



**M**ATT SEGAL WAS LOSING IT. Wedged in a shady crack, fifteen feet up, right beneath the roof where the business begins, he'd started singing sweetly, "Come on, sun, come shine for me." The frosty, humid air had numbed his injured thumb (five months prior he'd sliced two nerves and a tendon while cutting an English muffin during a month-long meditation retreat). If he were clipping the route's bolts, he could have overlooked his insecurity, but he was trying to climb it on gear. While the polished jams and ring locks at the start weren't usually difficult for him—his nickname, after all was "Vice Grip"—this time he kept glancing below, staring at his rack, then down climbing to readjust the piece below him.

My stomach wrenched, adrenaline churning with the crack-strength coffee I'd been drinking all morning. A difficult trad ascent can be like a wild bull ride: the climbers' muscles tense, their bodies contort in strange shapes as they lunge and crimp, trying to keep their balance on the rock and maintain control in an unpredictable environment. Sometimes they whoop for joy as they pull through a crux—and then, sometimes, they're off, for a rowdy, airy ride. It's an exciting, but also a nerve-wracking sight... especially if the climber is your boyfriend.

# THE END of the BEGINNING

On a few small cliffs outside Boulder, Colorado, a quiet evolution is taking place. With good style, hard trad and the fellowship of the rope, who needs bolts? **ABBEY SMITH**

Copp-30. Matt Segal on The Evictor (5.12+ R), Eldorado Canyon, Colorado—one of his first trad climbs. Segal and his mentor, Eric Decaria, are part of a new generation of trad climbers combining old-school ethics with new-school grades to redefine the discipline. Jonny Copp



**Copp-34.** Segal working Deadline (5.14), Castle Rock, Boulder Canyon, Boulder, Colorado. In 2005 Segal became the second person to climb the bolted crack using only gear. Decaria was the first. On the same formation, other Boulder Canyon climbs, like Athlete's Feat (5.11)—first freed by Royal Robbins and Pat Ament in 1964—represent the origins of hard trad, ones that are now being reinterpreted by climbers like Segal and Decaria. Jonny Copp

There is no specific crux on Deadline, the bolted 5.14a crack climb on Castle Rock in Boulder Canyon that Matt was trying; it just gets increasingly harder and pumpier toward the top. Both Matt and Eric DeCaria, Matt's partner, believed the addition of bolts was unnecessary and unethical. It would go on gear. The bolts should be chopped.

All around us, the sunlight gleamed off granite walls, flickering across the river and rippling into the shadows between the features and the trees. I'd grown up in Colorado, and climbed in Boulder Canyon many times, but the familiar landscape now seemed surreal.

Eric was quiet as usual. He remained intently focused on Matt's movements and gestures. As Matt hung on the rope, hunched over, Eric knew he'd fallen into a mental abyss. He also knew what Matt needed to pull him out.

Matt listens to Eric; he has ever since they began climbing together two years ago. "Dude," Eric finally said, his habitual

reserve giving way to an older-brother-like solicitude. "You know what to do. Just take a break and fire it from the beginning."

Matt broke out of his trance. "You're right. I don't know what I'm thinking." He painstakingly backcleaned the steep route. A few minutes later he slumped beside me in the dirt. "If I don't do it on the next try, I'm going to give up for a while," he said.

"Just take a rest," I replied. "I know you can do it."

Eric had been the first person to send Deadline on gear, ground up, a few years ago. Now he had his own standing project just to the left: an overhanging, glossy, rounded crack with smeary feet and powerful moves, likely to be two letter grades harder.

It was Matt's turn to belay, and as he fed out the rope, Eric began unlocking the opening sequence. When Eric climbs, it's hard to tell whether a route is 5.8 or 5.13. He is a perfectionist, a technician, calculating everything down to the smallest detail, and as he strives

to render each move simple, perfect and clean, he can make a climb look effortless.

Once he'd managed to figure out the thugy dyno finish, he backcleaned and joined us on the ground.

"You ready, Matt?" he said.

