

GOING MANLESS

Looking back, forward, and inward 75 years after Miriam O'Brien Underhill's milestone all-female ascent of the Grépon in the French Alps.

MOLLY LOOMIS

*"The Grépon has disappeared. Now that it has been done by two women alone, no self-respecting man can undertake it. A pity, too, because it used to be a very good climb."*¹ Those were the words of French alpinist Etienne Bruhl in 1929 on the return of Miriam O'Brien Underhill and Alice Damesme from their successful manless ascent of the classic Alps test piece of the era, The Grépon. Women climbing "alone"—without the presence of a man—was in those days a scandalous act.

The year 2004 marked the 75th anniversary of American Underhill and Frenchwoman Damesme's ascent, a hallmark in the history of women's climbing. Although one other recorded "en cordée féminine" climb had taken place (Elizabeth Le Blond and Lady Evelyn McDonnell's winter traverse of Piz Palü on the Swiss-Italian border in 1900), in the late 1920s the Grépon was considered one of the Alps's toughest climbs; the daring and gall required for two women to climb a route as technical as the Grépon shocked the climbing community.

Despite prejudices and obstacles created by societal norms, women have followed Underhill's lead and succeeded in style on the world's most difficult routes: Alison Hargreaves blitzing the classic north faces of the Alps, Lynn Hill freeing The Nose in a day, and Ines Papert winning Overall First at the Ouray Ice Festival. And many of today's top female alpinists, like Abby Watkins, Karen McNeill, Heidi Wirtz, and Sue Nott, often choose to climb in all-women's teams, continuing Underhill's manless tradition. But, despite a long list of impressive ascents helping to dispel doubts about women's capabilities in the mountains, and the near-century that has passed since Underhill and Damesme's groundbreaking ascent, women remain a minority in the world's high places.

Why?

Even before Underhill, Lucy Walker, Anna and Ellen Pigeon, Katy Richardson, and Lily Bristow scaled peaks throughout the Alps (accompanied by guides or experienced men). Even now, 75 years after Underhill's ascent of the Grépon, when I'm with my girlfriends at a popular crag or high in the mountains, we still encounter comments ranging from complimentary and kind to condescending and rude, their message being that we are women and we are climbing, a combination unusual enough to warrant commentary.

Driven by an interest in climbing history, a curiosity to hear the perspectives and insight of my foremothers, and a belief that female voices aren't heard enough, I set out in search of their stories. With bivouac conversations and e-mail discussions with nearly two dozen leading climbers in today's small sorority of alpinists, I've tried to explore what keeps our numbers down and what the future holds for women in high places.

REASONS FOR CLIMBING EN CORDÉE FÉMININE:

Credit Where Credit is Due

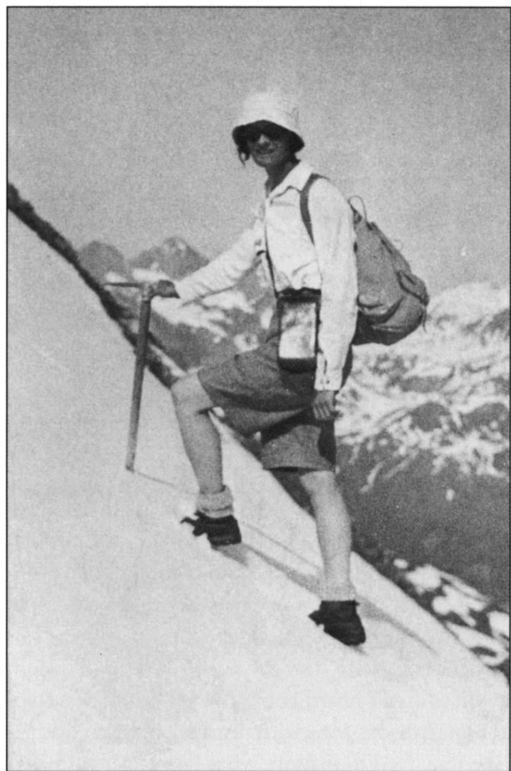
Noted in 1957 as “undoubtedly the greatest lady climber that America has produced,”² Underhill writes in her 1956 autobiography *Give Me the Hills* that she was drawn to the idea of manless ascents as a means of proving to herself and others the depth of her climbing skill: “Very early I realized that the person who invariably climbs behind a good leader... may never really learn mountaineering at all and in any case enjoys only part of the varied delights and rewards of climbing.... He is, after all, only following.... If he is also the leader, the one who carries the supreme responsibility for the expedition, he tastes the supreme joys.... I saw no reason why women, *ipso facto*, should be incapable of leading a good climb.... But I did realize that if women were really to lead, that is, to take the entire responsibility for the climb, there couldn't be any man at all in the party. For back in the 1920s women were perhaps a bit more sheltered than they are today. In any emergency, particularly in an outdoor sport like mountaineering, what man wouldn't spring to the front to take over? I decided to try some climbs not only guideless but manless.”³

Considering French climbing icon Catherine Destivelle's outstanding resumé of ascents in the Himalaya and the Alps, as well as rock and competition climbing, I was surprised when

she told me, “When you climb a route with a man everyone says, ‘Of course the guy does the job.’ I have to accept that if I climb with a man.” Although lauded as “one of the world's most accomplished all-around climbers,”⁴ Destivelle, more than half a century after Underhill, has still been subjected to doubt.

