SA MOUNTAIN

SOUTH AFRICA'S DEDICATED CLIMBING MAGAZINE

ISSUE NO. 88 | MARCH – MAY 2024

MOUNT KENYA
Africa's Quintessential Alpine Peak

RICK WILLIAMS
Cape Climber extraordinaire

Stories By
ANDY de KLERK

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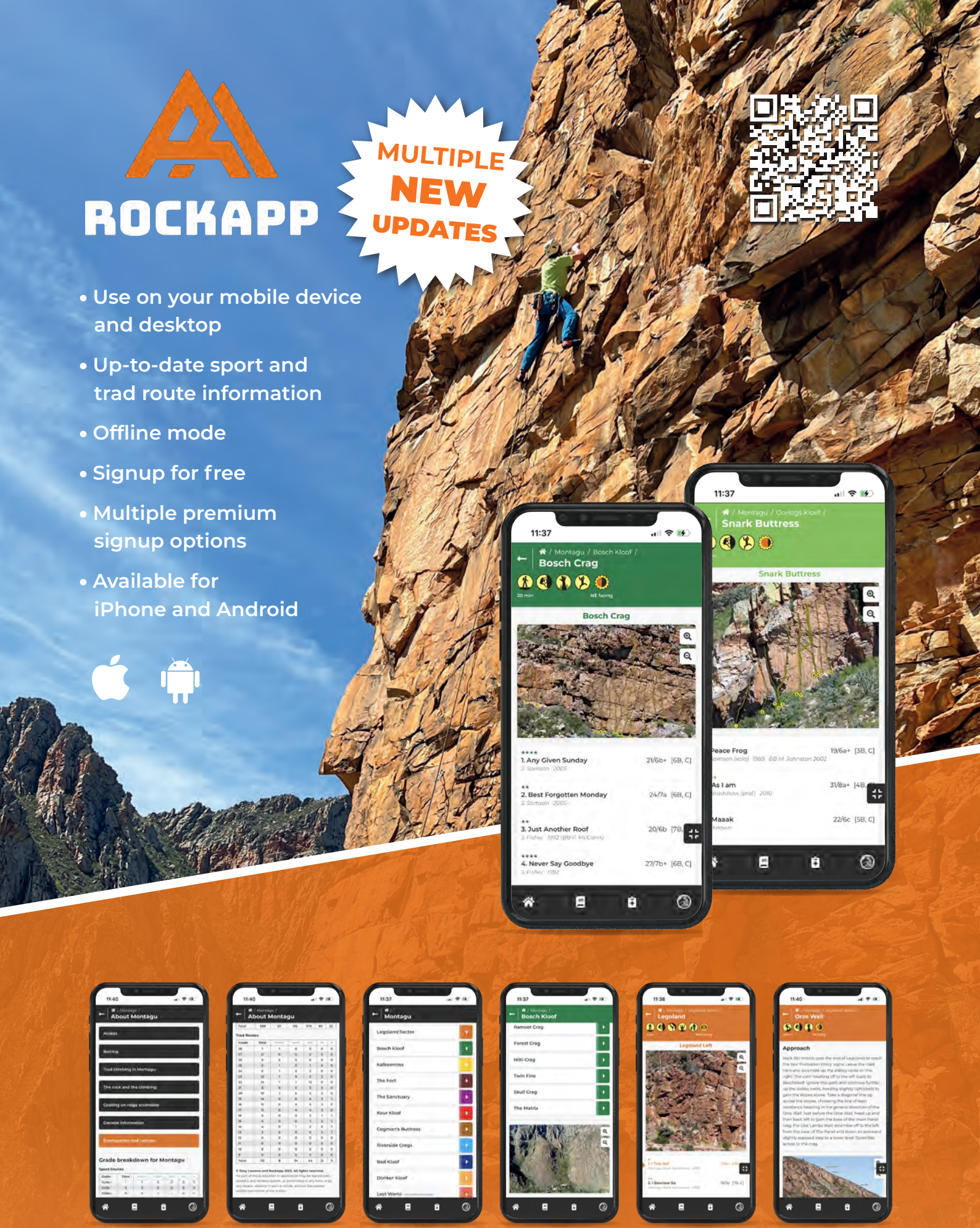

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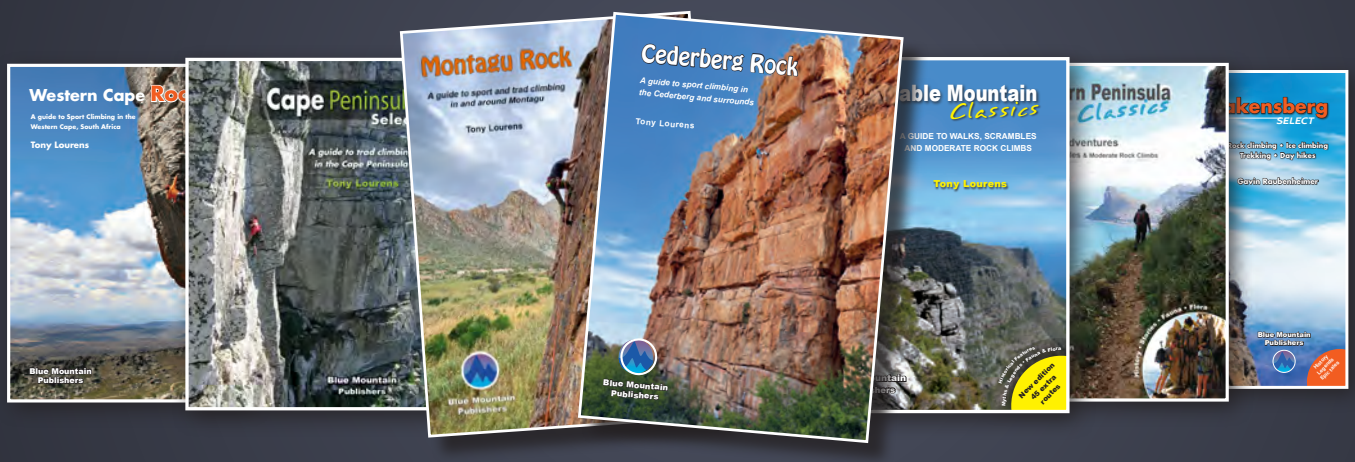

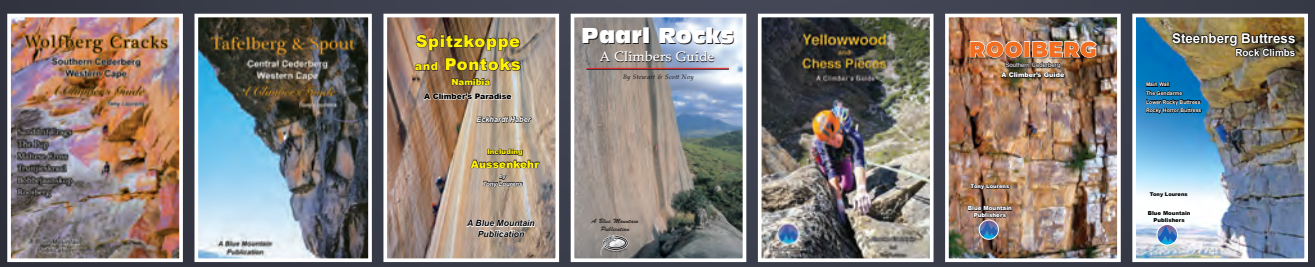

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Garvin Jacobs sitting on the shoulder before the top traverse on the *Standard Route* on Nelion, Mount Kenya. Photo TONY LOURENS

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editorial

I KNOW THAT MOUNTAIN

Collecting more memories on *Super Twister*, Rock n Roll Kloof, Montagu. Photo JOHN ALEXANDER

You can drive past a mountain a thousand times and you can look up at its huge walls, its impressive ridges and inviting crags, but what you see is really only skin deep, two dimensional if you like. It can look beautiful and you can even imagine yourself up there on one of those ridges or faces, but truth be told, it is still only a two-dimensional experience taking place in your mind.

Then, one day, you get out there and climb a route on that same mountain, or even just hike an interesting trail to the summit. You sit on the top and look down at the road that you have driven so many times when looking up at the same mountain, and you look around at the unfolding mountainscape, and take in the deep emotional experience of where you are and what you have just done. And at this precise moment, you realise that this mountain will never mean the same to you again. It will never be a mountain that you just look at from the road. From this moment onwards, you will have a much more intense and passionate connection with this mountain. Because rather than just looking from a distance, you have now touched her and experienced a whole different level of varying emotions. Whilst climbing her walls, scrambling her ridges, and sitting on the summit, you may have encountered joy, fear, amazement, achievement, elation and so many other mixed feelings. Emotions and memories that will stay with you for the rest of your life. These feeling you don't get from just looking.

Now, when you drive that same road again, you will gaze up at that mountain and you will look through very different eyes. You will see a very different mountain and your thoughts and emotions will be on another level. With your eye, you will trace the route that you did, and you will re-live some of those moments you had when you climbed it, even if it's decades later. Those memories never fade.

