

IN PRAISE OF THE NUMBER THREE STOPPER - OR NUTS TO YOU

By Martin Berzins

After dragging my nut rack into the depths of the Cheedale jungle on numerous days this year and not using it I came to two conclusions. The first was that I needn't bother carrying it any more, and the second was that some of the wired nuts are now as old as some of the doggers I saw, furiously pretending that they too could lead E7's.

This led me to thinking about my rack and the people and routes that influenced its composition. The oldest nut I used until recently was a Clog 1 wedge. This nut was perhaps one of those that influenced the gritstone revolution of the seventies. The Clog No 1 seemed to protect everything from Western Front to Profit of Doom. In order to find the protection 'beta' for any route, you had only to ask the protection guru, Steve Bancroft who would invariably tell you to take a Troll 4 as well as a Clog 1.

One of the outstanding problems of the time was the Goblins Roof at Almscliff. Local climbers discussed using pole vaulting mats or G-clamp runners on flanges in the roof. Steve however, tied down a poor nut in the left side of the roof and put one rope through it. The other rope went through a low nut in the gully wall some fifteen metres away. Even with this 'baby-bouncer', there is potential for a ground fall from above the crux. The protection was enough for Steve's accomplice Hank Pasquill to make the first lead of the route, much to the chagrin of locals like Alan Manson, who perhaps has protection skills that surpass even Steve's!

At Brimham there is an obvious rounded runnel with a wide flaring break at the bottom, too wide for conventional nuts and surely unprotectable before camming devices. But 'Masno' had seen the Californian light and had learned about hexes from the

masters. My brother Bob and I, amongst others, looked on in disbelief as he constructed a perfectly mechanically sound stack of three hexentrics so complicated that no-one can remember what he did. Fortunately Al's route succumbed to a long reach, so we didn't have to put his mechanics to the test. Alan named the route Gwyneth, because it was next to John Syrett's route Felicity, and both were closely linked to the Leeds University Climbing Club at that time.

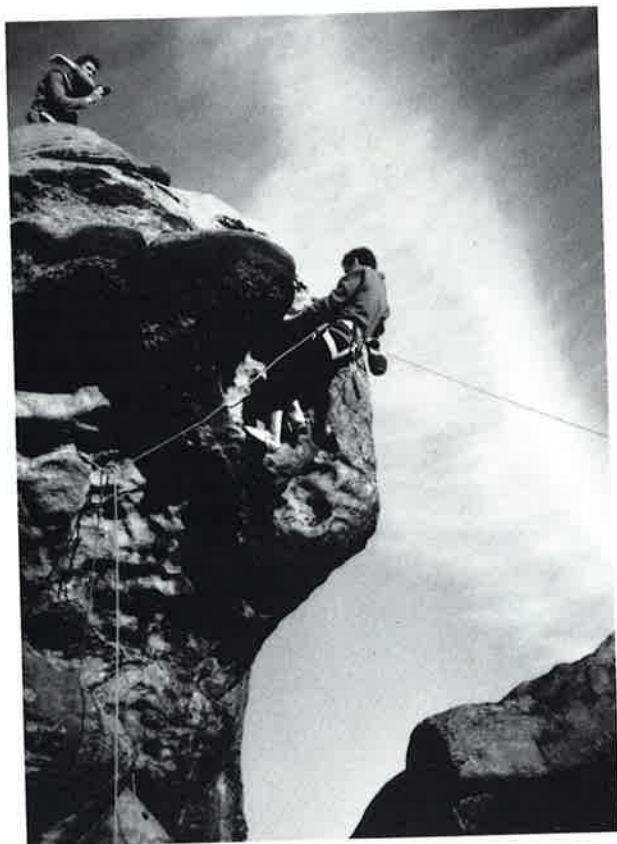
It was about this time that I started going to Kilnsey, which always frightened me at first. It seemed intimidating and serious. Central Wall had only had a couple of ascents and was high on Livesey's list of limestone desperates. The prospect facing me was not pleasant. Somehow I'd clawed my way high up to a semi-rest in a shallow niche. The only good nut placement took a No 4 Chouinard stopper I'd recently bought. I didn't really trust the nut or the rock and I didn't have a back-up nut. The route goes rightwards, but I strayed straight up. As I pumped out I saw the large holds of the route proper and fell. I was cross, the nut seemed fine so next go I sprinted up to Trauma Traverse without further protection. My fingers uncurled - I screamed with terror - for sure I was dead - only to stop some fifty feet lower, level with the crux. The next day I went out and bought as many stoppers as I could.