Pacific Northwesterner Carla Firey, who made many impressive free ascents in the 1970s, didn't feel that she'd fully participated in the climbing experience unless she'd been on the sharp end: “If I don't participate in leading, I don't really count [the climb]. It's the leading that is really exciting.”

Arlene Blum helped usher in relative acceptance in the 1970s for North American females on the world's highest peaks. After being denied admission onto multiple Denali expeditions (“I was told women could go as far as base camp. They didn't think women were strong enough to continue higher than that”), Blum took matters into her own hands, organizing an all-women's



Miriam O'Brien Underhill.

expedition up the peak in 1970. All six expedition members reached the summit. Blum subsequently spearheaded the well-publicized American Women's Himalayan Expedition to Annapurna I (26,540ft), and later a joint Indian-American Women's expedition up the virgin peak Bhagirunpanth in the Indian Himalaya.

When I asked Blum if she would organize something like the American Women's Himalayan Expedition now, she paused, then replied, "Probably not," citing the equality of men and women in the mountains today compared to when she was climbing.

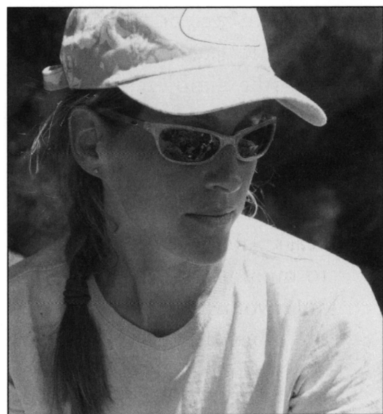
Several of the women from Blum's era (she just turned 60) and earlier whom I contacted viewed "manless climbs" as a thing of the past—no longer a necessity, since women have proven they are capable of climbing at the same level as men.

To Blum the present number of females making significant ascents must seem astounding. The opportunities available to women climbers today weren't possible in the era of prejudice and doubt she experienced. But perhaps to her and her peers' surprise, many current climbers, both male and female, believe the vertical world still has a ways to grow before we've reached equality. We women may have proven we're capable, but many of those I contacted argue that our capability is still struggling for recognition. Many women seek all-women's expeditions to remind themselves and others of the female's capacity for climbing hard, without the shadow of doubt that a man in the team may cast on their abilities, either inadvertently by his own doing or by critical peers.

But climbing isn't just about proving yourself, of course: it's also fun. Many of today's most active female climbers climb "en cordée féminine" simply because they enjoy the comfortable dynamic—the camaraderie—special to climbing in an all-women's team. By the same token, I suspect, many men prefer to climb with other guys.



Arlene Blum in 2005. *Annalise Blum*



Amy Bullard in 2003. *Sallie Shatz*

Special Dynamics

Amy Bullard received a copy of Blum's *Annapurna: A Woman's Place* when she turned 18, and remembers the inspiration it provided: "It gave me permission to climb in the big mountains."

In addition to first ascents in the Himalaya and Patagonia, and working as a mountain guide, Bullard, in 1999, led the first American women's expedition to attempt an 8,000-meter peak without supplemental oxygen or Sherpa climbing support. Three team members reached the summit.

"Cho Oyu felt so normal [compared to co-ed expeditions]. We didn't have to be so careful with what we said to each other, and we made decisions by



Monika Kambic-Mali in 2005. *Tanja Grmovsek*

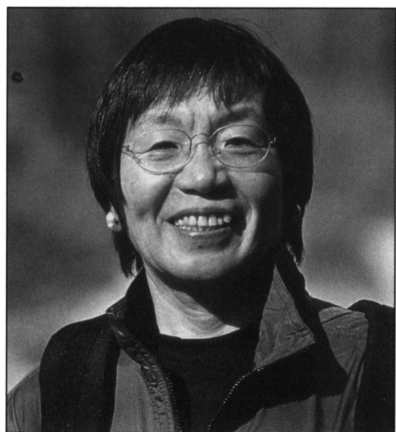
consensus," she recalls. "We were criticized at base camp for bringing too much stuff up on the mountain, like sleeping bags to Camp Three, but in the end the guys slept in them while we were away!"

Coloradoan Heidi Wirtz, 36, who has participated in all-women's expeditions to China and Canada, and has several tough first ascents to her credit, like Bad Hair Day (VI 5.12-, all female team) on the South Howser Minaret and Quilombo (IV 5.11+ A1) in Patagonia, wrote to me, "I definitely think that it is way more inspiring to hear of two women getting after it together rather than a guy-girl team. I personally prefer climbing with women in the mountains. It feels a lot more empowering to me. Not to say that I don't have awesome male partners as well, but I feel more of a 'team' dynamics with a female partner."

