

Sport Climbing Circuit

By Alan Cassidy



In the summer of 2008 I applied for an MCoFS bursary in order to undertake a 7+ week trip around Europe's great sport-climbing areas with the following objectives in mind; to compete in 2 Lead Climbing World Cups and improve upon my previous best placings with the aim of reaching my first World Cup semi-final and to increase my outdoor sport-climbing PBs to 8a+ on-sight and 8c redpoint. Achieving the latter of which would be my lifetime climbing ambition.

Introduction

I applied for the MCoS bursary in order to undertake a 7+ week trip around Europe's great sport-climbing areas with 3 objectives in mind:

- To **prepare** for 2 Lead Climbing World Cups in Bern (Switzerland) and Imst (Austria).
- To **compete** in these World Cups and improve upon my previous best World Cup placing with the aim of reaching my first World Cup semi-final.
- To **increase my outdoor sport-climbing PBs to 8a+ on-sight and 8c redpoint**. Achieving the latter of which would have made me only the 3rd Scottish climber to achieve this level.

Personal Climbing Profile

I have been climbing for 15 years and participating in climbing competitions for at least 12 of those. Outdoor climbing has always been my prime motivator and main interest and prior to this trip I had climbed:

- E8 headpoint and E6 onsight traditional climbing
- 8b+ redpoint and 8a onsight sport climbing
- V12 bouldering

In competition climbing I have been reasonably successful on a national level. Highlights of my competition career include:

- I placed 5th overall in the one British Indoor Climbing Championships (BICC) I competed in as a junior. I was not however selected for the British Junior Team and missed out on competing in the European Youth Cups.
- I won the Scottish region in the inaugural British Regional Youth Climbing Championships BRYCS and was 5th in national final.
- After a break from competitions I have competed in every senior BICC since 2004 with my best being a 3rd place finish at the 2007 BICC in Blackpool.
- In 2008, I won the inaugural BMC Leading Ladder to win my first national event.

Prior to this trip I had competed at 2 World Cup competitions, both in Kranj, Slovenia finishing 36th and 39th respectively. I hoped to improve greatly on these results in the World Cups I was to attend on this trip.

I am sponsored by **Boreal** (climbing shoes) and **PodSacs** (rucksacks and bouldering mats etc).

Logistics

I was to be accompanied by my girlfriend, Hannah on this trip. For the purpose of our travels (and hopefully further adventures) we bought and converted a Toyota Hiace Panel Van at the cost of a very reasonable, £800. A further £100 was spent bringing it up to scratch mechanically. A big saving was made with the help of a very kind mechanic friend we met at the Glasgow Climbing Centre.

We estimated a total trip budget of £3000 would cover our costs most of which would be spent on transport and food as we intended to avoid all accommodation costs by living in the van and never using organised campsites.

The British Climbing Team met entry fees & international licence for the World Cup.

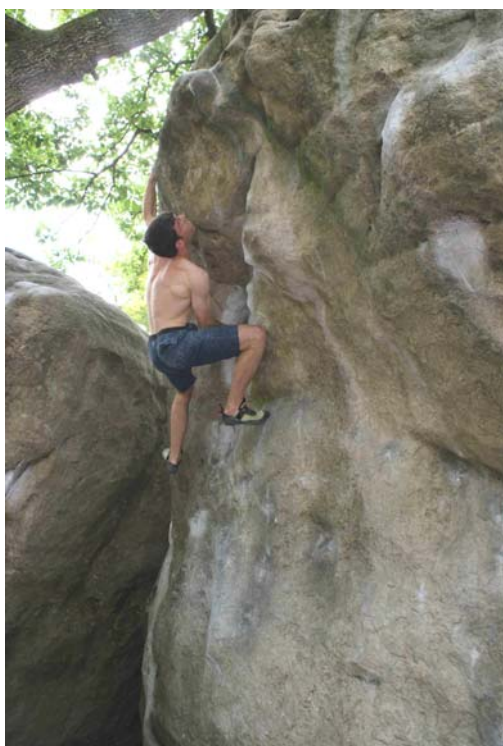
Preparation

In the months leading up to this trip my preparation was almost entirely dedicated to indoor climbing. I identified that for both the competition goals and the outdoor climbing goals I needed to mainly address my "power endurance" to enable me to hang in on some very hard, overhanging ground for duration of around 6+ mins.