Matt's shoulders relaxed and he dropped into a calm, intense focus. With a wave of confidence, he got to his feet, tied in, and began climbing Deadline. He waltzed through the beginning, climbing and placing gear in a single, fluid motion, this time without looking back. Just before the final ten feet, he slowed, his muscles engaged, and he swung his feet to a vertical smear, applying just the right amount of pressure to keep his feet from slipping off. For one instant his whole body seemed to hover as if weightless on improbable, invisible holds—and then he ran it out to the finish.

It was over, thank God. Matt sagged in relief as I lowered him from the chains. With his ascent, Matt had made a tribute to Eric, his

trad-climbing mentor, and their gear ascents had restored the experience of the route to something like its original form. More importantly, their decision to lead it ground up, backcleaning on each attempt, combined old-school ethics with new-school grades in a way that defines contemporary hard trad. Matt, Erik—and their peers—climbers like Sonnie Trotter, Didier Berthod and Matt Wilder—are the hybrids taking trad to its next level.

**Saturday, November 26, 2005:** Matt and Eric were lurking at their usual coffee-shop hang, Café Sole, drinking their second lattes of the day and chitchatting about climbing. Perhaps Matt's dark brown eyes were a little more radiant and Eric's retiring character a bit more open than usual, but there was no real sign that anything had happened. Only the lurching in my stomach told me that Matt had just made climbing history—and that I hadn't been there to watch.

"So d'you do it?" I asked, my hands fluttering in anticipation.

"Yeah," Matt said, as if there had ever been a doubt. The conversation quickly switched to the topic of food. It wasn't until I saw a copy of Peter Mortimer's video that I realized how spectacular the send had been.

That morning, while I had been sport climbing just a few canyons over, the word had gotten out like hot gossip among a group of bored housewives: there was a new project in Eldorado Canyon, a thirty-foot old aid line, Lycra-Clad Donkeys, with a tantalizing crux—a technical dyno off high feet and small crimps on a forty-five degree wall—that suited a powerhouse boulderer. A swarm of the country's burliest pad people had showed up to this obscure wall in the Kloof Alcove, making the space beneath it claustrophobic. Everyone wanted to try the moves, which could be broken down into a V7 boulder problem, the V11 crux and a V6 finish. But while the gear might be totally safe, placing it as you climb would add another degree of spice. Even though Mortimer happened to be there with his camera, no one was interested in giving that style a go.

Except Matt and Eric. They warmed up on the route itself, since nothing else could prepare them for the steep, crimpy, pinchy, big-body movements. Up to the crux, they already had the route dialed.

As on every other day, both of them were shut down by the crux, but on Matt's third try he exploded with grace and precision to stick the tiny in-cut crimp above him with authority. Out came an earth-shattering yell. His legs cut loose in a violent arc as he

fought to tame the wild swing, then, with unbelievable control, he paused, his legs dangling free, before gently, meticulously, placing his feet back on the steep wall.

He had only tried the route through the crux move, and he now found himself on unfamiliar terrain. On the cruiser finish, he threw for another hold... and missed. He fell back to a hand jam. His body became rigid and tense, and he took deep breaths as he tried to regain his composure. Below, from the crowds, came faint sounds of encouragement urging him to keep it together. After a minute of shaking out, he precisely placed his left foot, then his right, and finished the route without hesitation.

That day Matt's free route, Iron Monkey—solid 5.14—became the hardest crack climb in Eldo. Matt also joined the handful of climbers who've made first or first free ascents of 5.14 trad routes, a motley group of modern legends, like Swiss Didier Berthod (Greenspit, 5.14a, Valle d'Orco, Italy, 2003), Briton Dave MacLeod (Requiem Direct Finish, 5.14c R, Dumbarton Rock, Scotland, 2006) and Americans Ron Kauk



**Copp-29.** Decaria (left) and Segal in Boulder Canyon. Note the pills: Segal sliced two nerves and a tendon in a kitchen accident in 2004, leaving parts of his hand numb to this day. The injury isn't holding him back: his ground-up free ascents of climbs such as Deadline (5.14) and Iron Monkey (5.14) make him one of the strongest trad climbers in the country. Jonny Copp

(Magic Line, Yosemite, 5.14a, 1997) and Lynn Hill (The Free Nose, 5.14a, Yosemite, 1993), to name a few.