New Zealander Karen McNeill, 35, who currently resides in Canada, admits candidly that climbing in an all-women's team often presents sponsorship opportunities—a point of disdain among some males I know. But regardless of the publicity, McNeill, who has carried out manless expeditions to Patagonia, Greenland, British Columbia, India, Peru, and Nepal, has found she thrives when climbing in all-women teams. Most recently McNeill and her frequent partner Sue Nott completed the first all-women's ascent of McKinley's Cassin Ridge (Alaska Grade 5).

"Personally this is the best approach for me. I find men and women function differently. Being a woman we understand how each other works. We tend to be supportive, and there always seems room for discussion about the climb, direction, and decisions to be made. I haven't always found this with men. I have done my best climbs with women." Junko Tabei of Japan, best known as the first woman to scale Everest, has participated in an astounding 44 all-women's expeditions to high peaks around the world, including Shishapangma, Pobeda, McKinley, and the Eiger. Tabei, now 65, wrote me while climbing in Spain, "The satisfaction I get from women-only expeditions is greater than from mixed expeditions. When the members have similar physical conditions, climbing becomes equal among them. It is much easier to be in a small tent with partners of the same sex, and I feel much happier when we overcome difficulties with only women."

The bottom line, as Wirtz, McNeill, and many others agreed, is that the ideal composition of a team comes down to what works best for the individual. Beth Rodden, 24, participated in a 1999 expedition to Madagascar with Lynn Hill, Kath Pyke, and Nancy Feagin, where they established the line Bravo Les Filles (5.12c A0). She told me, "Women can achieve their potential in any atmosphere depending on how hard they push themselves with their partner. If the individual believes that she



Junko Tabei. *Tabei collection in 2000.*

can only be pushed with other women, then there is the answer. Most of the time I climb better with men because they are stronger and therefore push me to aim higher.” Rodden typically climbs with her husband Tommy Caldwell. She recently opened *The Optimist* (5.14b), the hardest climb to date established by an American woman.

Role Models

A highlight for McNeill from her Cassin success has been interest from other women climbers. “After the climb I’ve given a bunch of slideshows,” she says. “Women come up to me and comment on how inspired they are to go into the mountains from seeing the show. To me that is the best part. I love it!” McNeill counts alpinists Anne Palmer, Pat Deavoll, and Brede Arkless as her own role models.

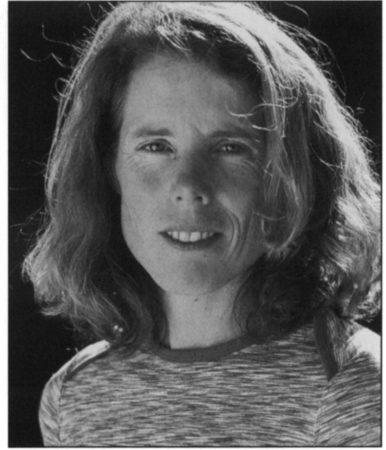
Abby Watkins, a certified Alpine Guide with the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides, is another firm believer in the importance of strong, accessible examples for female climbers. “The more successful role models there are out there,” she says, “the more young women will be attracted to take the sport seriously. Being guided or taught by a man does not apply as directly as being guided or taught by a woman. Watching a man do something bears no significance to a woman—it simply does not apply to her.”

I don’t believe Watkins is referring to something as simplistic as a woman watching a man tie a knot, but she does verbalize something I’ve witnessed (and experienced) time and time again guiding, pointed out to me several years ago by a fellow guide, as experienced as I was old: “Women perform better when a woman guide is part of the team,” he said, elaborating that excuses, whether silent or spoken, like “I’m not strong enough, tough enough, etc.; I’m a girl” are taken away. In front of their eyes a girl is succeeding.

For me it is more tangible, easily transferable, to watch a woman climb: I am in essence watching my own form—the form I most naturally, inherently relate to and identify with—and it doesn’t stop at movement, but encompasses attitude and composure as well.

Kath Pyke, 39, who in addition to her ascent of *Bravo Les Filles* in Madagascar has made impressive first ascents in Iran, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, believes a link exists between the media’s portrayal of women climbers and the lack of accessible role models in the alpine realm. “Typically climbing media portray women with beautiful bodies achieving at sport climbing. Mountaineering involves a lot of grunt work that is rarely glamorous, and after a long demanding trip it may be difficult for people to discern if the climber is even female. It’s rare that a journalist comes along on these trips and portrays these images. For a climber trying to transition from sport climbing to mountaineering there are few images, role models, or real people out there to talk to. Groups like *Chicks With Picks* and magazines like *She Sends* are doing a good job, but they don’t reach enough people.”

Founder and publisher emeritus of *She Sends*, Lizzy Scully, started the magazine in an attempt to address the void mentioned by Pyke. “I was a contributing editor for *Climbing Magazine* at the time [2002], and they wouldn’t put more stuff in the magazine about women,”



Abby Watkins in 2004. Scott Wilson



Lizzy Scully and Heidi Wirtz, 2002. Lizzy Scully

she says (she clarifies that this has since changed). “I got frustrated and decided just to throw something together myself. It bummed me out to rarely see articles about and or by women. I wrote an article for the second issue of *Alpinist*, but I think I’m still the only woman to have an article about an alpine experience in that magazine.”

