

# LE PIOLET D'OR

*Whither prizes for alpinism?*

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Marko Prezelj addresses the audience, translator Anthony Moinet, and journalist Gilles Chappaz, on stage at the 16th annual Piolet d'Or ceremony in Grenoble, France. Prezelj's climbing partner, Boris Lorencic, is at left. The story of their climb begins on page 14 of this *Journal*. *Philippe Descamps*

Arguments over the wisdom of attempting to honor the “best climb of the year” came to a head before and after the 16th Piolet d'Or ceremony in Grenoble, France, on January 26, 2007. The Piolet d'Or is sponsored by the French magazine *Montagnes*, with the winner chosen each year by a jury of climbers and journalists. In recent years, several nominated teams of climbers have declined to participate in the awards program, arguing that such awards run counter to the spirit of alpinism, and that comparing ascents of different styles is impossible. In late 2006, the Groupe de Haute Montagne (GHM), a cofounder of the Piolet d'Or program, said it would no longer cooperate with *Montagnes* on the awards.

Nonetheless, the 16<sup>th</sup> annual Piolet d'Or awards proceeded, and the jury chose to honor Boris Lorencic and Marko Prezelj for their first ascent of the northwest pillar of 7,326-meter Chomolhari, on the border of Tibet and Bhutan. (Prezelj's account of this climb begins on page 14 of this *Journal*.) Prezelj, who received the very first Piolet d'Or, in 1991, and has been nominated a total of four times for the prize, spoke out against the awards at the 2007 ceremony in Grenoble; afterward, at the request of *Montagnes*, he wrote an essay opposing such

prizes, which he disseminated widely, generating much discussion. *Montagnes* responded with an editorial stating its arguments for maintaining the award and promising to revise the program with critics' concerns in mind. As of June 2007, the magazine had not yet announced its plans for the 17th Piolet d'Or.

Because we feel that this discussion touches on many issues vital to today's climbers—Why do we climb? What is the meaning of success? Is climbing a “sport” with winners and losers?—and because most of the past winners of the Piolet d'Or have written articles for the *AAJ* about their ascents, we present both Prezelj's original essay and the *Montagnes* editorial for your consideration.

## GLADIATORS AND CLOWNS D'OR

Marko Prezelj  
February 2007

Several people criticized me for participating in the Piolet d'Or ceremony this year. None of them were in Grenoble. Joining this circus gave me the opportunity to present my opinion about the award publicly. Time will tell if doing so was a mistake.

I don't believe in awards for alpinism, much less trophies or titles presented by the public or the media. At the ceremony I could see and feel the competitive spirit created and fueled by the event's organizers. Most of the climbers readily accepted this mood without understanding that they had been pushed into an arena where spectators thrive on drama, where winner and loser are judged.

It is not possible to judge another person's climb objectively. Each ascent contains untold stories, influenced by expectations and illusions that develop long before setting foot on the mountain. In alpinism, even the most personal judgments are extremely subjective. When we return from the mountains we remember moments differently than they were—there and then—when we had to make decisions under the pressure of many factors.

Comparing different climbs is not possible without some kind of personal involvement, and even then it is difficult. Last year I climbed in Alaska, Patagonia, and Tibet. I cannot decide which expedition was the most...the “most what,” in fact?

To illustrate this, I asked (during the first part of ceremony) the father of several children to decide which one was the best and which was the worst? He could not answer.

I might choose which wine, food, song, book, or movie I like the most in a certain moment, but a jury cannot decide which is the best, worst, or “most” for everyone in one year. If a jury chooses a single winner, it automatically implies a loser, which is the essence of competition. And first place means there is a second, third, and last place. Is the last-place climb truly the worst, or were the winners simply more adept at the manipulation game? Did they exaggerate the “beauty” of their ascent more effectively or market themselves better to the jury?

The idea of inspirational gatherings of climbers is positive, but I cannot support the absurd idea of those same climbers “competing” at alpinism. At the Piolet d'Or ceremony, I said the trophy is not important to me because the choice of a winner is subjective, like singing and beauty contests, and commercial influence on the event is obvious and definite. My broken English prevented me from being clear.

But the story of the Piolet d'Or makes it clear that comparing climbs (and the protagonists and their ideals) is nonsense, especially doing so for one calendar year. If comparison is impossible, what are the media and sponsors presenting and promoting, and why? Are they doing it for increased sales, or for *fame* maybe?