This goes for all the mountains, walls and crags that you climb over time – from a young impressionable beginner to a wizened experience climber with many escapades under the belt. You sort of build up a memory folder of experiences of climbs and adventures you have had on these mountains, and once you have had any sort of climbing encounter, it goes into the mountain memory vaults. It is a never-ending journey. A journey that keeps enriching your life and brings you closer to those beautiful hills that shape our existence. A mountain climbed is a mountain lived.

What a privilege it is to drive along the foothills of Table Mountain and look up those buttresses, walls and ravines, each one with many tales and adventures to tell. Driving through the Cederberg – Krakadouw, Tafelberg and Wolfberg all looming above. And along the Du Toit's Kloof Pass, gazing up at those immense peaks and walls. A tapestry of life's experiences and adventures laid out in front of you. All packed in that folder of mountain nostalgia.

And I look up and think to myself *I know that mountain!*

Be safe in the hills

Tony

SA MOUNTAIN

SOUTH AFRICA'S DEDICATED CLIMBING MAGAZINE

EDITOR	Tony Lourens
DESIGN & LAYOUT	Blue Mountain Publishers
PROOFREADER	Chelsea Henning
WEB MASTER	Blue Mountain Publishers
CONTRIBUTORS	Andy de Klerk, Micky Williams, Brenda Marx, Terence Livingston, Tony Lourens
ADVERTISING	Tony Lourens 082 550 6819 tony@samountain.co.za
ADDRESS	SA Mountain 1 Tolbos Street Montagu editor@samountain.co.za www.samountain.co.za
PUBLISHER	Tony Lourens – Blue Mountain Publishers
DISTRIBUTION	Available free online – www.samountain.co.za

COVER PHOTO: On the opening ascent of *Krakadouw Amphitheatre*, Cederberg. Photo RICK WILLIAMS COLLECTION

SA Mountain is available free online.

SA Mountain is published 4 times a year (March, June, September, December) and concentrates on covering mountain activities such as mountaineering, rock climbing, alpine climbing and expeditions. It also features articles on training, latest gear reviews and interviews.

If you wish to contribute to the publication please email all articles to tony@samountain.co.za. Please note that articles may be edited or shortened at the editor's discretion. Articles and images can and will be used on associated online media and in conjunction with any of our media partners, and other Blue Mountain publications

Issue No. 88
MARCH – MAY 2024
ISSN: 1683-7444

Every time I climb Mount Kenya, I say to myself: “This is definitely the last time I am doing this.” The big alpine mountain thing: the freezing cold, the very early morning starts and the debilitating effects of altitude. Those bloody headaches, the forceful drinking of three to four litres of liquid a day to stay hydrated, and the constant peeing! Like 10 to 15 times a day!

MOUNT KENYA 2024

by Tony Lourens

Africa's Quintessential Alpine Peak

Sunset over a serene Lake Michaelson. Photo TONY LOURENS

Okay, the constant peeing has a lot to do with the Diamox (a pill that many take, which is supposed to help with the effects of altitude), which is also a diuretic, so makes you pee a LOT. And a Diamox altitude pee is not one that comes on slowly and can be kept in for a while until you decide when to pee. No! The urgency comes out of nowhere and you have like a minute to step away from the group and relieve yourself. All pretty urgent really. Never mind the multiple times you have to go at night – thank goodness for my pee bottle. That way I don't have to leave the snugness of my tent and venture out in sub-zero temperatures. And let's not forget the breathless exhaustion from lack of oxygen in the atmosphere.

But somehow, this little voice in my head, warning me to stay away, doesn't seem to be that strong once I'm off the hill and back home in Montagu. Hence, after multiple self-warnings, this is now my fourth time on Mount Kenya, and this time, I sent my wife, Patsy, a message from the mountain: "Listen, the next time I mention Mount Kenya, please take my passport and cut it up into little pieces."

And yet, now, only back a few weeks, I am already thinking about a possible return. This is because the human brain seems to only remember the good stuff and manages to make the hardships fade away somewhat. Pretty much the same with long country routes. I have done many in my life, but every time I ask myself, "What are you doing this for?" It's long and gruelling, and often scary, yet we go back for more.

The trip started innocently enough – my five clients flying in from different parts of the world and meeting in a Nairobi hotel. Anna from Switzerland, Robyn from the UK, Alan, a Scotsman working in Uganda, and Colin and Jeanne-Marie from Cape Town. An eclectic bunch, most of them repeat clients who have become close friends over the years and multiple mountain trips together.

Then, what should've been a standard four-hour drive to the Chogoria Park Gate at the foot of the mountain, turned into somewhat of an exciting (read tense) 4x4 drive up the steep final few kilometres of dirt road, which, due to much rain in the preceding few weeks, had turned into a slimy muddy track that had our able Land Cruiser struggling to get any sort of traction, often sending us skidding into the rutted edge of the road, all four wheels spinning helplessly. After what seemed an eternity, Martin, our driver, enlisting all his off-road driving skills, managed to get us out of the dwang (amidst rapturous applause) and back on the road en route to the park gate.

The next day, we met the whole crew from African Ascents, the logistics company we used for our 'expedition'. Twenty-three porters, our chef, Moses, the camp manager, Bongo, and our head guide for the trip, Boniface. He was the head honcho, in charge of the whole crew and also set the pace and regulated everything over the next eight days on the hill. Also part of the team was my friend and climbing partner, Garvin Jacobs, who I enlisted as one of the technical guides for the trip.

I know 23 porters sounds a lot, but there is a surprising amount of stuff that needs to be taken up the mountain for an eight-day journey, and we chose the 'luxury' edition, which slots in between 'standard' and 'VIP'. This included Mountain Hardware tents, mattresses, pillows and towels, excellent three-course meals, a toilet tent, and even a shower tent – with hot water. I know! Proper luxury, right? But somehow it was still *afkak parade* (tough going).

Over the next six to seven days, the plan was to slowly (with huge emphasis on slowly) make our way up the mountain, >>

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The whole climbing team at the beginning of the trip (note how happy and fresh we all look). Photo TONY LOURENS

from camp to camp, getting our bodies acclimatised to the growing altitude, until we reached our high camp at the Austrian Hut at 4780 metres, from where we planned to climb the peak of Nelion, up and down in one loooong day.

Starting off at 3000 metres (the park gate), which for most of us who came from practically sea level, was already high and quite taxing, we made our way up over the rolling foothills for six hours until we trudged wearily into Camp Ellis, or next camp at 3400 metres. I was already feeling the altitude, with a cracking headache knocking around my cranium. I popped some Myprodol and went to lie down. I have never done well at altitude, so I was ruing the next few days, expecting the worst.

Every evening Boni would do a briefing with the team in the mess tent. He would take our SATS and heart rate, and ask a series of questions relating to how we felt, etc. He would fill everything in on a chart and would closely monitor our progress as we climbed ever higher. He would then also tell us what the next day had in store for us.

The following day was the toughest I thought in terms of the trekking days. We walked up to 4200 metres, then down to Lake Michaelson at 3950 metres, most of us arriving with headaches of varying intensity. This was the most picturesque campsite on the whole trip – on the banks of a huge lake surrounded by high impressive walls. It was where we planned to have our rest day, which would help with our acclimatisation (or so we hoped). And also to celebrate Anna's birthday! But it was also the place where things started going slightly pear shaped.

Colin started showing signs of AMS (acute mountain sickness) – exhaustion, tight chest, difficulty breathing, and I woke up on the second morning with a sore throat and blocked nose, the signs of an oncoming cold, which is one of my worst nightmares on a trip like this. A common cold doesn't sound too threatening, but at altitudes between 4000 and 5000 metres in sub-zero conditions, the body's immune system is not at its best, and viruses thrive in these conditions, so I was quite concerned.

After another tough day moving up to our next camp on the desolate windswept Simba Col at 4650 metres, we were greeted by an urn of hot lemon/ginger tea with honey. We plonked ourselves down in the mess tent and consumed cup after cup of this heavenly drink. My throat was scratchy but not worse, but Colin's condition had worsened, so after a brief discussion between Boni, Garvin and myself, we decided that the best (and only) decision would be for Colin to get off the mountain immediately and down to a comfortable altitude (below 2000 metres). So sadly, we had to say goodbye to Colin as he made his way down the Sirimon Route, together with Bongo, our

>>

Above: Our donkey mascot posing on the summit of Point Lenana, with Nelion in the background – our objective for the following day. Photo TONY LOURENS
Right: A typical mess tent scene at camp. Photo COLIN LEVITAN

David starting up the first pitch. Photo TONY LOURENS

Robyn (with Garvin coming up behind), arriving at Bailie's Bivy.
Photo TONY LOURENS

camp manager and two porters, to Old Moses Camp at 3000 metres, where a vehicle would be waiting to take him down to a comfortable hotel. The next day, he went to the hospital, where he was diagnosed with early stages of pulmonary oedema, so we had made the right decision.

The following day was going to be our final day before the summit climb. It entailed scrambling up to the summit of Point Lenana at 4985 metres, then down the other side to the Austrian Hut – another miserable, cold, windswept camp perched on a shoulder in the shadows of the mighty peak of Nelion. Here we met our third technical guide, David, a Kenyan local and, together with Garvin, the three of us discussed how the following day was going to play out. We arranged for breakfast at 4.15 am, with a 5 am departure for the approach.