Scully, who has organized all-women’s expeditions to Canada, Pakistan, and India, often with Wirtz as a partner, says she was motivated to publish *She Sends* in part because she wanted “other women to see that women could climb big walls in foreign countries and organize expeditions.” Scully continues, “I sought out great women climbers and great women who climbed

because I wanted to be inspired. I figured *She Sends* would provide women such as myself with those role models.”

It comes as no surprise that many climbers, including Scully, have been inspired by Lynn Hill, who stunned the climbing world with her one-day free ascent of El Capitan’s Nose in 1994, a feat unrepeated by man or woman. Alison Osius, the only female president of the American Alpine Club (1998-1999), a former member of the U.S. Climbing Team, and a recipient of the AAC’s Underhill Achievement Award for “outstanding mountaineering achievement,” recalls the electrifying effect of Hill on women climbers, “Certainly women such as Mari Gingery or Barbara Devine in the 1970s, had been performing at a very high level before Lynn’s era. But Lynn was so visible and did so many very hard climbs that it really normalized the idea of women doing them. After a while everyone realized that women can be strong climbers, that climbs are all different; they are often sequencey, and it’s no big deal if a woman does a route first, in fact it happens all the time, and is to be expected.”

THE VALUE OF FIRST FEMALE AND FIRST ALL-FEMALE ASCENTS

“A woman who has done good work in the scholastic world doesn’t like to be called a good woman scholar,” said Annie Smith Peck, one of the first women to make a career out of high-altitude mountaineering, to the *New York Times* in 1911. “Call her a good scholar and let it go at that. I have climbed 1,500 feet higher than any man in the United States. Don’t call me a woman climber.”⁶

Twenty years later, as the number of women leading routes in the Alps continued increasing, due largely to Underhill and Damesme’s ascent of the Grépon and their subsequent climbs, representatives of Britain’s Ladies Alpine Club wrote, “It is inconceivable that the average woman climber could ever compete with the average man, but the inequality is no longer so pronounced that any mountaineering feat by a woman should cause so much surprise. The time has come when a woman must no longer think it a matter of importance that she was the first or second of her sex to be taken up a difficult climb.... Can we hope that the day is not far off when our achievements will be judged on their own merits, rather than overpraised because we are women?”

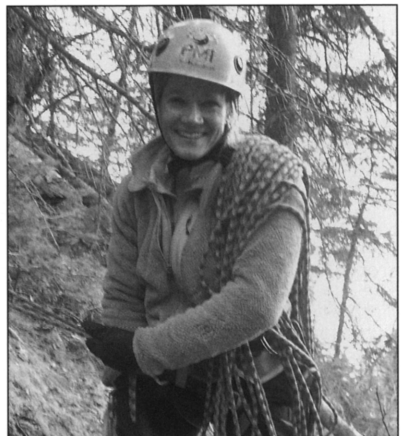
Why is it then that three-quarters of a century later we still precede first-ascent information with “female” and “all-female”? Is it a marketing ploy to draw sponsorship to a climbing bum on a meager budget? Or does it have to do with a phrase in the previous paragraph: “*to be taken up* a difficult climb”—an easily missed indication of conditions which have hindered women’s development in athletic endeavors? Is “First All-Female Ascent” a reminder that men’s and women’s backgrounds are different? Or do such distinctions divide us more than equalize us? I don’t think there is one right answer, nor that the multiple answers are simple.

Kitty Calhoun, who has attempted numerous difficult first ascents around the world in co-ed teams, including the west face of Latok III and the west face of Middle Triple Peak, does not see a need to distinguish between first ascents and first female ascents, but she does appreciate its value for some. “No, I don’t think there should be attention drawn to it,” she says. “But for some girls it’s important to have female role models. It’s a good thing for articles to be written about women, so girls can have them.”

Kathy Cosely, one of Calhoun’s partners on the 1990 Makalu West Pillar expedition, estimates that 90 percent of her 28-year climbing career has been spent in the alpine zone. She believes she may have been the first North American woman to climb the North Face of the Eiger, Aconcagua’s South Face, and Cerro Torre. She looks back on her and Mark Houston’s ascent of Aconcagua’s notorious South Face in 1992, accomplished in under two days. The wall is famed for its huge scale, dangerously loose rock, and seracs. “We bivied on the glacier and topped out in bright moonlight near midnight of our second day. It was very beautiful, and we felt satisfied that we’d done it as fast and as well as we could.” As for Cerro Torre in 1998, “I was sort of trying to be the first woman on Cerro Torre, but missed it by a couple of months. An Italian woman, Rosanna Manfrini, beat me to it!”⁸

Recently, Slovenians Monica Kambic-Mali and Tanja Grmovsek completed what they considered to be the first all-female ascent of Cerro Torre. Kambic-Mali, who completed the first all-female ascent of Fitz Roy with Tina Di Batista (Slovensa), via the Franco-Argentine Route in 2004, describes their harrowing ascent up the Torre’s Compressor Route’s final pitches: “Just two pitches before the top I got hit by a block of ice dropped by English climbers above me. I saw the block falling and just had time to put my head down and got hit on my back. For more than five minutes I was in shock. After half an hour I thought, ‘I have to go on,’ and I did. My partner continued leading, and I followed jumaring very slowly, 20 centimeters each time, only using my left hand. It was very painful but I had to do it. I couldn’t go down being so close to the top. I was just hoping the mushroom would not be too hard. Luckily it was very easy. My partner made good steps, and I could manage to the top finally! When I returned to Chalten, I went to the hospital [for] x-rays and they told me I had three ribs broken and that I had to rest for five weeks. But I climbed the Torre....”