Not long after, I met Arnis Strapcans who had a fierce light burning behind his eyes - once seen, never forgotten. Somehow, even when belaying, he inspired boldness. Late one day I was leading Boat Pusher's Wall at Stoney Middleton (what else?). I didn't really expect to find protection, so placed a token poor hexentric, sideways on a

horizontal, more as an afterthought than anything. "Crap nut that, Arnis", I said as I pulled on some obviously loose blocks - assuming that's what everyone did. Fortunately, I pulled hard, the blocks flew over Arnis' head, and my only nut, the hex, held. We giggled with hysteria at our good fortune, but it wasn't enough to stop me ending up in Stoke neurosurgical wing the next day after yet another fall, soloing behind Arnis at the Roaches. Fortunately, helmets were still fashionable, so they were able to let me out after one night in the hospital, pretty much unscathed apart from a broken wrist.

I didn't have a Deathwish, and it won't be any surprise to hear that my climbing calmed down and my protection skills improved after the Arnis episode. The advent of Friends made it unnecessary to know how to place hexentrics in unlikely cracks. One exception was Blue Scar, where Pete Gomersall hammered a Hex 3 into a most unlikely crack, and then eventually led Death Wish. On a rare (first?) on sight ascent many years later, the wire was brittle and rusted but could be backed up by a number 3 stopper in a tiny undercut. On my next visit I replaced the wire sling with rope. This, and the chalk on the route opened the floodgates. A little later still, I was running out of steam on Stairway to Heaven. Obeying my usual maxim of 'clip everything within reach' I had the nut on Deathwish clipped. Surely it wouldn't hold I thought, as I hurtled towards it. Steve Rhodes who was belaying thought so too, and closed his eyes. It was a true learning experience. I came to respect both Pete Gomersall's skill as an aid climber and the holding power of hexentrics.

The next real advance in nuts came with



Creative protection techniques in play on Goblin's Roof, Almscliff

Photo: M.Berzins

the Australian made RP nuts, whose narrow width made them ideal in old pin scars. Made of brass and silver soldered, they were thought to break too easily at first. Chris Sowden put this theory to the test on PR in the Shawangunks of New York State. The guide neglected to mention that the 'legendary Steve Wunsh' had used a 'crack'n'up' to protect the route. I went up, decided it was too hard and tentatively tested the 0 RP. This was fine for Chris, who proceeded to take fall after fall before he completed the route and dragged me up it. Who says RPs break? As if to complete my conversion one of the 'gunkies' even gave me an original aluminium R.P. as a memento.

The next real innovation came with Wild Country Rocks. The curved shape seemed of dubious worth to me at first, and the wire a little thin. But anyway, I found myself on The Golden Mile on Chee Tor, and having completed all the hard moves, I placed a No 1 Rock in a crozzly crack. One side of the wire was snug against the side of the crack, but the other was held in only by a brittle nub of limestone. Above this, the climbing was easy but unprotected, so I

relaxed. One moment I was rocking over to reach the girdle break and the next I was airborne, convinced that this person I was watching hurtle down would die. I didn't care, as though merely a spectator to the event. "You daft bastard! What did you do that for?" my brother Bob yelled after he'd held a sixty foot fall and lowered me to the ground. Rocks, it would seem, have good holding powers.

Although there are now many more nuts available, in my view,

by far and away the best nut is the No 3 stopper. Its small size and thick wire makes it the nut on occasions. Two such instances were a week and three thousand miles apart.

The town of Little Falls in New York State lies next to the Albany to Buffalo train line and has a crag that looks very similar to gritstone on the surface, though very different in composition. One of the hand cracks there is Easy Goer at 5.12d, which relies solely on 2 No 3 stoppers to protect the crux, a desperate slap for a brick-edge hold. My preoccupation with the No 3 stopper was such that one of the locals rechristened the nut a 'Berzins' only half in jest. The route was finally climbed on the last possible try of the last possible day before I flew home to try a route on Scafell (for this, read attend an important conference.)

Chris Sowden and I had cleaned the large impending brown wall right of Shere Khan a year previously, but the only protection below the crux was a solitary No 3 stopper. Another one went in after the crux. Although it didn't go completely free, and is still in that sense, being 'worked on', Seige Perilous E6 6c is a testament to the No 3 stopper as the means to climb an unlikely route in

awesome surroundings.

Of course the No 3 stopper is also the crucial and well tested protection on the now infamous Frankie E6 6b at Kilnsey. In this case though, the nuts underneath it have to be placed to it's right to hold it in place. Further right, still at Kilnsey, Zero Option takes a No 2 stopper or a filed down No 3 in a bombproof placement in a crack, level with the only bolt. Clearly, the route is possible without the bolt, and would become a wild adventure. But, who will try it, and what is the point? Perhaps the justification was made by Heinz Mariacher in a recent Mountain article:

"To us, climbing was more than a sport, it was above all a confrontation with risk and uncertainty." Now Heinz is just another sports climber. ♦



David Turnbull utilising available protection - an ice screw and a tied-off hex around a flint. Monster Crack, Beachy Head

Photo: Crispin Waddy

Martin Berzins is a staff member of the Computer School at Leeds University. He has been climbing for quite a while now, and is no stranger to controversy. He has climbed almost everywhere in Britain, and many places abroad. He is married and lives in Leeds