In Slovenia, where I come from, fame has a woman's name: Slava. Old people used to say, "Slava je kurba" ("fame is a bitch"); one day she is sleeping with one, and the next day with another. Fame is a cheap trap set by the media in which the complacent are quickly caught and exploited, realizing too late that trust and honor do not live in the same house as notoriety. The public doesn't truly care about climbers, who are links in an incestuous chain binding sick hunger for attention to media that promote or criticize according to their interests. The Piolet d'Or shows that organizers know and count on the cruel fact that they will always find plenty of desperate, passionate gladiators and clowns to role-play in the fame game. The more interesting question is: Is it a reality show or a soap opera?

If the romantic idea of the Piolet d'Or will survive in the future it must evolve into a simple gathering where climbers can exchange ideas and share their dreams, illusions, and realities. Perhaps they might even climb together—with no one cast as winner or loser. I ask the media and the promoters to stop forcing the competitive spirit into alpinism, and to start respecting alpinists, their human differences, and the creative ideas that make alpinism a complicated and rewarding experience.

I apologize if I have offended anyone who is addicted to Miss Fame; she gets around, so watch out for STDs. And finally: Alpinists are bullets, and the media is a rifle. Where is the target?

## ELITE

*Philippe Descamps*  
April 2007

At long last, the debate on the Piolet d'Or is open! Thanks to Marko Prezelj's provocative statements, our mountaineering community has started to exchange points of view and to ask itself questions about the award's meaning. From the organizers' point of view, certain statements could seem a little bit unfair or even out of place. But to understand the passionate stances, one must understand the issues at the heart of the debate, which is far from being simplistic. While everybody agrees on the dangers of an excessively competitive spirit, there is also a broad consensus on the impor-



From left: Pavle Kozjek, the "people's choice" winner for his single-push new route on Cho Oyu; Marko Prezelj; and Boris Lorencic, holding the golden ice axe. *Philippe Descamps*

tance of providing a space where great mountaineers can meet together and with the public. It's now only a question of finding the right formula, the right balance.

Far from fostering a spirit of healthy emulation, the logic of pure competition is not only bad for mountaineering as a whole, it is also dangerous for mountaineers individually. Distracted by financial objectives, mountaineers are encouraged to overstretch their capacity, to make use of performance-boosting substances, and to take inconsiderate risks. An excessive competitive spirit fosters a feeling of superiority, which in turn develops into arrogance and creates a hierarchical vision of the community.

Within the mountaineering community, the race for celebrity didn't wait for the Piolet d'Or. The media hierarchies set up in the '70s and '80s were mostly determined by the talent of the various press agents. By becoming international, by attempting to formulate objective criteria—however imperfect—and by taking an ethical stance, the juries of the Piolet d'Or have over the years managed to defend a certain style of mountaineering. None of those who were awarded the Piolet d'Or over the last 16 years were undeserving, even if their exploits sometimes had very little in common. The juries' decisions were coherent with the defense of a certain style of mountaineering, which has had a lasting influence on the evolution of mentalities in many countries. If the staging of the award ceremony probably needs to be revisited, the show of the past few years has at least had the merit of showing that mountaineering needs spokespersons more than it needs champions.

The real challenge for the members of the mountaineering elite is to open up to the world, to meet each other, and to share their experiences with the public. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, we know that the greatest arsenals are of no use if their only purpose is to protect those who despise the values that they pretend they are defending. We know since Vilfredo Pareto [the French-Italian sociologist and economist] that history is a “cemetery of aristocracies.” Clubs are for a fossilized elite who have lost all contact with reality.

The experience of these last years has proven that if they stay within the boundaries of their professional objectives and don't try to overstep their competence, specialized journalists have an important part to play in the evolution of mountaineering. Their job is to check on the information at its source, to cross-reference the information, if possible, with information from other sources, and to make the information understandable by putting it into perspective. It's not about objectivity—there is no such thing—but about a subjective point of view trying to embrace the largest number of objective facts possible. That is the art of critique. It has nothing to do with the art of propaganda, which is all about passing things off for what they are not.

If the question today is whether we should rethink the Piolet d'Or or scrap it, one has to start from what it is today: a prize that is known throughout the world and which helps promote mountaineering and its universal values. Whom does it profit? Mountaineers and mountaineering as a whole. All ideas are welcome. The discussion is open. We will make the selection criteria more explicit and give mountaineers a bigger say in the outcome, by giving the competing teams an opportunity to vote for their favorite climb (their own excluded). We also intend to break away from [being] a French event by taking a more international approach, in order to better promote the specificity and the meaning of the different nations' approach to mountaineering. The competition is open again for mountaineers and for all men of good will.

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