That night we all retired to our frozen tents, with some anxiety playing around our heads. I was also worried about my health, climbing the peak with a viral cold, breathing in that frigid air on my burning throat for 14 hours plus, might not be the best idea. Under normal circumstances, back home, I would just stay indoors and wait it out until I felt better before I went climbing. But up there I felt enormous pressure. I was with my four clients, who I was mainly responsible for, and it was my job to see that they got to the summit of the peak. I also felt an allegiance to my sponsors for this expedition, The North Face, to reach the summit of the peak myself. With these thoughts playing around my head, I drifted off into a restless sleep.

My alarm went off at 3.45 am. The first thing I noticed was the wind. It was ruthlessly buffeting my tent. The temperatures were below zero and, coupled with the wind, it was quite brutal. We staggered out of our tents, managed to force some breakfast down, then started the approach at about 5 am, an inky blackness surrounding us. David led the way across the talus slopes, the Lewis Glacier a shadow of what it was 20 years ago, when I was last on this side of the mountain. I watched our trail of headlights and also saw headlights on the beginning stages of the route, indicating there were other parties ahead of us. >>

Robyn doing the final tricky moves of the lower traverse to gain the start of the Rabbit Hole pitch.
Photo TONY LOURENS

Anna and Jeanne-Marie having an exciting time on the top crux traverse. Photo TONY LOURENS

Just as it was getting light, we arrived at the foot of the wall and set about getting ready for the climb – David started off with Anna and Jeanne-Marie on his rope. I then followed with Robyn on my rope, and Garvin and Alan brought up the rear.

The Standard SE Face route up Nelion is not a particularly difficult route, but it is high, long (about 650 metres of climbing) and cold, and coupled with the fact that you are thickly clothed, wearing a pack and climbing in approach shoes, all adds up to making it quite a demanding adventure.

The first few pitches are quite easy, then comes a tricky traverse which gains the foot of the Rabbit Hole pitch. The Rabbit pitch is probably around grade 14, but gives proper climbing and feels harder given the circumstances. This leads to the start of 1 o'clock Gully. We climbed this to the right of the gully in three loooong pitches, which are very easy, and brings you to Bailie's Bivy – a small rustic bivy shack, which marks the halfway point on the climb. The problem with loooong easy pitches is that you tend to move too quickly and you end up exhausted because of the altitude, so you have to stop just to breathe.

From Bailie's, things ramp up a bit. A long traverse leads to the foot of Graaf's Variation, which is considered the crux of the climb. It is an excellent piece of climbing following some beautiful corners with good gear, on good rock for 30 metres. Probably about grade 16 at a normal crag, but up there in those frigid conditions, with a pack and climbing in approach shoes, it felt more like 18 to me.

After this, we climbed another long, but relatively easy pitch leading to a shoulder before another cruxy section – an undulating traverse to the right over some bowel sucking alpine exposure. This pitch gave some really tricky climbing, made worse by the fact that it was a traverse, so difficult to protect for the climbers following, resulting in some entertainment amongst the group. After this, some easy but long exhausting pitches up some gullies lead to the top, where we arrived in light snowfall.

Normally the group would gather for a summit shot, but we were all so >>

Above and below: Recuperating in the Howell Hut on the summit of Nelion. Photos ROBYN MARSHALL

Tony arriving on the summit of Nelion. Photo JEANNE-MARIE MOUTON

Abseiling high on the mountain.
Photo ALAN MCHARDY

exhausted, and wanting to get out of the sleeting snow, that we decided to forego the shot and all seven of us crammed into the Howell Bivy Hut on the summit to get out of the weather and rest up for a while.

Although reluctant to leave the sanctuary of the little box bivy, we had to make a move at 3 pm to allow us enough time to complete the complex descent and 12 abseils to the bottom of the wall. David, who knows this route like the back of his hand, led the way, and rigged the abseils so quickly and professionally that we hardly had to wait to get onto any of the abseils. Four hours later, we all touched down at the base of the route.

On the ground we thought we were home and dry, but one of the most exhausting parts of the day was still waiting for us – the relentless three-hour walk down the steep loose scree to our camp at 4200 metres in the blackness of night. We arrived at our camp at 10 pm, totally trashed! We were even too tired to eat. We only managed some tea and a few mouthfuls of soup before collapsing in our tents.

The next day we walked out to the flesh pots of a comfortable hotel in Nanyuki, which felt like paradise. There we were reunited with Colin, who much to our relief had recovered quite a bit by then. That night we celebrated a great trip with a great bunch of people, before going our separate ways the following day . . . until the next time. "Patsy, where's my passport?"

McKinder's Camp on our way down. The twin summits of Batian and Nelion standing proud in the deep blue sky, with the Point John tower on the right. Photo TONY LOURENS

A huge thanks to African Ascents for all their logistics work and excellent, professional staff, service, delicious food and equipment. Special thanks to Boniface our head guide from African Ascents, Moses our brilliant chef and Bongo our camp manager. They certainly know how to run a good show. And to all the porters who worked hard at carrying loads up the hill.

The whole group at the Park Gate at the end of the trip. Photo TONY LOURENS

THE NORTH FACE

Sponsors of Mount Kenya 2024

by TONY LOURENS

On my recent trip to Mount Kenya, I was very fortunate to be sponsored with some excellent kit by The North Face. This was my fourth time to this great African alpine peak, so I had a good idea of what was in store for me in terms of freezing temperatures, winds and the general tough conditions that come with climbing at these altitudes.

TNF asked for a wish list, so after much research and deliberation, I made my choices based on past experience and what I would need on my day-to-day life on the mountain – trekking and camp life, and also on summit day – a 700-metre rock climb in the thin frigid air above 5000 metres. Fortunately, I already had some technical TNF gear, from previous trips, which I knew would come in really handy, like my trusty Shadow 30 plus 10 backpack, which is the perfect alpine bag for these kind of climbing adventures.

Check out the review

I also took my pair of Explorer trousers, which were just the ticket for the trekking part of the trip. I used these six days in a row without any chaffing or discomfort.

Check out the review

For my rain shell, I took along my Dryzzle Futurelight jacket, which kept me dry and protected during the rain showers we experienced in the beginning and end of our trek and also on summit day, when we were caught in some wet sleet/snow conditions on the very top of the peak.

Check out the review

Another piece of kit that I took with was my very dependable lightweight TNF “Summit Series” down jacket, which comes with me on just about all my mountain trips – the ideal jacket to keep you protected against the cold while you’re doing strenuous activities, like climbing.

With these four pieces of kit already part of my arsenal, I carefully made the following choices to compliment and add to these.

Nuptse Retro Down Jacket

This became my most used and important piece of kit. Once the sun goes down above 3000 metres, the temperature drops really quickly. The Nuptse was a real winner here – with a thin first layer and a light fleece on top of that, the Nuptse worked incredibly well. I wore this continually from about 5 pm until bed time and again in the early morning hours at breakfast time. And at the higher altitudes, when things got even nastier, I would slip on my light Summit Series jacket underneath the Nuptse for added warmth.

Tony starting up Graaf’s Variation pitch, the best pitch of the *Standard Route* on Nelion, Mount Kenya. Photo GARVIN JACOBS

Quest Fleece Jacket

I basically lived in this top. Trekking during the day, when you are expending energy but the temps are still quite cool, walking with just a single layer, was just too cold. So, on top of a wicking T-shirt, I wore the lightweight Quest. This was the perfect combo. The wicking top would keep the sweat away from my skin, and the fleece would keep the cold air out. Only when the cold wind came up at the higher altitudes was it necessary to put on another layer while trekking between camps.

Flex T
Trail Jammer T
Valday T

These three TNF T-shirts were all I wore as my first layer on the entire trek. All with excellent wicking properties to keep sweat and moisture away from your skin, and super quick drying.

Mountain Athletic Pants and Crew Neck Fleece

When getting into camp after the long daily trek, the first thing we did was fall into the mess tent and have a few cups of tea, then we would retire to our respective tents to relax and get a bit of rest. At this time, it's great to be able to get out of your trekking kit and don something fleecy and comfortable for the rest of the day. It makes you feel really cosy and warm. The Athletic pants and crew neck did the job admirably, with its polyester outer and light polar fleece lining.

Quest Slim Softshell Pants

This was a total winner. I kept these as my party trick for summit day. Everyone who was heading up the final 700 metres to the summit of Nelion was in a quandary as to what would work best in terms of layering. I'm not a great fan of long johns. I just find them too restricting and hot. So, I was very excited when I saw the Slim softshell pants. They are light, durable, water and wind repellent, with a slim, but slightly elasticated fit. They actually performed better than I expected, keeping me warm and comfortable the whole 18-hour-long day, and allowed excellent freedom of movement while climbing.

Base Camp Duffel X-large

What better travel duffel than the iconic TNF Base Camp – tough, practical and spacious enough for all my kit and climbing equipment. Comes with carry handles and shoulder straps for ease of carrying. I chose bright yellow, so it is easily identifiable from a distance when travelling.