Many of such high-grade trad ascents, however, including Berthod's and Kauk's, have relied on preplaced or fixed gear (Berthod has recently gone back to climb Greenspit again, this time placing the gear on lead), raising the question of whether they were, indeed, entirely trad climbs. If

some of the difficulty lies in maintaining mental composure while nesting a Stopper from a desperate stance high above your last piece, then is clipping into a preplaced cam just a relatively more dangerous form of sport climbing? Canadian Sonnie Trotter's 2006 first ascent of the Cobra Crack (5.14), ground up, placing all the gear on lead, is, it turns out, one of the rare exceptions.

Matt and Eric always place their gear from the ground up on the send, but their efforts strive to create a balance between style and difficulty. "What we do and the style in which we climb is very personal," Matt explained to me once. "It's not driven by purism or numbers; we just try to climb as pure and hard as possible. If we always wanted to climb totally pure, we would never climb harder than 5.13.... Every situation and every route calls for something different." While they aim for good style, they will occasionally make compromises that rely on more modern innovations.

Matt drilled his first bolt ever on the crux of The End of the Beginning. He and Eric had decided the line, which occurs at

11,000 feet in Rocky Mountain National Park, would go as a mixed route, but rather than rap-bolting it, they agreed to climb it ground up, placing a few bolts through the dynamic crux and its flat directional holds. With Eric coaching him from the ground, Matt, scared stiff, hung from hooks on the fifty-degree roof and gruelingly drilled into the blocky alpine granite for forty-five minutes. They named the route after a song by

the hip-hop artist Murs, signifying the initiation of Matt's new style of climbing.

Even when they use bolts, the decision-making process, when they stand at the base of a new climb and try to imagine how it will unfold, is a vital part of the experience—one that ordinary sport climbing, with its predetermined selection of bombproof pro, nearly eliminates.

Like other ascensionists of difficult trad climbs, whose diverse backgrounds range from sport to bouldering to comps to walls to alpine, Matt and Eric's approach demonstrates how much the boundaries between different categories are blurring. If climbers like them are mixing the vocabularies of what had once been viewed as wildly contrasting cultures, it's in part because they belong to all of them.

**Unlike many contemporary climbers** who update their 8a scorecards and appear regularly in magazines, Matt doesn't like to brag about his own accomplishments, even to his girlfriend. The story I know about his early climbing life is pieced together from the bits I've been able to glean from him, filled in

with conversations with former coaches and from his mother.

But once the conversation turns to details about his latest project, his voice begins to rise uncontrollably until it's a soft yell, his hands flap in the air, his brown, feathered hair seems to stand on end, and a large vertical vein starts to bulge in his forehead. Matt's twenty-two, and like many of his generation he was first exposed to climbing in gyms. In Miami, where Matt grew up, climbing meant pulling on plastic.

At age fourteen and 100 pounds, Matt had already begun training with Kynan and Derek Waggoner, owners of Miami's X-Treme Rock Climbing Gym, when climber Tony Yaniro arrived to set routes for one of the Waggoners' comps. Among the kids climbing around him, Tony noticed one with more tenacity than the others. When he walked over to help Matt with a problem, Tony was impressed by the boy's polite responses to his suggestions; here was someone who seemed entirely open to learning, a well-behaved student who would be willing to put in the work it took to climb hard. Yaniro himself had played an important role

in the development of hard trad. In 1979 he'd redpointed a forty-foot overhanging double roof crack, Grand Illusion in Sugarloaf, California, the world's first 5.13b/c. His techniques, a combination of handdogging and specific home training, reflected a dramatic shift in perspective. Two years earlier, Ray Jardine had used handdogging and his new invention, Friends, to "work" Phoenix, the first 5.13, in Yosemite. At the time, Camp 4 purists insisted that whenever a climber fell, he or she had to lower off, backclean and climb back up to the highpoint from the ground. Jardine's controversial style, together with his easy-to-place cams and the advent of sticky rubber and chalk, allowed climbers to try lines at or past their limits—while, some might argue, reducing the uncertainty in a way that prefigured sport climbing.

