don't care one way or the other about competitions—they'd rather be out climbing. And I can't help but wonder if this year I wouldn't rather spend a long August weekend in the Tetons or the South Platte, rather than dangling from a rope, camera in hand, watching other people climb.

Our readers may wish to get regularly **MOUNTAIN,** the foremost bimonthly mountaineering magazine published in England on climbing in all parts of the world, including the USA. There are six issues each year and a subscription costs $19.50. To subscribe, send to **MOUNTAIN MAGAZINE LTD.,** PO Box 184, Sheffield S11 9DL, England.