In the gathering darkness at the top of the bolt ladder, shortly after the accident, Kambic-Mali and Grmorsek bypassed a few meters of copperhead-clipping by jumaring a rope brought up by the



Kitty Calhoun in 2004. *Susie Sutphin*



Kambic-Mali and Tanja Grmovsek in 2005.

Englishmen climbing above: a fact that in some climber's minds compromises their claim to a first all-female ascent.

In her post-expedition report Grmovsek writes, "In the end some climbs that I made with other women mean to me a bit more, because there was 'no cheating'; I had to do it all, solve all the problems by myself, so nobody could say I was pulled up by my climbing partner. To climb with an equal woman, to do a hard climb when you have to show all of your best and when you have to do it all by yourself is really a challenge."

Famed Polish alpinist Wanda Rutkiewicz wrestled with the ethics of first ascents and the definition of all-women's ascents. During the first all-women's winter ascent of the Matterhorn's north face (1978), she and her three teammates reached the summit; however, they were rescued shortly thereafter by a helicopter because one of the climbers was in critical condition. Rutkiewicz questioned the validity of their ascent, and feared that doubt would be cast by her peers.⁹

Rutkiewicz went on to summit eight of the fourteen 8,000m peaks, and made the first female ascent of K2, before she died on Kanchenjunga in 1992. From her experiences in the Himalaya, she pondered the legitimacy of a "women's expedition" that includes male Sherpas. In her much discussed paper "*Women's Mountaineering in the Himalayas and Karakorum (in the last 25 years)*," presented at the 25th Jubilee of the Indian Mountaineering Federation, she stated, "All expeditions until 1981 to eight thousand meter peaks were not really women's expeditions, because Sherpas participated in each of them. Sherpas are also mountaineers. I do not see why it is necessary to make a distinction between the mixed men-women's expeditions and women's expeditions made with Sherpas."¹⁰

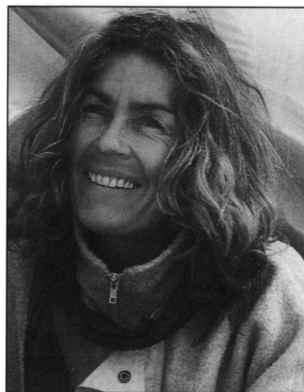
In 1994 she was posthumously awarded the King Albert Mountain Award for "her courageous, pioneering spirit in the development of feminine mountaineering and the exploration of the world's highest peaks for more than a quarter of a century."¹¹

WHAT KEEPS WOMEN IN THE MINORITY?

Although a long list of examples proves women are capable of climbing the world's difficult routes, it is still a relatively small percentage who climb beyond the crags. I asked a number of today's women alpinists why. Their replies focused mostly on heavy loads, lack of exposure to successful role models, acceptance of risk, and motherhood.

Size and Natural Abilities

With a long list of first ascents and first female ascents in Patagonia, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Baffin, and the United States, 5-foot 5-inch Steph Davis is no longer put off by the challenges of



Wanda Rutkiewicz.

weight and size that she once believed were hindrances. She often climbs with her husband Dean Potter, whom she describes as a “6-foot 5-inch giant,” and sees challenges even for him: “I think that at first women can feel limited in alpinism by the amount of gear you must carry and use. But when I climb with Dean we are still limited by these things. After years of feeling physically disadvantaged because of the problem of carrying weight in alpine climbing, I have finally come to realize that *everyone* is limited by it. With alpinism there isn’t really a certain limiting factor that is specific to women; some women are bigger and stronger than some men. Ultimately it’s not even gender-based, just size and endurance.”

McNeill adds, “We aren’t built like men, and sometimes we focus on what we aren’t, and that it’s been a boys’ club. We need to focus on what we are good at, and get out there because we like it. We are built differently. Often we can’t carry as much on our backs as the guys. This is not a negative. As women we need to develop alternative approaches, whether this is climbing in teams of three to spread out the loads or by adopting the ‘fast-and-light’ approach.”

Several women I interviewed hypothesize that the success many ladies have found sport climbing, helped by natural flexibility and gymnastic background, have kept them happily distracted in the lowlands.

“Women have a better chance of shining in comparison to men in sport climbing; that is, their physiological differences are not limitations to their success in sport climbing (in fact rather the opposite), in contrast to the alpine arena, where a certain amount of weight-toting and brute labor are required,” writes Cosely in an e-mail. “Role models like Lynn Hill and others since have proven that in rock climbing the playing field is actually fairly level. This is less clear in high and difficult alpine climbing.”