Like Jardine, Yaniro received a lot of criticism from traditionalists, who called his 5.13 invalid—both because the grade was rarified, and because Yaniro's style meant, according to them, that he had "aided" the route. Even though he backcleaned his protection between attempts, he'd practiced

moves while hanging on the rope. Yaniro retorted that his method allowed him to push the grades faster, bypassing the years of preparation such routes would otherwise require. Although he did plenty of bold routes, the difficulty, not the risk, was what interested him; according to Yaniro, "anyone can die free soloing a 5.8," but until the European sport mentality brought with it a new emphasis on training, few Americans were willing to work hard enough to climb hard 5.13.

Yaniro's climbing mirrored the changes in his generation. Although he continued to climb hard trad routes in a "sport" style, when comp climbing spread to the States, the opportunity to focus completely on technical difficulties fascinated him, and he became a route setter, climbing-wall designer and teacher of pioneering clinics. In the 1990s, indoor training was a relatively new concept. Yaniro's scientific approach targeted certain muscle groups for specific routes, and he saw Matt as the perfect testpiece for his latest innovations.

Matt proved to be an eager student, and in between attending Yaniro's clinics, he continued to train, waking up early to run or campus, then returning to the gym after school for ladder training. Under Yaniro's tutelage Matt became a comp-killing machine. Within his first year of climbing, he made the Youth National Team, and during the next four years he went to the Youth World Championships and progressed to World Cups in Italy, France, Austria and Germany. From 2002–2004, he placed within the top three at the American Bouldering Series. In 2004 he became the ABS National Champion.

Yet during that time, an empty feeling slowly built in him. When Yaniro noticed Matt was losing interest, he urged him to try climbing on real rock. "Move to Colorado," he advised. "Get out of Florida." Ultimately, he told Matt, comps were only practice for the real thing. As he explained to me, "You can only climb in a gym so long before you're not stimulated anymore."

**"Don't follow the fad, burn your pad!"** Matt was standing on the podium at the ABS Nationals in 2003; he'd just placed second, and as the cameras flashed and hundreds of gazes fixed on him, he began yelling anti-bouldering slogans: "Don't be a dope, stay on a rope!" Matt had taken his coaches' advice and moved to Boulder. He had come for the training circuits, but the cheering crowds and small rocks (pebbles, as he calls them) no longer inspired him.



**Copp-35. Tony Yaniro on Pirate (5.12d), Suicide Rock, California. Climbs like this, and his 1979 testpiece Grand Illusion—the world's first 5.13b/c—established Yaniro as one of his generation's strongest climbers, but his methods of climbing were met with scepticism by purists. Yaniro went on to apply his scientific approach to comp climbs. In the early 1990s, he became Segal's coach.** Heinz Zak

**Copp-35. Segal working the aid line formerly known as Lycra Clad Donkeys in Eldorado Canyon. Segal freed the route, which he dubbed Iron Monkey, at 5.14; it now stands as the hardest trad route in Eldo.** Jonny Copp



In Eldo, on the other hand, he found the red and gold sandstone immediately captivating. He dreamed of one day claiming a first ascent on its walls. Indoor now seemed utterly trivial. The only problem was, everyone he knew was a sport climber, boulderer or gym rat, and he had no one to teach him.

Relying on nothing more than his prodigious strength and figuring that cam placements were more or less self-evident, Matt borrowed a rack and made his way up Bastille Crack (5.7+), Rosie Crucifixion (10a), Super Slab (10c) and Superfly (12+). Without any idea about trad-climbing ethics or a real sense of what he could achieve, Matt top roped Superfly first, then led it, placing all the gear on the go. He also top roped Iron Monkey, considered to be the last hard free route in Eldo. He planned to return and lead it on preplaced gear the following year.

