

Alps

with Ian Parnell

AND BEYOND

Fast Thinking

Ian Parnell catches up with American alpine speedster Jonathan Copp.

In recent years, a growing group of American climbers has gradually turned up the throttle on the strange game of speed climbing – racing up the walls of Yosemite and Colorado's Black Canyon in hours rather than days. To many this game seemed destined to remain an esoteric Stateside pursuit but several of the speedsters have other ideas, applying their lightning tactics to the great rock walls of the world.

Peter Croft, Dean Potter and Steve Schneider are the higher profile names but for me one of the most impressive shooting stars is 28 year old, Colorado based, Jonathan Copp. Take his trip to the Hainabrakk Towers (neighbours to the Trango Towers) in Pakistan during 2000 with Mike Pennings. Their super-light style – shared bivi bag, shared sleeping bag, even shared rock shoes yielded a trio of outstanding ascents: first ascent of the 3500 ft Cats Ears Spire, a 3700ft new route on Hainabrakk East Tower and finally the second ascent of a grade VII 4,300ft route on Shipton Spire. Not only were these routes done in a super-fast 3 days a piece but all free at E4/5 except for the odd aid point.

When Copp writes about his ascents he talks little of grades but a lot about luck and laughter which seem to be his stock response

to adventure, something he seems to seek Huckleberry Finn-like through his climbs.

This year in Patagonia after a 25-pitch new route on Aguja Poincenot and oh-so close efforts on the 5800ft Pier Giorgio, Copp found himself near the top of the 4000ft Domo Blanco. Faced with an icefield but no tools he improvised with a Friend 4. At the end of the pitch with no ice gear for a belay he chipped a scoop in the snow, stuck in his elbow and bracing himself called down "Rope fixed" to his partner, Dylan Taylor. Copp called it "Storm-fed insanity", laughing of course!

Parnell: A very vibrant alpine scene seems to have sprung up in the US over the last couple of years, with many young climbers transferring their speed skills honed on US walls to the bigger mountains. How do you explain the new trend?

Copp: Essentially – Americans are lazy. Once people begin to see the fun factor increase and the work-load go down, they're in. I mean who REALLY wants to haul loads of crap, fix lines and drill bolts all season? I'd rather climb. I think the world's mountains are an infinitum of possibility. And now that style is actually paramount to the final objective, eyes, including my own, are being opened to challenges that would have once been



Jonathan Copp ready for some sandstone wrestling in Canyonlands. Photo: Stephen Bartlett

considered impossible from an alpine approach. Now, when looked at from an alpine ideal (which is not a new concept), the opportunity for completing objectives in regions with short weather windows becomes apparent. But, to go along with that, the possibility of serious failure is also more pronounced.

You are well known for your full-on committing single push style in the mountains, what are your personal guidelines on these ascents?

I'm not a soap-box rider. I don't like to see people leaving trash in the mountains or chopping down trees to build their little huts, but if someone wants to put 160 bolts up alongside a crack system or fix lines for weeks, I'm not the person who says that's wrong. I like to look at a mountain and figure out if a buddy and I can climb it in a day or a few days and get back safely. This figuring is always mutating because of what we learn on every route.

Which ascent of yours do you think best illustrates your style? Which came close to the ideal?

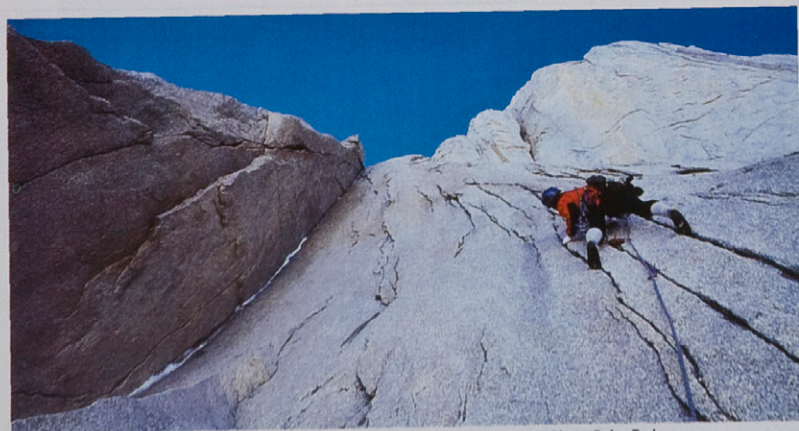
I was just asked a similar question the other day by someone who's never tied in to a rope. My answer: I'm really not trying to prove anything, so ideals lie in satisfaction and enjoyment. And I honestly have innumerable memories of grins as wide as I can manage – from the Black Canyon with a rope, rack and shirt on the back to Shipton Spire with a little more luggage (but not much more).

Are you worried that by paring your equipment down to the minimum and travelling so fast that you might be cutting down the safety margins too much – do the risks worry you?

Slight "healthy" fear sometimes.

Did any particular climb or experience get you first turned on to the possibilities of the single push?

I don't believe any one experience or person drastically changed my thinking, though the combination of great partners (friends) and days in the mountains and canyons certainly changed me and, I hope, always will.



Jonny Copp on the first single push attempt of Piere Giorgio, Patagonia. Photo: Dylan Taylor

Any influences or mentors you admire?

There are many people, living and dead, I admire who also influence me and keep me psyched. Among them are Shipton and Tilman, Mike Pennings, Alex Lowe, Albert Einstein, Timmy O'Neill, Dylan Taylor, Jim Donini, Santi Luangprasuit, Michael Kennedy, Josh Wharton, Gandhi, Cameron Tague, Brooke Andrews, Dalai Lama, John and Phyllis Copp, Mark Reiner... the list goes on. Sorry if I'm not more concise here, but it's tough to gauge what energies I get from each of these people and others. Suffice it to say it's the people I am closest to who have the greatest impact on me.

Having travelled a fair bit how healthy do you think the US alpine scene is at the moment?

Do you mean per capita? Just kidding. Getting healthier every year, I think.

There was a fairly well publicised issue at this years Ouray ice festival which seemed to highlight a confrontation between different styles of climbing in the mountains. Do you think there is a big ethical divide in the way that different Americans approach the unclimbed challenges in the mountains?

I don't think there is one major divide but more of a sliding scale of ideas and ideals. For me, looking at a mountain as something to conquer is as archaic a concept as imperialism or an earth-centred universe. We all know the top is attainable.

On your recent trip to Patagonia, your self and Dylan Taylor were within a whisker of making the first alpine style ascent of Greenpeace on Pierre Giorgio when Dylan lost his helmet and you turned back within feet of the summit. You wrote afterward that you were proud of this decision. That must have been real heart wrenching one to make?

It was a tough call to make, one of those stomach-tightening occasions. But as we were rappelling into the darkness, I was jazzed to know Dylan and I would be able to lounge sometime, somewhere over a beer and a story with intact skulls. Failing is part of climbing – if it wasn't, what would be the challenge?

What are your future plans?

To keep my eyes open. To dance to the music. To get to know people well, including myself – and if this means more running around in the mountains (and I think it does) so be it.

On a more general level where do you see alpine climbing going in the next few years, how far can the single push style be pushed?

Alpine climbing will continue to be employed on the world's most formidable objectives. Major link-ups in the big mountains are next. I don't know how far the single push can be pushed. I guess it's that unknown that is so intriguing. ©