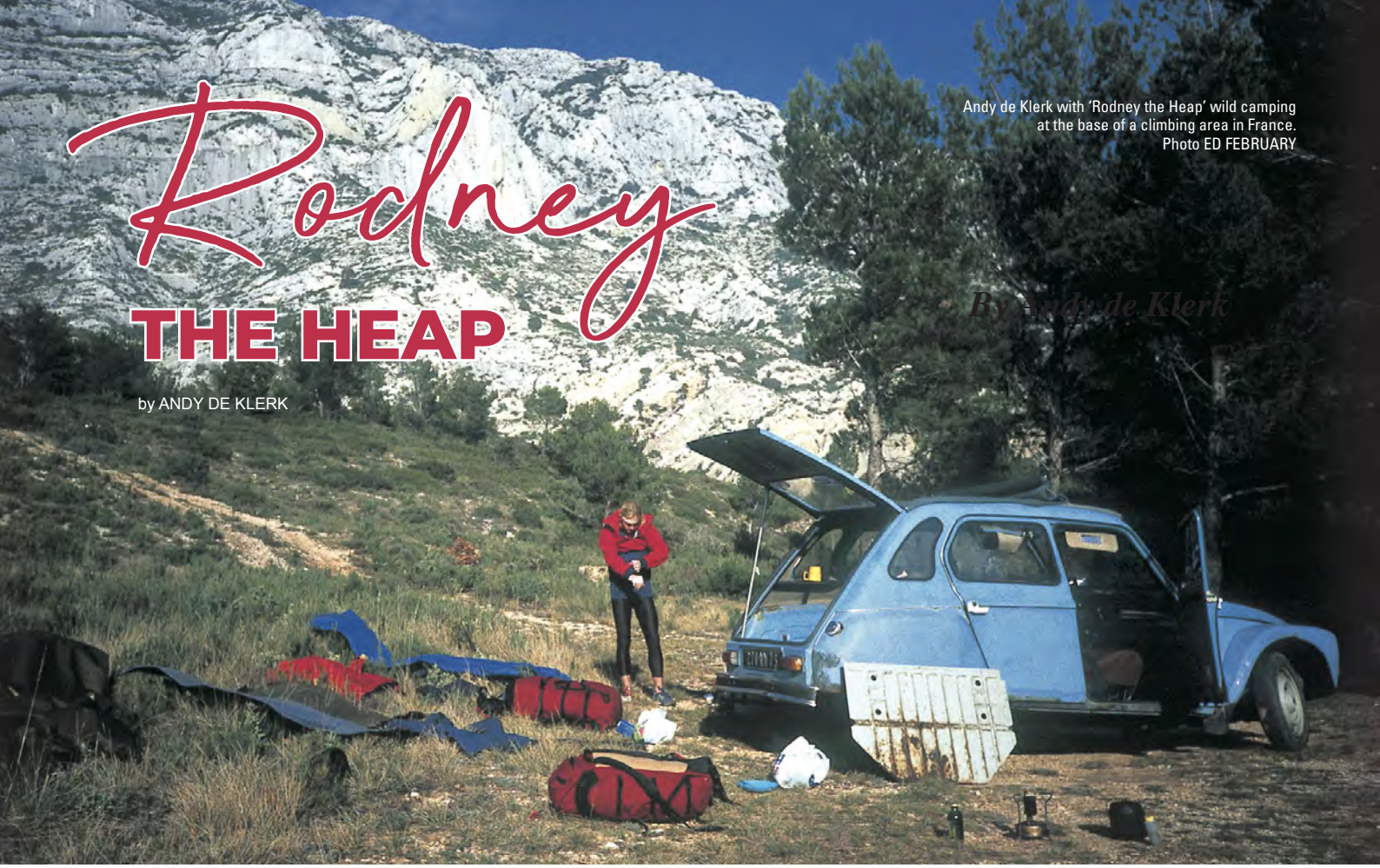
RAW
EXPOSURE

Birte Toussaint, laybacking through the top overhang on the first pitch of *Bombay Duck* (16), Table Mountain, Western Cape. Photo WILLIE KOEN

Brian Godfrey onsighting the classic *Atomic Breakaway* (21), Lost World, Montagu. Photo TONY LOURENS

Rodney THE HEAP

by ANDY DE KLERK



Andy de Klerk with 'Rodney the Heap' wild camping at the base of a climbing area in France. Photo ED FEBRUARY

And so there we were. Again! Ed [February] and I in the middle of a minor epic without even realising it. The blizzard had finally become so bad that we couldn't continue any further: snowdrifts piled high around us, and thick heavy snow braided everything together into a white crystal sheet. Night was fast approaching, and it looked like a bivvy was inevitable. Ed peered into the gloom as the last of the heat around us vanished and said: "Mmm, I feel a nip in the air. It reminds me of Pearl Harbour."

We weren't on Everest or the Alps, although some of that would come later, nor were we anywhere remotely close to the mountains. Instead, there we sat inside our car, half drifted over, in the middle of the M1 motorway somewhere in the flat farmlands of Sussex, 100 miles from London. Unbeknown to us, we had entered the UK in the middle of the worst winter storm to hit the island in half a century – 500-year-old oak trees had lain uprooted on the side of the highway, but how were we to know anything was amiss? This was our first visit to the British Isles and we spent that first night in an English jail.

Ed was curled up on the front seat in his sleeping bag with a cup of tea when a gloved hand wiped drifted snow from the window. "I'm sorry sirs, but you can't stay here, you'll have to come with me." Ed offered the copper some tea, which he politely declined. We were then pulled out of the snowdrift sideways by an army Landrover and driven to the nearest village where we spent the night in the nick along with a salesman, a prostitute and a thief, none of whom were on their way to Llanberis Pass to climb *Cenotaph Corner* or *Left Wall*. The cell doors were left open that night, and all of us, I'm sure, were only too happy to leave the next morning.

Two days later we dug our car out of the drift on the side of the motorway, and there, in all of his frost encrusted glory, emerged 'Rodney the Heap'. Some months previously, Ed and I had bought the car in France. We had needed transportation for our grand Euro Tour, and so with the help of Didier Trousseau, a friend of ours in Albertville, we had managed to buy a Citroen 2CV "Deux Chevaux" for 600 Francs which was quite cheap even back then. From a distance the car had looked in pretty good shape, but on closer inspection, it turned out to be a complete heap: Powered by a glorified two-cylinder lawnmower engine, it was a rattling old contraption held together with some bits of wire and not too much else. But it had four wheels and it could drive, and we were psyched because we were mobile and could go climbing. Ed named the car Rodney, after his brother, because it tended to drink a lot of oil but, despite itself, still had plenty of stamina. We loaded our gear into the back and constantly surprised ourselves at how much stamina Rodney had as he carried us, gears whining and pistons screaming over torturous alpine roads.

Rodney just seemed to be a magnet for the cops. We would be peacefully driving down the road, well below the speed limit, on our way to the crag, when I would happen to glance in the one remaining rear-view mirror (on the passenger side) and see flashing lights. Gendarmerie/police/carabinieri/polizie. They were all the same. "Here we go

again…" They always tended to haul you out and check your papers and examine the car and then let you go with a warning to do this, or that, or the next thing which we never did. Like get the roof fixed because there was a gaping hole in it where Chris Lomax had put a frozen rope through the vinyl in the Vallee de La Romanche after we had climbed a frozen waterfall in brittle temperatures near -40˚C.

We were stopped by the cops in virtually every country in Europe, which was hardly surprising after all the numerous mechanical mishaps and accidents, each one making Rodney look even more of a wreck than the last. Somebody drilled a bolt hanger onto the back for convenient belaying; we came within an inch of taking out a red Maserati in Monte Carlo after an Australian climber that we had given a lift to left the handbrake off; the bonnet blew off going down the highway one day because I had neglected to tie it back on after an oil stop; and a small collision on a one lane road in the Cairngorms had thrown the whole car frame out of line. Rodney drove along like a dog with a broken leg: the three good legs dragging the fourth behind. He crabbed his way down the road, scrubbing all the tyres bare.

About nine months after the wheel alignment accident, Lomax and I were driving through the flat industrial heartland of Northern France one blisteringly hot Sunday afternoon. We were en route to Chamonix when one of the long-suffering tyres finally had a blowout. We put on the spare, which was only marginally better, and less than a kilometre down the road, we were pulled over by a gendarme yet again. He inspected the tyre which we had just changed and was horrified at how bald it was, and then (I knew it was coming), he wanted to see our spare, which was lying in shreds inside the boot. There was the expected Gallic horror: eyes rolled back, "O La La" and "O Merde!" The policeman made us follow him to the nearest village, made us buy four new tyres, made the mechanic heat up the rear axle and pound it back into line, and bade us "Bon voyage et bonne escalade" with a nice ticket for disturbing his quiet Sunday afternoon beat. In one afternoon he had used up half the money I had saved for the entire summer, but I didn't care, because there was a whole season ahead of us. I ended up doing a lot of enchainements to save on telepherique fares, and a lucky break when the teller at a Bureau de Change added two zeros to a traveller's cheque by mistake meant I could keep climbing instead of picking grapes or washing beer glasses at the Bar Nationale. Somehow it all worked out in the end, despite ourselves. And Rodney kept chugging away.