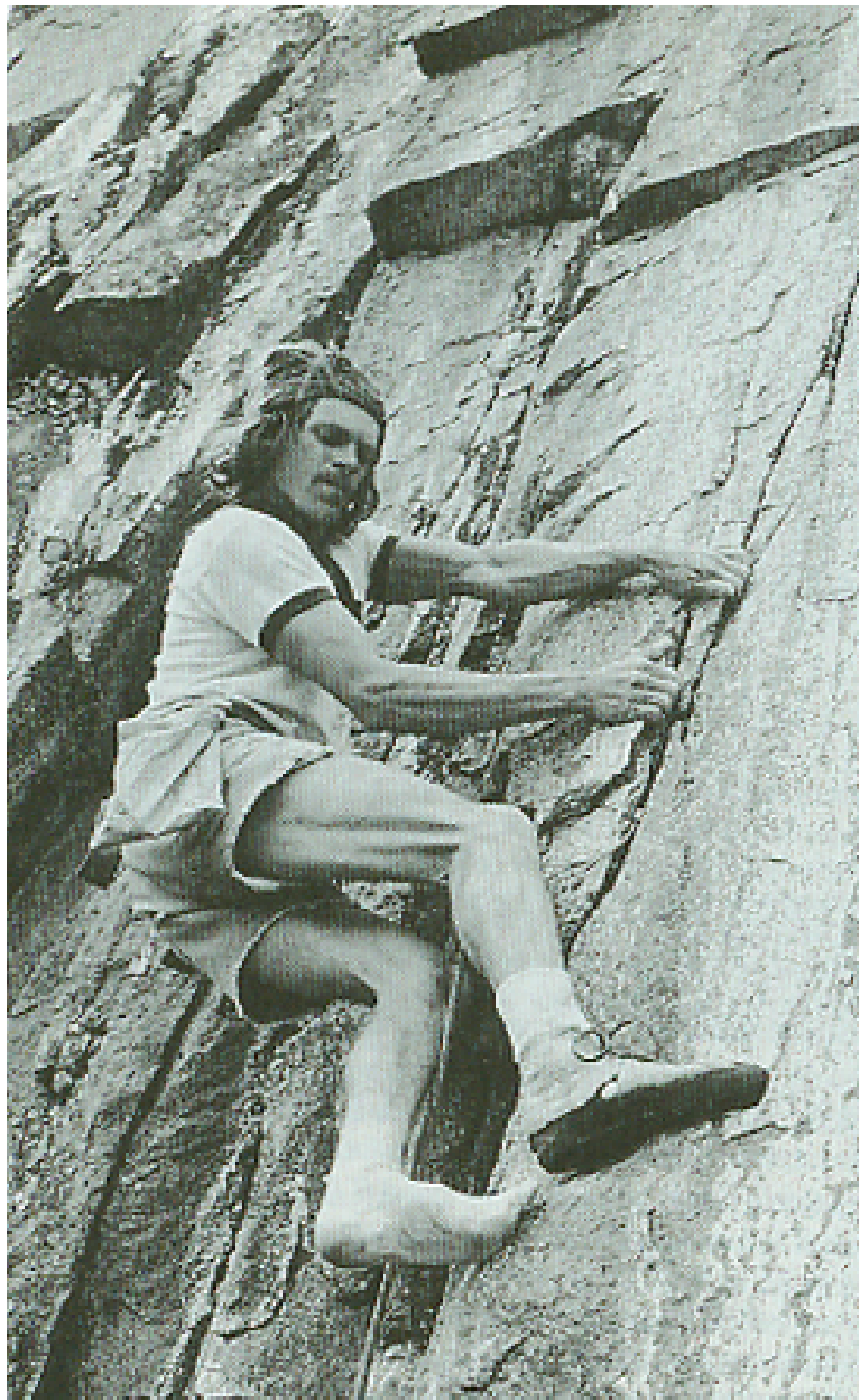
Meanwhile he'd started phoning around for potential partners. A mutual friend had suggested the soft-spoken Eric Decaria, but Eric already had a crew. When the two ran into each other at a barbeque, Matt recognized Eric—with his pony-tailed dreads and hand-rolled cigarettes, Eric was hard to miss.

