

Competition Climbing in the C.I.S.

The only plastic is in the boots

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There are rumors among older mountaineers that competitive mountaineering in Russia will soon die. At first glance this seems to be true. There are no mountaineering competitions in the West, Russian mountain competitions were financed by the State, and the State budget does not spoil sportsmen any more. However, compared to the old times when it was difficult to gather the required 32 teams, nowadays the number of teams participating in the championship exceeds 50. What is even more paradoxical is that today's sportsmen must pay their traveling expenses out of their own pockets and these expenses have grown extremely high. Moreover, the application fee to participate in the championship (about \$60—a big deal in Russia) must be paid as well.

Rock climbing competitions began in the West in 1988. In part, their origins were in Russia, where rock climbing competitions had taken place for more than 30 years. In our mountain competitions, as in any sport, a team's accomplishments are judged according to certain criteria. The major difference between mountaineering and other sports is that, in the former, the referees are usually far removed from the competitors. However, it does not prevent the referees from evaluating the technical difficulty of the route and the team's actions.

When competitions began in the U.S.S.R. in 1948, it gave mountaineering the status of a sport. Accordingly, it was given financial support from the State. For instance, Trade Unions distributed about 13,000 vouchers for accommodation in mountaineering camps. A participant paid only 30 percent of the cost; the rest was paid by the Trade Unions, which made trips to mountains highly affordable. Trade Unions also maintained mountaineering camps and Mountain Rescue Stations. As in any other Soviet sport, a system of grading the sport developed in such a way that one could gradually gain experience through increasingly difficult climbing. This process allowed a great number of beginners to go to the mountains, complete a training course on ice, snow, and rock, and ascend a 1B route. This accomplishment was recognized with a "Mountaineer of the U.S.S.R." badge. One could then progress through the III Grade (with three ascents of the "2" grade), the II Grade (five ascents of "3" grade), and the I Grade (five ascents of 4B and 5A grades) to the Master of the Sport candidate (three ascents of 5B grade). These candidates could participate in the provincial and U.S.S.R. championships. The first three places taken in the competitions allowed candidates to earn points needed to achieve the rank of Master of Sport or Honorary Master of Sport.

Initially, the championships were conducted in three classes: technical, high altitude and traverse. In the application for a competition, participants had to state the mountain, objective of the ascent, and the route. They had to name the participants and the coach. Six participants were required for technical climbing and eight for the high altitude and traverse ascents. Upon accomplishment of the climb, participants filed a report, usually by September 30. In the report they had to describe the route's difficulties and illustrate them with photographs and diagrams. Also, the route had to be described in detail, including details on the safety of the climbing. These reports were archived over time in a central library in Moscow. The reports could then be used for research by future climbers.

Referees for the competitions were chosen from among past mountaineers on the basis of their



Ala Archa National Park, in the Kyrgysky Alatau Mountains of the Western Tien Shan, Kyrgyzstan. Climbing competitions are held here in both summer and winter seasons. Peak Korona is the high point on the left skyline; Free Korea Peak is the prominent massif up-glacier. Nikolai Chtchetchnikov

experience in the specific class of ascent. These referees evaluated ascents, giving preference to first ascents and those of greater difficulty. Beginning in 1970, the Mountaineering Federation started sending referees directly to the location of the climbs. There, they could watch the ascents, and their opinions later on were decisive in the selection of the winners.

In judging an ascent, the referees first took into account the route's difficulty (5B, 6A or 6B), the vertical relief from top to bottom of the route, the elevation of the crux pitches, the average steepness of the route, and the amount of protection (such as pitons, ice screws, etc.) used. Finally, weather conditions were taken into account. Since 1983, lasers have been used to determine with higher precision the steepness and length of the routes.

In later years, the number of classes was increased to include winter rock class for summits up to 4250 meters; technical class for summits from 4250 to 5250 meters; high-altitude technical class for summits from 5250 to 6700 meters; high altitude class, for climbing higher than 6700 meters; traverses, ice/snow class and first ascents. Only four competitions out of these new classes could be held in any given year.