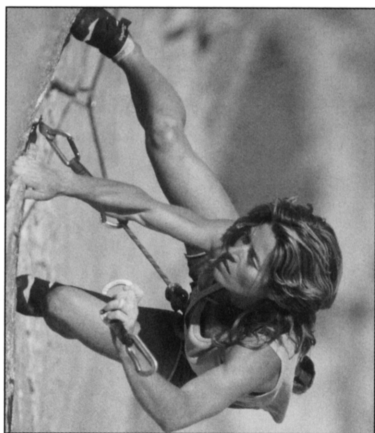
Children

At one time climbing was believed to cause dangerous pelvic disturbances and disrupt the menstrual cycle.¹² Fortunately, that was just a myth. But women who are serious climbers still have to wrestle with the mommy track, just as career women do. For many would-be mothers that choice affects their windows of opportunity for both climbing and childbearing, as well as the types of climbs they pursue.

“One unavoidable limiting factor for the advance of women in alpinism is the fact that alpinists reach their prime when they are in their late thirties/ early forties,” explains Davis, 34. “Climbers often put off [having a child] during their twenties in order to travel and climb. Then it’s now or never by the time they reach their thirties. It seems like every male alpinist I know has a wife and kids at home. For them it’s great. They get to have the benefits of a family at home, and then go climb in the mountains. I have never met a female alpinist who has a husband and kids at home; it just doesn’t work that way. For example, if I chose to have a child, Dean’s lifestyle would not have to be affected at all. Mine, however, would change completely. So unless our society shifts radically, and I too can also have a husband and kids at home, this is something that



Steph Davis in 2004. Dean Potter



Lynn Hill in 1994. *Heinz Zak*

will always limit the numbers of hardcore women alpinists.”

There are exceptions, of course, and the famous British soloist Alison Hargreaves comes to mind. Although she was criticized by many for the role reversal, her husband managed the home and small children while she climbed around the world, including Everest, during the early 1990s. But her home life was rare indeed. More typical (if the word “typical” applies) are women like Calhoun, Destivelle, and Hill, who have found that the responsibilities of motherhood have significantly changed their climbing careers. Calhoun and Destivelle, mothers of nine- and ten-year-old boys respectively, are reluctant to leave home for long periods. Meanwhile Hill (44), mother of a two-year-old

son, has lost interest in remote, big wall objectives.

Destivelle concurs, at least temporarily: “When you have a project, you think about it all the time; you can’t do that with a kid. It is difficult for me to focus on climbing until he is a little more independent. I don’t want to leave him or go too far away from home right now.” Destivelle anticipates returning to climbing once her son is older.

Catherine Freer, regarded in the 1980s as one of America’s top alpinists, male or female, died in an avalanche or collapsed cornice at age 38, while attempting a second ascent of Mt. Logan’s Hummingbird Ridge. Renny Jackson, Freer’s partner on their first ascent of a difficult route on Cholatse’s north face, recalls that Freer “wondered out loud on several occasions about not having enough time to do it all—alpinism and having a family life.” But, he adds, “She was way better as a climber than most men at that time anyway. It just seemed natural that she should be doing what she was doing.”

Some women, including Bullard and Cosley, have chosen to remain childless. “I think having children is a huge limiting factor for most women taking on big expeditions, and is one of the reasons that I don’t want to have kids,” says Bullard, 37. “I don’t think I could keep my head in it if I knew I was responsible for someone else’s welfare. I couldn’t stand to be away either.”

Acceptance of Risk

Lynn Hill wonders if there is a link between potential motherhood and a lower risk threshold amongst women climbers in comparison to men, a difference many elite women climbers recognize.

“Women are more reasonable risk-takers; they typically make a rational refusal to take unnecessary risk. I know how to handle a dangerous situation, but it’s not what gives me pleasure—I don’t seek it out. I know I am more cautious than many men,” Hill says, pointing to her non-desire to solo climb as an example. She carefully qualifies her comments as generalizations. “Men are more likely to put everything on the line. I don’t know if it’s a cultural or biological thing. Maybe they feel more expendable?”

Wirtz states it bluntly, “Maybe women are smarter; they have more of a breeding instinct than a bacon drive.”

Ironically, Destivelle, whose list of solo ascents includes the formidable famous north faces of the Alps in winter, admits “I hate to be scared and without a big safety margin, which is the

case in alpine climbing: you will be scared.” I asked if fear has ever crept in while soloing. “Well, that was not such a high level,” she explained. In my silence over the telephone she must have realized how ridiculous her statement sounded to be a mortal. “Well, yeah, okay, it’s a high level.” We both laughed.

“As a generalization [men] can be classified as greater risk takers,” notes Kath Pyke, “and women are generally more cautious.” She points to research studies she read while working for the British Mountaineering Council ¹³ “Women can learn from this, although for some it will be innate.”