Rodney also developed a stubborn fickleness in his ability to start. Ed had taken most of the ignition to pieces and still couldn't get it to work, so we learned to park on hills and became experts at predicting exactly who would have jumper cables to help us get started again. Outside Avignon one morning, Moose [Nick Good], Julie Brugger and I had almost finished stealing a box of ripe apples from an orchard when the farmer spotted us and came running towards us yelling and brandishing a spade. Straight out of a B-grade movie, except that Rodney, our trusty getaway car, refused to start at the critical moment and we were caught red handed. Julie ended up baking him a delicious apple pie, and in the end we drove away with an even bigger box of apples along with a jump-start from his tractor.

Rodney had another, slightly more serious bug, and that was his appetite for steering wheels. We drove into the campsite at Apt after a day of climbing and the steering wheel suddenly came away in my hands. The knuckle at the end of the shaft had broken off. If you look carefully enough though, virtually every village in France has a junkyard nearby and there would almost always be one or two old 2CV's from which you could scavenge spare steering wheels. Rodney would go through about one steering wheel a week on average, but for the long drive back to the UK we planned ahead and wedged in five extras next to the two Kiwi climbers we had given a lift to. Border crossings in Rodney tended to be rather lengthy affairs at the best of times, but that crossing at Dover topped them all. Simon, one of the Kiwis, even managed to take a nap during the four hours it took the customs to take the car apart and put it back together looking for the drugs we didn't have. We were strip searched, questioned separately, and then re-questioned, and our stories must have corroborated, because they finally let us go. We were just honest young climbers after all. As we drove off Simon turned to me: "Ya know, I reckon it must have been the steering wheels in the back that tipped them off".

The last time I saw Rodney was when I parked him down an alley in a swank Wimbledon neighbourhood. A French couple were walking their dog down the road and the woman came rushing up to me all excited: "Vous etes Francais et un Savoyard quandmeme?" Her face fell with real disappointment when I replied: "Non madame, je suis Sud Africain, et je parts ce soir." They continued their walk down the damp street as I stowed the three remaining steering wheels in the back, locked the door and flew home. Some months later, Andy Wood, a friend of ours, needed a car in Europe and I drew him a map of how to find Rodney and handed him the keys. Rodney apparently drove six blocks and then died forever. Perhaps it was because neither Ed nor I were there to coax some more inspiration into him, or perhaps it was just that he had had enough, but Rodney decided not to co-operate any further. His was a lonely fate on a grey London Street, also far from home.

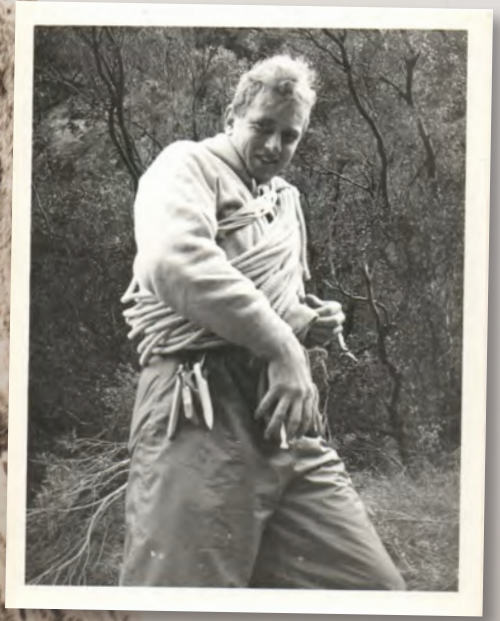
Woody gave me back the keys and the registration papers, and I kept them for quite a while, not really ready to let go of an old friend. I imagine that poor old 'Rodney the Heap' probably found his end crushed into a rusting piece of compressed metal in some British automotive scrap yard after the police had failed to trace the registered owners. The owners had gone. Their lives had moved on to different goals. Rodney was the ultimate dream car: he took us to the places where we made our dreams come true. For a year and a half we drove, lived, and slept in him, we nursed, cajoled, kicked and swore at him, and still he kept on going; whining and rattling and taking us to the bottom of whatever climb we had set our sights on. There was no way they could have known how much fun we had had with Rodney, nor how much freedom that beat up wreck had given us. I do sometimes wonder though, after the police finally towed Rodney away for the last time, whether they stopped for a minute or two to wonder why there were so many steering wheels in the back.

Rick WILLIAMS

Cape climber extraordinaire

by MICKY WILLIAMS

A hawser-laid rope moves slowly upward, the overhang above blocking his companions' view of the climber glued to the smooth, white sandstone face. Suddenly the movement is quicker, tugging at the belayer's waist. Two climbers wait anxiously on the ledge below; the belayer shouts "Richard, are you up?" After a few more agonising moments comes the shout of "Off belay". Then came the phrase that gives the new route its name: "That was touch and go, I only just made it!" Barry Fletcher, at time of writing, the sole surviving member of that first ascent, never called him Rick or Ricky. It was always Richard, or old chap – a mutual address.



MAIN: Rick on the crux pitch of *Krakadouw Amphitheatre*.
INSET: Rick at an MCSA rock meet in the early '60s.
Photos RICK WILLIAMS COLLECTION

Richard (Rick) Francis Williams was born on 31 May 1939 in Liverpool, England, a few months before the start of WW2. I remember having to use his original birth certificate to secure my British passport when I first travelled to the UK, and when my brother and I visited the Cavern Club in Liverpool where the Beatles first played, their replica birth certs on the wall looked exactly like Dad's.

When the bombing of major British cities began, he was moved to Kendal in the Lake District, with his mother Beatrice ('Mudrie') and older brother Hugh. His father, Vincent, was in the air force and posted abroad for almost the entire duration of the war. The story goes that when he returned, Rick didn't remember him at all and in fact resented this 'new' person in his life to the extent he carried Vincent's shoes outside one day in the hope the man would follow.

The Williams family had, for a couple of generations, been in the shoe retail business. My great aunt Phyllis, the only relative I knew in England, once showed me a photograph of the family shoe shop in Croydon, London, emblazoned with 'H.W. Williams' along the shop front. I think that was my great grandfather, of whom the only other thing I know is that he won a cycle race in 1899. I still have the medal he won, given to me by Phyllis. In 1946, like many families keen to escape rationed post-war Britain, they emigrated to Cape Town, travelling by ship as one did then.

Vincent soon had a job as a shoe salesman, and Rick was initially put into school in Tamboerskloof. It was here he met the future Queen Elizabeth, still a princess at the time, on the royal visit to Cape Town in early 1947. Outside his school, the princess walked down the line of small boys, stopping at one who was probably a bit smaller than his peers, had longer shorts and much, much whiter legs. "You're an English boy, aren't you," she said to Rick. This anecdote has always lacked an indication of what his reply was, if there even was one beyond an open-mouthed seven-year-old stare. I never thought to ask him, but I wonder if even then the young boy glanced up at the silver-grey rock around the upper cable-car station with any idea that in just fourteen years' time he would contribute to what was, however briefly, one of the hardest rock-climbs in the world and remains one of the classic test pieces on Table Mountain to this day.

The small Rick didn't much like school and moved through several of them. Perhaps this was the emergence of the often mischievous, somewhat misanthropic (but in the best possible way) man I knew as my dad. He adored animals his whole life, and when the family lived in Pinelands, he tried to bring a donkey home one day. Mudrie was having none of that! >>

On a recce mission on upper section of Fernwood Precipice, April 1968. Photo BARRY FLETCHER

He did settle eventually, and for his secondary schooling attended Kearsney College in KwaZulu-Natal, between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. He excelled in sports, playing first team rugby and cricket. Rick was left handed, but for cricket he could bat either way, and I'm sure he enjoyed using this party trick to confound bowlers. He also loved sailing. He and two friends had to be rescued from Durban Bay once, after getting into difficulty on their 'Opie' sailing boat. He always claimed they were fine, and the rescuers could have left them alone, but this event ended up on the front page of the newspaper, much to his mortification. Although his love of sailing was life-long, perhaps this incident prompted him to seek land-based adventures, and it was during his high school years that he started rock climbing.

Hugh, his older brother by five years, had started climbing with Dave Smith and others from the Johannesburg area. Rick's first forays into climbing were with them, but he also soon met Barry Fletcher, Bob Reinecke and Paul White, and Rick and Paul became close friends. Paul was killed in an abseiling accident in 1967. This badly affected Rick for some time, and my older brother was named after him. Barry offered to take him climbing on his visits to Cape Town, and it soon became apparent that there was little he couldn't climb. Exceptionally strong and able to do one-arm pull-ups, he was also among the first climbers in SA to realise that training was something helpful to top level climbing. Bouldering and "practice pitches" (shorter one-pitch crags and faces), were a huge part of his climbing activity.