Eric didn't really know Matt, and he listened silently as Matt jabbered about Iron Monkey and the other routes he wanted to climb. Though they had totally different styles, Eric recognized Matt's endless energy and saw his potential to progress out of raw passion into controlled skill. Before the evening was over, he had decided to take him on.

Eric promotes himself even less than he talks. Although he had started climbing in

1991, in Ogden, Utah, in the midst of the sport-climbing revolution, his interests lay more in adventure. In Moab, he had fallen in with a set inspired and sometimes led by old-school masters like Dan Osman, Tom Gilge and Jay Smith. Faintly arrogant in their skills, Eric's friends ate mushrooms and kept areas such as Mill Creek on the down-low while developing fresh, bold lines. The crew's style stirred enough controversy that frustrated local sport climbers called a meeting to discuss the alleged runout, sandbagged nature of Mill Creek's routes. Eric's group, however, ignored the complaints and continued quietly developing this and other testpiece areas without publicizing their activities. Climbing for them was about friendships, art and adventure. Grades were a joke; at the Horn, another one of Eric's testpiece areas, there are none. A "sliding H scale" for bouldering was developed: if you did an H4 and someone else repeated it, then it became an H3; if you could do it in your sneakers, it got downgraded to an H2; if you could do it wasted and in sneakers, it was an H1.

When he was eighteen, having done only a few aid climbs on small walls, Eric set off for the Black Canyon with timeless desert rat Jimmy Dunn to attempt to free the Diagonal Wall. At 4:30 a.m. the two descended to the base of the dark and mysterious rock and began simulclimbing for 1,000 feet on 5.10 terrain. Dunn had assured Eric that he would bring the rack, but to Eric's surprise he had packed a meager set of Stoppers, three Camalots, a couple of quickdraws, one rope and no food or water.



**Webster-1.** Jimmy Dunn on the first ascent of *Zonked Out* (5.12b), *Woodchuck Ledge*, *Cathedral*, *New Hampshire*, in 1978. (The one bare foot facilitated better toe jams.) Dunn was one of Decaria's early influences, climbing with him on such routes as the first free ascent of the *Diagonal Wall*, with the two freed at 5.11 X in six hours with minimal gear. Ed Webster

Intimidated but determined to make a good impression, Eric racked up and led two exposed, traversing 5.11 X pitches with gigantic, loose, hanging daggers back-to-back. At the end of the second pitch, Eric discovered a bolt sitting on the ledge and a rusted, quarter-inch, hangerless stud for his anchor. He belayed Dunn off a leg-bar. The last move of the second pitch required a kneebar to move through a

blank section. Dunn had never tried one before. Wedged uncomfortably in the rock, Eric coached him through the move, praying he wouldn't fall.

They had reached the point where Dunn and several other strong partners had failed before. The best option was to climb a difficult arête, and Dunn willingly gave Eric the lead. Eric punched it twenty feet to a pin that immediately came out. Panicked, he ran

it out another ten feet to a loose pin, clipped it anyway, then continued another twenty feet to two good holds and double dynoed to a ledge. Kitty-litter gravel sent him on a huge whipper past his belayer. Mentally and physically exhausted, Eric tried and whipped again. On the third attempt, he stuck the dyno and mantled the ledge to a blank section of rock, where he had to traverse forty feet with no protection on a soft, pink pegmatite band to a dihedral and a relatively straightforward last pitch. They finished the route in six and half hours, claiming the first free ascent. Out of such monumental experiences Eric found exceptional poise and self-confidence, which he now hoped to bequeath to Matt, just as Dunn and other mentors had done for him.