Or could it be that a double standard still exists for the level of acceptable risk for women, what Arlene Blum once called the “supposed life-giving rather than life-risking sex” ¹⁴ ? And could this in turn reinforce even more cautious behavior?

Karen McNeill and Sue Nott’s Cassin Ridge ascent of McKinley was criticized by some for pushing the limit too far. The pair ascended in abysmal conditions and was forced to spend a night on the summit. Abby Watkins commented, “If they had been men, there would have been less speculation about how far they hung it out to climb that route. I think perhaps when women do risk everything for a mountaineering goal, society frowns on them.”

Watkins’s suggestion of a double standard brings to mind Hargreaves’s death on K2 in 1995. Hargreaves, mother to two, had recently made an ascent of Everest without bottled oxygen or Sherpa support (until then a feat accomplished only by Reinhold Messner, in 1978). After K2, she planned to climb Kangchenjunga, the world’s third highest mountain, also without oxygen. Hargreaves was lambasted by many in the British media for undertaking such serious climbing objectives as the mother of young children. In a panel discussion at the 1994 Banff Mountain Film Festival in Canada, where Hargreaves was the opening speaker because of her first-ever (male or female) solo of all six great north faces of the Alps in a single summer, one guest recalls the audience “temporarily derailing” a panel discussion of women in adventure because they “were aghast that Alison would dare to mountain climb being the mother of two small children.”

“I think a double standard still exists,” commented Kitty Calhoun in a 2003 *Climbing* magazine article on the history of women climbing in the Karakoram. “It still seems more acceptable for a dad to be a climber.” ¹⁵

Calhoun has experienced her fair share of adversity in the alpine realm, a partner once calling her “the bivy queen.” ¹⁶ “I’m most attracted to routes I am not sure that I can get up, ones that are technically challenging. Sure,” she says, “there have been avalanches, times we ran out of food.”

“Did these close calls ever lead you to reconsider alpine climbing?” I asked.

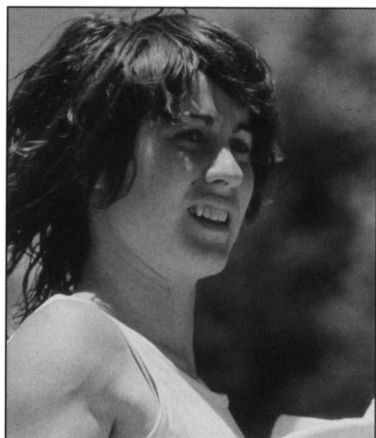
“No, it just makes me appreciate the small things in life again—things that we usually take for granted.”

Double Standard—A Digression

Many see the question of a double standard from a different angle. A middle-aged, liberal official of the American Alpine Club was asked to comment on an



Alison Hargreaves. Ed Douglas



Catherine Destivelle in 1988. *John Harlin III*

earlier draft of this essay and embedded this comment in the manuscript: "Why is there such a double standard in women's climbing? I either know or know of every woman in this article. I doubt I would have heard of most of them if they were men, given their level of accomplishment. Sounds harsh, but it's true. I don't know the names of half the Americans doing good repeats in the mountains."

I was interested in what the women interviewed for this article would think of his statement; he seemed skeptical of their accomplishments, and his comment raised the bigger question of whether special attention should be given to women's climbing endeavors regardless of how they measure up to men's accomplishments.

Blum responded, "We tend to remember people because of things that make them stand out. For example, Eric Weinhemayer and Warren Harding are unforgettable. Excellence isn't necessarily memorable, because there are so many excellent climbers. It's the distinguishing characteristics that make us remember people. The other thought that comes to mind is that in Brazil, they are interested in what Brazilian climbers can do, African-Americans are interested in the accomplishments of African-Americans, so it seems reasonable that women would notice women's achievements."

"This all is extremely petty, comparing men and women and their accomplishments in the mountains," replied Calhoun with characteristic polite forthrightness. "Who cares? It is just nice for me sometimes to read articles written by women, about women. Almost all I ever read in the climbing genre is written by men about men."

I had consciously avoided male input to this article, in part for the reasons Calhoun alludes to. However, my letter to women climbers also fell into the mailbox of the Patagonian climber Rolando Garibotti, who was engaged in a parallel discussion with friends. Rolo wrote, "Without inspiration no particular field advances, so if magazines and journals don't give space to women's activity, even if this might involve needing to have double standards, there will be no push forward. Even if at times I might be a bit surprised or frustrated by it, I would rather see double standards being used, such as reporting the 'ordinary' all-female 12-hour Nose, than see no reporting at all. Equal opportunity should imply being exposed to the same type of inspirational role models, regardless of how those role models compare to the role models of the opposite sex. This I think is a necessary step towards further advancing gender equality.

"If in every sport there is a differentiation between men and women, why should we not have it in climbing? There are obvious physical differences between the sexes, and for the last couple of hundred years people have accepted this as a fact and in almost every sport have given credit to male and female achievements separately. While in the future this might perhaps eventually disappear, in climbing we should not fancy ourselves as being super avant-garde or progressive and try to push this type of agenda before sports such as running do. We should use the rules and yardsticks of the day, and crediting sports achievements of men and women separately is one of them. There might come a time when this will change, but we aren't there yet, and climbing is not the sport that will lead the way."