His name starts to appear against routes in the late 1950s; the first was on Tafelberg in the Cedarberg. The names escapes me, but Rick was 17 at the time. *Postern Crest* was next, in 1957. Although recognised as a Barry Fletcher route, Rick was on the opening ascent, and as the young rope gun, I'm sure he would have been pointed at some of the harder pitches. I've led the first pitch of that climb, probably at about the same age, and I remember it being one of those times that I – how shall I put this – questioned my life choices. I completed the pitch, but was terrified, and I had a full generation's worth of equipment and footwear evolution to help me.

Joan Quail belaying Rick Williams on *Snakes & Ladders*, Barrier Buttress. Photo RICK WILLIAMS COLLECTION

Rick Williams and Barry Fletcher having breakfast before climbing on Fernwood Precipice, 1968. Photo KEITH FLETCHER

I didn't climb much with Rick. Our climbing careers, if one can put it like that, didn't overlap. We did do some easier routes together with Lynne (Dad's spouse and partner of nearly 40 years), and my brother Paul on Elsie's Peak, the Hangklips (Groot and Klein), Muizenberg, and Lion's Head. But by the time I was in my mid to late teens and starting to climb harder routes, he had almost completely wound down. Years of injury to his knees from running down mountains, combined with shoulder problems from an inherited arthritis condition eventually put paid to anything but relatively easy climbs. Because of these health issues, he went almost completely vegetarian during the '80s and early '90s.

Kayaking had become his new passion in the early 1980s, and I have far more memories of Dad from rivers than I do from climbs. Also sailing; he bought a 32-foot sloop called Intrepid in 1982, and sailed her down from Durban with Keith Fletcher.

I vividly remember the 'practice pitches' though, and the weird boulder problems he showed me part way up Lion's Head. One of them, apparently established by Keith Fletcher, was something nobody could figure out how to climb conventionally – it was only possible if you faced outwards and did it backwards. I doubt I'd even be able to find it again!

I can only talk about my own experience of 'his' climbs; he didn't talk much about his climbs and was always more interested in what I was doing. We would slag each other off of course, as climbers do. I was once telling him about climbing *Thunder and Lichen* on Valken Buttress with Richard Behne, and how Richard was at one point run out at least ten feet above his last piece of gear. "Only ten feet? That's nothing!" For many years, an enlarged mounted photo of Rick on *Hot Dogger* hung in the front hallway of our house

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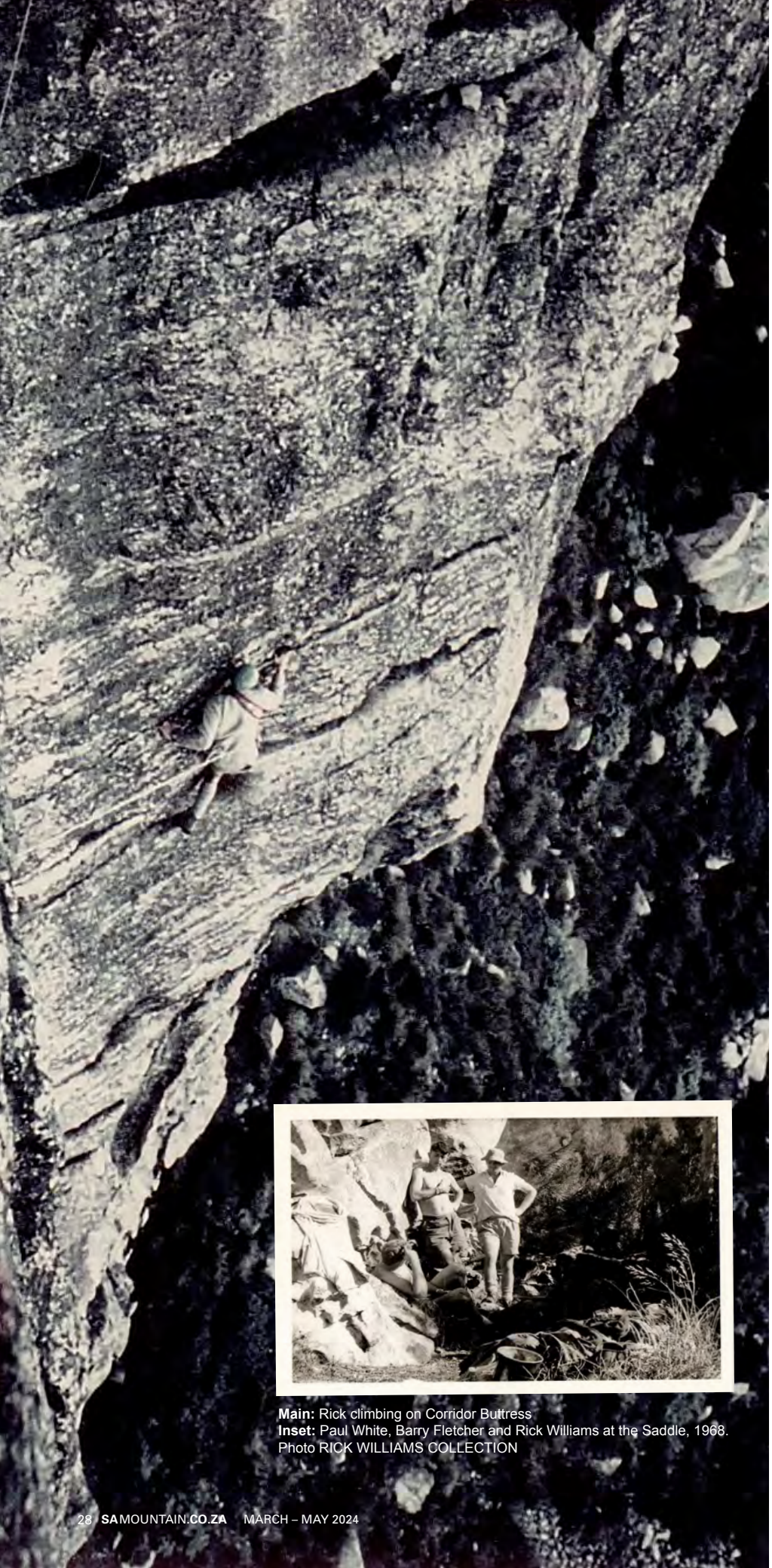


Main: Rick climbing on Corridor Buttress
Inset: Paul White, Barry Fletcher and Rick Williams at the Saddle, 1968.
Photo RICK WILLIAMS COLLECTION

in Newlands. For that route, a wooden wedge had been specially made to fit the wide rail and provide some protection – now, of course, a large cam does the job. In this photo it looks for all the world like he's aiding the thing, and there's an etrier hanging from the wedge. Later, after my parents separated, the photo hung in his office at Nautilus Marine. I used to tease him about aiding the climb, even though it's a route I've never climbed myself.

On one occasion I visited him at work with Bobby Woods. At the time Bobby and I worked on the fringes of the same industry, and we were discussing potential work collaboration. Bobby, on seeing the photo, immediately said "Look, you're aiding that" and of course I felt totally vindicated – "See, I've been saying that for years!"

For what it's worth, Rick certainly didn't use aid on the first full opening ascent, with Tony Chinery and Don Hartley. Don wrote in a Facebook post after Dad's passing: *"I remember on Hot Dogger how he had psyched himself up to lead the crux, he launched himself onto the hand traverse and did a pure mantleshelf no fuss pure execution, my jaw dropped holding the rope what a great climber"* And of course there's the intro to *Hot Dogger* in the Twelve Apostles guidebook: "A frightening series of desperate pitches, technical and ridiculously strenuous."

I did most of my early climbing with my maternal grandparents, Brian and Joan Quail. Once on an MCSA rock meet at Muizenberg, someone had put a top-rope on an old F2-grade route that has a strenuous undercut pull-up straight out of the cave. I was probably thirteen or fourteen, and remember hearing someone remark "He's got Rick's power" as I pulled through the move. I never really did have Rick's power though, and probably made up for it in other ways.

Perhaps the most well-known of Rick's climbs, or more accurately, routes of which he took part in the opening ascent, is *Touch and Go*. Having drawn straws, or presumably sticks, Paul White had tried the crux first, and an iconic photo of Paul at the end of the first handrail, before pulling up to establish oneself on the face above, was taken by Barry Fletcher and appeared in the MCSA journal of 1961.

Don Hartley later used the photo to produce a wonderful chalk drawing that hung for years in Dad's house in Hout

Bay, and now hangs in my house in Belturbet, Ireland. Paul White had placed a piton above, and retreated from there as he didn't think he could complete the pitch having expended that amount of energy on the first part. Rick had drawn the second straw, and it was his turn that produced the first ascent of the crux pitch, and the comment that gave the route its name. I climbed it a few times, once in 'takkies' and without chalk, as I assume Dad had originally done it. But my abiding memory is climbing the *Touch and Go/Magnetic Wall* combination with Richard Behne and two visiting Estonians, neither of whom spoke much English.

Seeing one taking out a rack of quickdraws, with no sign of any nuts or cams, we managed to communicate the general lack of bolts in the area. We offered to let them follow us, their leader using our gear placements. One of them couldn't do the crux though. We retrieved him later by way of Arrow Final. The other guy, who was quite good, looked at Richard and I after he'd reached us on the ledge above the crux. Gesturing down, he said: "Sorry about my friend . . . big mouth, small muscles!"