Since 1982, so-called "schools" or pre-competitions in ice and snow class were created. In brief, teams had to first complete a chosen ice route (usually about 300 meters long) in front of referees and spectators. The teams received points for safety or tactics violations. Finally, out of 15 or 16 teams, the best seven or eight were chosen. They then completed the next part of the competitions by climbing mountains in the surrounding area. Usually they were given ten days

The Kara-Su Valley in the Karavshin Region of the Pamir Ala, Kyrgyzstan. The 4,000-foot west face of Peak 4810 predominates, with Asan visible below, and Pirimidalni (5509 m) partially obscured by clouds to the right. Sergei Kovalov

and the referees watched the climbs directly. A team could get a maximum of two points for the "school" and eight points for the subsequent climbs. The places were awarded quickly because there were no reports; the referees made their decisions on the spot.

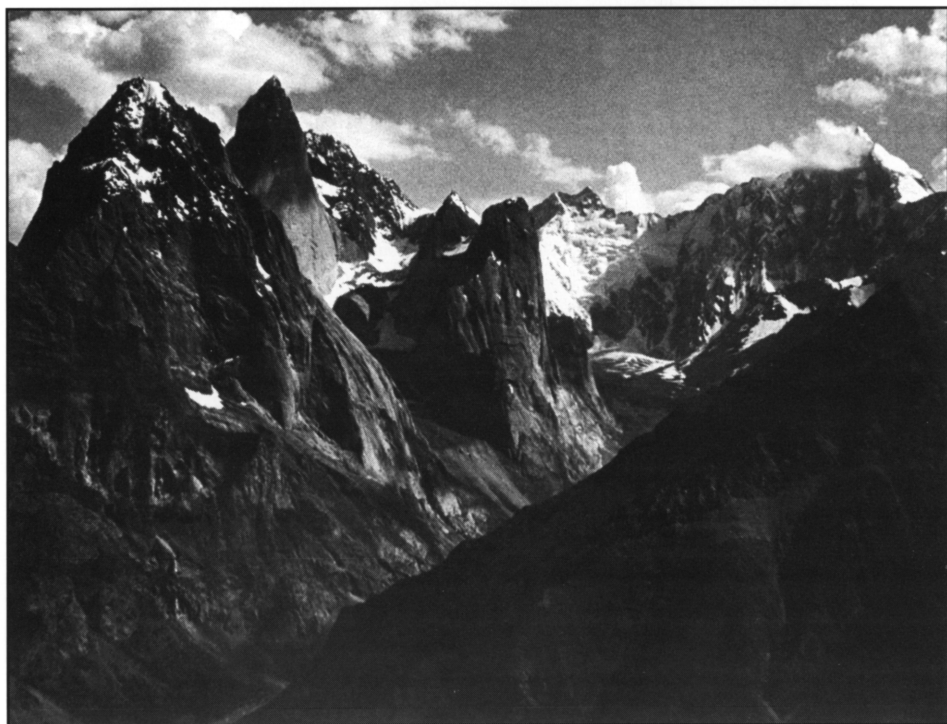
Many sportsmen and coaches recognized this new competition as a breakthrough that allowed them to further refine their climbing techniques and to try new equipment and new tactics of ascents. The visual competitions also allowed regular spectators to watch the climbs, as was the case on the Kashka-Tash Glacier in the Caucasus, where people from several valleys gathered to watch the climbs.