Acquired Taste?

Back to the big question: three-quarters of a century after Underhill's momentous ascent, why are our numbers still so small?

"Climbing in the mountains is like climbing a big wall," says Lizzy Scully. "It's a hell of a lot of work, and until you do it for many years it's uncomfortable and time consuming. Not to say that women don't work as hard as men, they obviously do. It's just that they haven't figured out the joys of working hard to climb big alpine routes. It's difficult to climb 'really hard' in the mountains because you have to be better rounded. These days the focus is on climbing hard routes (bouldering, sport), rather than on spending time in the mountains."



Karen McNeill in 2004. *Kim Csizmazia*

"I think it's hard for women to embrace alpinism, as opposed to rock climbing, for many reasons," concludes Steph Davis, who has always been in the minority as a female drawn to remote objectives. "When I think about alpine climbing, I think of really heavy packs, sleep deprivation, weird and dangerous snow, ice and rock, horrific body odor, and being exhausted/hot/wet/cold/scared. Most women are not naturally attracted to these things. Alpinism is much more experience-dependent, and there is zero glamour involved. It takes hard training, hard work, a strong mind, and a willingness to endure. Yet I would say these are all things that women excel at, physically and mentally, if they can get past the initial turn-offs (heavy packs, stinkiness, grossly climbing, etc.) and the cultural feminine stereotypes of our current society. (Britney Spears and Nicole Kidman are not alpinist material.)"

THE FUTURE: WHAT IT HOLDS AND HOW DIFFERENT WILL IT BE?

Although the majority of women I spoke with believe that the number of women pursuing sports perceived as high risk will never equal the number of male participants, there is overwhelming consensus that female alpinists will and can accomplish whatever they set their minds to.

"I see more and more women out there leading and taking responsibility for themselves in the mountains," notes Abby Watkins. "It is easier to find partners these days who are willing and capable of taking on a big mountain (or big ski tour, or big rock or ice climb). The more successful role models there are, the more young women will be inspired to take the sport seriously."

Karen McNeill, whom many view as a key player in alpinism's bright future, wrote me, "I believe we're on the verge of some big changes. Ines Papert will go climb some big alpine routes. This in turn will encourage other women to do the same. Often we need to see other women doing it; then we believe we can do it."

I wonder, 75 years from now, what will be the focus of a similar article about women in alpinism. Will tomorrow's top alpinists cite any of today's stars as those who provided them with inspiration? As lighter-weight and warmer gear evolves to meet female-specific needs, the pool of talent continues expanding, and our collective female climbing history keeps growing,

what new heights will we reach? Will the tradition of manless climbs endure simply for the pure enjoyment found climbing “en cordée féminine”?

I don't know, of course. But I do know that exploring these questions will involve countless cold, wet bivies, deep sinker jams, the crunch of snow at dawn, and the vivid paint of alpenglow. It is only after thousands more women have experienced these joys that the answers will begin to take form. I hope we all are able to relish the process as much as the end result.

Additional thanks to Sibylle Hechtel, Gwen Moffat, Eliza Moran, Irena Mrak, and Barbara Washburn for helpful comments and stories.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Molly Loomis lives in Victor, Idaho, though she spends much of the year guiding and instructing throughout the western United States and currently for Alpine Ascents International and NOLS. Having participated in multiple “en cordée féminine” expeditions herself, she most recently traveled to Kyrgyzstan for a climbing and cultural exchange made possible through the generosity of the Anatoli Boukreev Memorial Fund.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Underhill, Miriam. *Give Me the Hills* p. 153.
2. By Sir Arnold Lunn in 1957, leading historian of Alpine mountaineering. Brown, Rebecca A. *Women on High* p. 220.
3. Underhill, Miriam. *Give Me the Hills* p. 144.
4. <http://outside.away.com/banff/destivelle.html>
5. DaSilva, Rachel. *Leading Out* p. 94.
6. Brown, Rebecca A. *Women on High* p. 146.
7. Brown, Rebecca A. *Women on High* p. 218.
8. Manfrini was indeed the first woman to ascend Cerro Torre, however she did not do any of the leading.
9. Birkett, Bill and Bill Peascod. *Women Climbing: 200 Years of Achievement* p. 135.
10. Birkett, Bill and Bill Peascod. *Women Climbing: 200 Years of Achievement* p. 127.
11. www.king-albert-foundation.ch
12. Brown, Rebecca A. *Women on High* p. 40.
13. There are many U.S studies and papers such as the “*Failing at Fairness*” by Myra and David Sadker PhDs, “*Gender Leadership*” by Missy White, *Reviving Ophelia* by Mary Pipher PhD., and many others, backing the research results mentioned by Pyke.
14. DaSilva, Rachel. *Leading Out* p. 8.
15. Scully, Lizzy. “*In the Footsteps of Fanny: Women in the Karakoram.*” *Climbing* June 2003.
16. Waterman, Jonathan. *The Education of an Alpinist.* *Climbing* April 1988.