Matt began his apprenticeship with Eric in autumn 2004 with shotgun lessons at the base of routes like Eldo's *Evictor* (5.12+ R) and *Fraid Line* (5.13 R). As they racked up, Eric would hand Matt the gear in the exact order of placements, explaining where and how to set each piece. When Matt embarked on *Fraid Line*, he quickly found himself in the no-fall zone; a rightward traverse further enhanced the potential for big air. His retreating confidence in his gear made his body quake and his movements stiff with fear. He climbed well, but he checked each piece after placing it, then rechecked it, then checked it again.

"Just punch it," Eric yelled. The extra boost of encouragement took Matt to the chains.

The first piece Matt fell on was a purple TCU. The second, a pinky-nail-size number one RP, is now proudly displayed on the refrigerator. He squealed like a little girl when he winged on it, but it held, and it now marks the moment he realized that gear works, especially when you weigh 125 pounds.

Eric's own adventures with climbers like Dunn had made him want to be a part of an earlier climbing tradition. As Matt would discover, Eric wanted to gain the respect of the older purists, not to get his accomplishments into magazines. As Matt became a sort of apprentice to Eric, Eric's values began to guide his own perspective. "I gained [my] knowledge through experience," Eric said when I asked him about his influence. "It's cool to pass [it] on to Matt. He's the next generation; maybe he can pass it on to someone else, too."

**With bits of sawdust in his hair**, his body weathered from another demanding day of construction, Eric stashed his tools and packed his shoes. Meanwhile, Matt raced



**Copp-15.** Decaria working on *Headline*, an as-of-yet unclimbed route on *Castle Rock* that will likely be one of the hardest trad climbs in the world. Decaria was influenced by trad masters such as Dunn and Jay Smith; in turn, he is sharing his perspective with Segal. Jonny Copp

home on his bicycle. He'd had a long day of classes at Naropa University, where he's studying Religious Studies, but like Eric, he was stoked for an evening session on the project.

They fueled up on double-shot lattes at Spruce Confections, hopped in the truck and, smoking cigarettes, drinking more coffee and listening to hip-hop, drove the fifteen minutes up Boulder Canyon. At the base of the climb they immediately started racking. Instead of warming up on the 5.10 around the corner, they alternated burns on the route, painfully stuffing their cold fingers into the crack and sewing it up like a prom dress, placing a piece after nearly every move.

After six days on the route, Eric had finally discovered all the funky body positions and finger-lock sequences that suited his sausage-like fingers. He decided to try for a send. Cautiously, he wedged his swollen fingers in the tight locks that had previously trapped his tips when he had fallen. Matt watched intensely. Preoccupied by

Deadline, he had only spent a couple days on the route, so he observed Eric to understand his movement.

Eric placed just enough protection to avoid hitting the dirt: stalling in the treacherous locks to place gear could mean slipping out of the overhanging crack. This time, though, he wasn't climbing with his signature grace. He was fighting to stay on. His feet skated around on the blank wall while he campused between locks in the frictionless crack. He fell.

On the next go he made solid progress and stuck the crux, a dyno from flared finger locks to another poor lock with no real feet, just a sketchy, quasi heel-toe cam that sets the body up for the dyno. Exhausted, his fingers gnarled, he backcleaned the route and gave Matt a ride.

Matt had to find his own sequence: his fingers are not nearly as fat as Eric's. Nonetheless, like a Chinese finger trap, the crack seized Matt's right pointer finger, just as it had Eric's, causing the entire digit to

lose feeling. With a numb thumb and pointer, he tried again, before deciding to call it a day. The sun had sunk behind the Flatirons and darkness had crept up the canyon. They collected their belongings, threw them into the back of the truck and piled in for the ride home.

As they drove down the canyon, Eric turned up the volume. The two knew the route would be the hardest thing either of them had climbed; they also knew that one day, it would go. As Murs says, "It's a done deal because the movement don't stop 'til the rising sun." After all, they are the new generation, and this is just the end of the beginning.