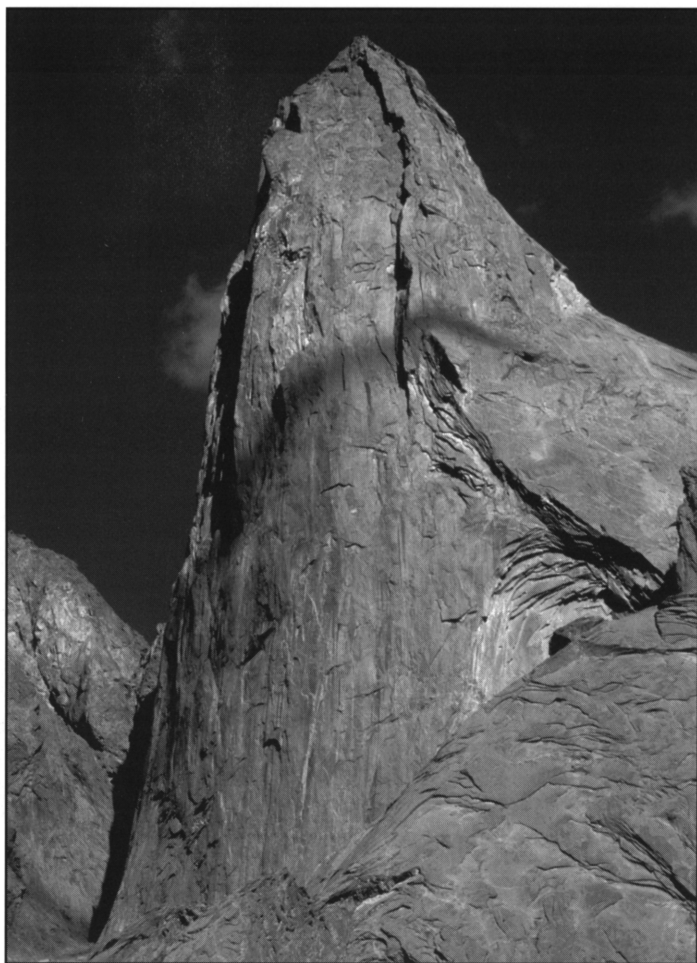
Still later, "schools" were started in the rock and technical classes. Every year, a different region was chosen for the "school." In 1985, a technical class was conducted in the Kirgiz Ala-Tau of Ala Archa National Park in the Tien Shan Range; in 1986, in the area of Mount Ushba, in the Caucasus; and in 1987, in the Fansky Mountains of the Pamir-Alai.

In 1994, open competitions took place in the Karavshin Valley of the Pamir-Alai, a unique region of granite peaks, such as Peak 4810, Asan, Slesova and others. The difficulty of the routes and their steepness were comparable to and greater than those on El Captain and the Petit Dru. The area has attracted mountaineers since 1982, when it was "discovered" for climbing.

In this climbing paradise, the best teams from Russia gathered in late July. Twenty-two routes were chosen on four peaks. Every route was given a score according to its difficulty, from one-and-a-half to nine points. Accordingly, the easiest route could be accomplished in one to two days, and the hardest in seven to eight days. The winning team could collect a maximum score in 15 days. A team could divide and climb different routes to gain the maximum score.

There were also different forms of competitions. For instance, in 1988, in the Jeti-Ogus Valley





The 2,000-foot northwest face of Slesova in the "climbing paradise" of the (Karavshin) Ak-Su Valley.
Braden Van Matre

in the Tien Shan, teams had to climb two ice routes on two different peaks in the area in such a way that the second team repeated the route first climbed by the other team two or three days before. This allowed the referees to compare physical strengths and tactics of the different teams.

In 1990, to initiate winter climbs, a winter class was invented. The objective of the climb was not restricted. However, the ascent had to be completed between January 1 and February 20. The team could contain no more than six people and the climb could not last longer than 10 days. In 1997 there were 20 teams that started the competition. Only seven completed their climbs, mainly because of the bad weather in Caucasus Mountains.

Recently, the Russian Federation passed a resolution that any climb in any area of the world could participate in the competition. However, there is not yet enough support to send referees overseas.

The competitions in Russia are open. We invite our foreign colleagues to participate. Get in touch with the Russian Mountaineering Federation and we will send you the information.