When I was about twelve, I remember meeting Johannesburg-based climber George Mallory, grandson and namesake of the famous mountaineer who disappeared on Everest in 1924. His cousin was my best friend at school, and George, several years older than us, was staying with them while sampling some Cape climbing. When his aunt introduced me, she mentioned I was from a climbing family, and I told him that yes, my dad was a climber. "Oh, did your dad ever do *Touch and Go*?"

One of my most special memories of one of Dad's climbs was climbing *Krakadouw Amphitheatre* with my brother. We were both in university, he in Pretoria at Onderstepoort and I at UCT. So I was definitely the one doing the most climbing, but Paul loved to get some in whenever he visited during holidays. We were continuing north afterwards, to do a multi-day kayaking trip on the Orange River with Rick, Lynne, and others. Richard Behne also headed up to Krakadouw with two others, I think it was André Burger and Chris Vickers. As Paul and I only had time for one route, we opted for *Krakadouw Amphitheatre*, while Richard, Chris and André took on one of the harder routes on the smaller amphitheatre.

Rick on the crux handrail pitch of *Hot Dogger*, Postern Buttress. Photo RICK WILLIAMS COLLECTION

Although now somewhat overshadowed by the likes of *Gorilla Grooves* and *King Kong*, two of the best quality climbs you'll find anywhere in the world, the *Amphitheatre* route is still a wonderful climb, and quite sustained in the grade. It took us the whole day to climb, neither of us having done it before, and what with having to find our way through the unfamiliar descent passages, and then set up abseils, it was very nearly dark by the time we started abseiling. Having prepared ourselves for some ribbing from Richard Behne about taking so long (and probably some semi-serious scolding – he always looked out for me in that way), we were surprised to see them still on their climb, clearly having difficulty with route finding.

They ended up benighted on a ledge not far from the top, only finding their way up and off the next morning. They were too high up for their two 50-metre ropes to reach the ground, so they couldn't retreat, and we couldn't send anything up to them. Instead, they sang very loudly all night trying to keep us awake too (climbers, né!), to no avail, as we didn't hear a thing in the sleeping spot underneath an overhang.

Rick loved kayaking almost as much as he had loved climbing (I think!). Most weekends during winter, if we weren't sailing, would see us out on a >>

Rick on the second pitch of *Touch and Go*.
PHOTO MIKE SCOTT

river somewhere: the Eerste in Stellenbosch, upper sections of the Berg above Paarl, the Molenaars, either past the Du Toits Kloof Hotel, or the lower section to Rawsonville. We also took on the Doring in the Northern Cederberg, and even the Palmiet a couple of times, especially now that one could legally do so. However, that last detail had never stopped Rick, 'Binkie' Kohler, Doug Berrisford, etc. before. The plan, apparently, was to give false names if caught – names of other climbers, of course!

Rick was never on the pioneering edge of kayaking the way he had been with climbing. They avoided more dangerous rivers which are probably regarded as mainstream today. But I believe more than anything, Rick just loved being outdoors, especially being outdoors close to, or in, the Cape mountains. He had both hips replaced in his 60s, and this gave him a new lease on life. In typical Rick fashion, he expressed disappointment that the doctors had forbidden him from taking the removed bone pieces home for the dogs!

Rick lived for years in Hout Bay, in a small cottage that at one point had been a farm's tractor shed. There are many trees in the garden, including several yellowwoods. He decided to build a wooden second story, with the look and feel of a mountain hut. One morning in 1992, he and I removed the old asbestos roof sheeting of the cottage. Now he had a house with no roof, and building the new part was going to take several months. That same afternoon, we used the old roofing to build a shack in the garden. He, Lynne and the dogs lived in it for six months, running an extension cord from the house down to the shack, they even had their TV set up in it. Showers were taken in the house, with plastic sheeting to provide privacy. He and Lynne built the house themselves, with the help of some individual contractors. Years later, when, during a winter storm, one of the big stone pines fell and damaged part of the roof, his insurance company paid him to fix it himself – they couldn't find anyone else with the requisite knowledge of exactly how it had been built.

Rick passed away in the early hours of 10th August 2021, after suffering from lewy-body dementia which eventually left him bedridden. We scattered his ashes in some of the places he loved. Barrier Cave, because which Cape trad climber doesn't love that place? A boulder beneath the towering, brooding yellow wall of Fernwood Precipice, on which he established two routes, neither of which have had many (if any) repeats. And Silvermine, where he regularly walked in the company of beloved mountains, and his beloved dogs.

Rick and Barry Fletcher on an early recce of *Ascension Amphitheatre*
Photo KEITH FLETCHER

Rick's list of first ascents

Ascension Amphitheatre (1967) – Ascension Buttress, TM
Africa Amphitheatre (1967) – Africa Ledge, TM.
Touch and Go (1961) – Fountain Ledge, TM
Walkover (1966) – Barrier Buttress, TM
Hang Ten (1967) – Barrier Buttress, TM
Champs Elysees (1960) – Postern Buttress, TM
Postern Crest (1956) – Postern Buttress, TM
Hot Dogger (1976) – Postern Buttress, TM
The Hanger (1968) – Grootkop Buttress, TM
Fernwood Precipice (1963) – Fernwood Buttress, TM
Fernwood Precipice Direct (1976) – Fernwood Buttress, TM
Freddie (1962) – Witteberg
Haelhoek Spire Frontal (1965) – Haelhoek Sneeukop
The Strainer (1959) – Tafelberg, Cederberg
Krakadouw Amphitheatre (1968) – Krakadouw Peak, Cederberg
Via Centrale (1961) – Castle Rocks, Hex River
Ripcord (1959) – Postern Buttress, TM
Aloe Ridge (1965) – Haelhoek Sneeukop
Black Waterfall Face (1965) – De La Bat Ridges, Du Toit's Kloof
Prelude (1967) – Erica Buttress, TM
Reunion (1966) – Protea Buttress, TM
Violet Towers (1962) – Hex River
Wormhole Buttress (1966) – Wormhole Buttress, TM
Grootkop Gable (1975) – Grootkop Buttress, TM
Grotto Wall (1976) – Fountain Peak Buttress, TM
Millions (year unknown) – Lion's Head Granite

Rick on the first pitch of *Valken Edge*, Valken Buttress.
Photo MIKE SCOTT

OFF THE WALL

by Brenda Marx

HAND INJURIES

(fingers and wrists)

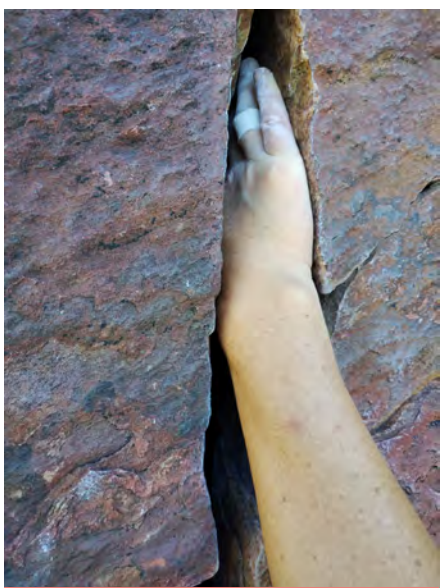
There is so much to be said about wrist and finger injuries – one could write a book on this subject alone.

Hands are probably the most common and neglected injuries in climbers.

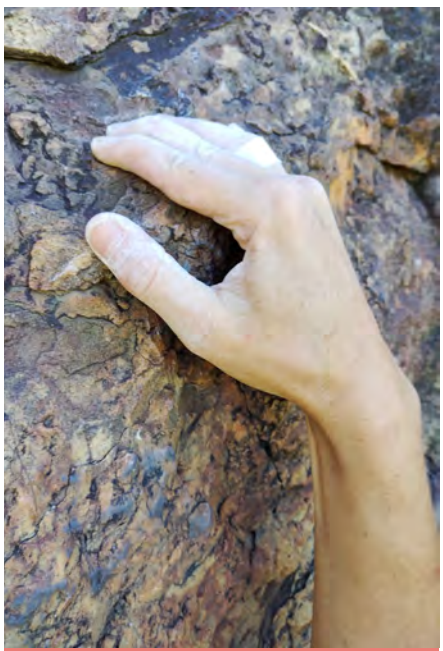
Why? I guess it's because the muscles and joints are not massive in size, so injuries can be perceived as 'small' or less 'serious', one's pain tolerance in the hands might be higher compared to the rest of the body, and we need our hands for almost everything that we do, so we learn to work around pain and discomfort.

However, together with our feet, these tiny muscles and joints are our primary connection to the rock that we so love to climb, and they are exposed to the same forces as our elbows and shoulders. I don't know of any climber who has not had some injury to their hands at some stage of their climbing lives. These injuries could therefore also be neglected the most. Today I will discuss the most common injuries. However, the treatments and rehab for finger and wrist injuries can be very similar regardless of the type of injuries and their causes.

Wrist sprains can be caused by over extension, for example, stopping a ground fall. Also, catching your whole bodyweight in a dyno can put excessive retractive force on the wrist. Doing this repetitively can lead to micro-tears in the joint, which over time can cause weakness and become more prone to sprains. A lot of twisting of your wrist in a hand jam can also cause tension and micro damage in the wrist, and doing this repetitively can cause inflammation and pain. Wrist sprains can range from mild to debilitating.



Thumb-down jams can place a lot of strain on the wrist, especially when twisting hard to help with some extra friction. Minimise risk of injury by focusing as much weight as possible on your feet, and if repetitive jamming is required, try to keep the wrist neutral or try to rather jam thumb-up.



Gripping slopers, underclings or even sidepulls with a flexed wrist places strain on the median nerve. Try to focus on keeping a neutral wrist as best you can.

Carpal tunnel syndrome is caused by the median nerve being pinched anywhere from the wrist to the shoulder. This can happen from repeated gripping with flexed wrists (e.g. bad technique while underclinging or holding on to slopers). It is generally more common in people who have weakness in the shoulders and/or neck. Sometimes carpal tunnel surgery is suggested, but it doesn't always end successfully. This type of injury can be prevented by shoulder strengthening (see the exercises in the article I wrote on shoulder rehab in the last issue of SAM) and keeping a neutral wrist position when gripping.

When you are experiencing a wrist injury, the best advice I can give you is to stop climbing and strengthen your shoulders. But we're not going to stop climbing, are we? Another option is to rather do climbs without slopers, >>

underclings, sidepulls or hand jams. However, you're probably on top form, have worked out all the beta on your proj, and you just need the next couple of sessions to link it all up. So, telling you to deload now is not going to work. You can use kinesiotape around your wrist to support it and aid with circulation. Also, the palm-against-wall-stretch explained in my article on elbow injuries can help bring relief. If you don't send that project in the next week or two, and the pain persists, please do go and see a physio who can help you with a proper customised rehabilitation programme for you.

In the palm of our hands are smallish muscles called the lumbrical muscles. They are most often injured when a finger is forcefully straightened while the other fingers are actively gripping or bent. If resisting with one finger is painful in the palm of the hand and resisting with two fingers is not, then that's a likely diagnosis. Recovery is usually one to two months. Buddy taping the finger that causes pain to one of its neighbours can help you to do some light climbing while you are healing.

Most climbers are no stranger to finger injuries. Finger injuries can be due to pressure trauma, such as bruising of the finger pads when pulling on sharp pockets, tendons and ligaments that get inflamed because the gliding in their sheaths get compromised due to pressure or swelling, or by fast jerks on the finger joints and tendons.

Again, when you have an injured finger, ideally don't climb until there's no pain, and then gradually increase the load over four to six weeks until you're back where you were. And again, because we are stubborn climbers full of psych, we're not going to do that. Localised rehab of the fingers is minimal, because we use our hands for most things that we do, and gentle movement can speed up healing. Finger extensor exercises can be done to aid healing. The easiest way to do that is to hold an elastic band over your fingers when the tips are all held together, and performing slow and controlled extension movements. Do 20 reps with each hand daily.

Engaging the shoulders optimally can do wonders for grip strength. I would therefore always recommend doing the shoulder exercises in the article I wrote on shoulder rehab (previous issue of SAM) to support the fingers, wrists and elbows.

Healing of finger injuries can take anything from one week to three months.

Pulley strains: Usually the pain is only felt after climbing. The ideal treatment is to take two to three weeks off climbing. Then support the injured pulley with tape and try to avoid full crimps for the next month or so. Bruising or swelling is not common with pulley injuries.

Pulley tears/ruptures: You will know when that happens. You will hear the dreaded pop sound, usually when pulling on a crimp. These injuries need time to heal. Ideally, take six weeks off climbing and gradually increase loading of the finger over the next three to six months.

Two wraps of about a centimetre-wide tape over the affected pulley can take up to 50 kg of strain off the pulley if it's done correctly. Apply the tape firmly without restricting any blood flow.

Pulleys can be very successfully supported by taping the injured pulley. Use a ±1cm wide strip of finger tape, and wrap it twice around the injured pulley. Be careful to not wrap it too tightly – you don't want to cut off any circulation (blood flow helps the healing process) – you just want to support the pulley.

The best advice when taping for an inflamed joint capsule is to wrap two rounds of tape around the base of the affected knuckle. Taping around half the knuckle, so that the edge of the tape is aligned with the fold of your finger still allows for enough movement while supporting the joint capsule.

Tenosynovitis is inflammation of the fluid-filled sheath that surrounds the tendon. When this tendon is inflamed, the gliding of the tendon in its sheath is compromised. This can feel like a pulley strain, but the finger is sore and more likely swollen. Taping the pulley in the injured area as explained above will spread the pressure of the pulley over the inflamed/irritated tendon and hopefully provide some relief.

Synovitis is inflammation of the joint capsule. The most common symptoms are soreness, stiffness and reduced range of movement. Taping for synovitis is a contentious issue, but I have found that two rounds of tape around the base of the affected knuckle supports the joint and, still allowing for enough movement to climb, really reduces the pain felt the day after climbing.

The flexor tendons are the tendons that connect the muscles of the forearm to our fingers. These can get injured by fast jerks on the finger, often on monos, and pain can be felt through the forearm. This can take about a month to heal. If you can't stop climbing, just avoid any moves that might hurt.

This is just scraping the surface of hand injuries in climbing, but I think I may have covered the most common ones. If you are unsure of your injury, or if it takes more than three months to heal, I recommend you see a physiotherapist to advise you on the best treatment for your situation.

Happy healing until next time.

The Da Vinci Code

F≤μN – *it's a bit of a drag!*

by Terence Livingston

Finger rubbed against thumb in a static snap, and the universe sparked into kinetic motion.

In the beginning, God said, "Let there be land." A scrape of earth emerged from the deep, up into the newly formed sky. And it was good.

Noah saw the first rainbow while perched on a peak. Both Moses and Jesus enjoyed the odd scramble up holy hills. The ancient Greeks had all their mythical deities living on Olympus. And the Islamic prophet uttered the devout words: "If the mountain won't come to Muhammad, Muhammad must go to the mountain."

With all this rich, spiritual alpine history, I am trying hard to sync with my metaphysical self as I grapple with the steep incline. But I feel nothing sacred as my body hangs at adverse angles to the wall. No matter how much faith I conjure up, gravity won't disappear. It's at that moment I need more divine inspiration, more insight into the laws of creation!

Feeling my fingertips slipping off the microscopic crimp, I wish I had applied a little more chalk. Anything to achieve oneness with the sandstone, to find my inner gecko. The sun is great on my back, but it's not doing anything for my sweaty hands. They're struggling to stick. Even the rubber on my shoes can't find any purchase, and I know I'm about the experience Leonardo da Vinci's theory of free-fall motion: "Speed is directly proportional to the time spent falling."

It's not a very helpful hypothesis when you're in mid-air!

It's just one of the many divine codes hidden in the fabric of the universe that the revered scientist uncovered. Fortunately, he also discovered another set of laws much more beneficial to achieving gecko status. Ones that can transform any of us mortals into mountain-top gurus.

From Aristotle to Vitruvius, the idea of friction became an interesting point of discovery, but it wasn't until Da Vinci came along in 1493 that these ideas began falling into place (excuse the pun!). Leonardo had better things to do than paint obscure clues into his artwork to hide supposed conspiracies! He was the OG influencer long before YouTubers, and his notes on friction paved the way for others to set them into scientific law. He understood the relation between the amount of force you apply directly to a surface and the texture of that surface. Friction is integral to climbing. If your appendages don't stick, better start praying!

Static friction is created between the rock and our hands and feet when we climb. If enough static friction exists, we can move against it and push ourselves along a route. But, if we exert more force than static friction, our hands and feet slip, and it's all over. It's about finding the zen between force and focus.

It's why we willingly squeeze our toes in the ancient Chinese art of foot binding. Those rubber-soled climbing shoes are not so much to inflict pain as they are to help smear against the stone, providing much-needed traction. It's also why we endure the white-smeared handholds on a route. Chalk has become a necessary evil to negate the sweat and provide a smidgen more grit to keep us locked onto the rock. Or it's in the cunning choice of how we grip the holds with our fingers, creating more friction than force. Finding a hidden little thumb catch that turns that nasty crimp into more of a pinch may be the difference between going upward and downward.

Instead of applying pure force, small changes in grasp and stance can add the necessary adhesion needed to make each move stick. Conserving energy is the key to fluid climbing without becoming exhausted or airborne! Instead of fighting it, we learn to work with the rock – become one with it!

In a world that is constantly preaching ways to defuse tension in the home, eliminate resistance at work, or any other friction, we're all for it. Surfers use wax to work a kick flip off the waves, Vertsappen chooses hard or soft tyres for certain laps, and we wrap our feet in rubber and slap $MgCO_3$ chalk on our palms to make them stick better. It's traction we want. When the rock offers nothing but mystery, then hacking Da Vinci's sacred code can unlock enough focus and contact to increase our belief of ascending higher.

God may have made the mountains high, but he also dropped in the law of friction so we could transcend our physical surroundings with a simple step and grip.

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