Based on previous experience and advice from the coaches on the British Climbing Team I trained for this style of climbing mostly through lapped intervals on the bouldering walls at Glasgow Climbing Centre and getting to Ratho when I could.

Due to time pressure, I was working and studying at the same time as trying to commit to a high volume of training; my training was a little more disjointed than I had hoped. I consoled myself that I would have time to prepare more when we finally left for France.

The Trip:



France 1

The first destination was *Fontainebleau* where we intended to stay for a few days to break up the journey and get moving on rock after a long period of training on plastic. Although the temperature was not conducive to hard bouldering, much fun was had playing on the rocks and going for runs in the forest for fitness.

From Fontainebleau we moved on to *Céuse* near Gap in the French Alps. The plan had been to stay here for a couple of weeks to build up fitness and to set to work on an 8c. Unfortunately things did not go according to plan. Hannah, who's primary interest is not climbing, found it frustrating being at Ceuse where, due to the long walk in, there seemed to be little time or energy for anything else. With tempers fraying, Ceuse just wasn't working. This was not the perfect training/climbing situation I had hoped for. Realising that my goals could not be achieved while things were like this we decided to move on and find somewhere where a better balance could be struck.

We moved on into the stunning Haute Val Durance and were enjoying climbing, running and being in the high mountain atmosphere. Things were looking up. My fitness was not what I had hoped it to be by this stage but things were coming together. That was until I was struck down by a mysterious vomiting illness. This saw me laid up, barely able to move from the van for over a week. I was left weak and very drained and my climbing had taken a step back again. I was starting to get very stressed that my goals were never going to be achieved.

Switzerland

By the time I had recovered fully we had moved on into Switzerland. With only 10 days until the competition and me climbing at about 70% (at best) something drastic had to be done. I decided that if I could at least get a good volume of routes under my belt I would at least be feeling like things were flowing again.

We visited several good crags in Switzerland as well as spending a few days in Zurich at the amazing "Gaswerk" climbing centre, the training temple to many of the top climbers in Switzerland. This was possibly the most amazing climbing centre I had ever seen. The walls were steeper and longer than anything I had ever climbed on (until the new competition wall at Ratho of course). This was good training but all a little too late. I left for Bern onsighting 7c at a push, knowing that on the day I had to be onsighting 8a+ with ease!

World Cup Bern

As apprehensive as I was about climbing at Bern, given the preparation I had had, it was great to be there amongst the world's best climbers. It is so motivating just being in the same room as these guys and girls. I felt like I would climb well.

Until we came out to view the route I had no idea what to expect. I was shocked. The route was not the usual power-endurance fest, typical of the world cup circuit. Instead the route was ultra short, maybe 8m long, about 17 moves. I had been expecting more than twice that!

When my turn finally arrived to climb I had a horrible feeling in my gut. I hadn't had this at the other World Cups. I suppose this time I had to contend with knowing how badly prepared I was. The first move looked desperate; in fact I found out later that one climber before me had failed on this move, which was probably about V7. Happily I stuck this move and I instantly relaxed. The next few moves were easier but sustained, the hardest thing being clipping the rope into the quickdraws as none of the holds could be described as reasonable. About half way up I fell although I did not feel tired. As soon as I reached the ground I realised I had misread the move and in fact the way to do the move would have been well within me. I was gutted. I felt I could have climbed much higher and it was a technical error rather than my fitness that had let me down in the end.



So that was it, 30s of climbing and I had had my 3rd World Cup experience. Overall I finished 46th out of 56 climbers. The other Brit, Drew Haigh came 52nd making it a poor show from the British contingent.

Austria

After Bern it was a drive straight to Austria to prepare for the Imst World Cup in 7 days time. I knew that there was no time to train as such but I could at least get in some good practice at the famous Tivoli climbing centre in Innsbruck. This is the climbing wall where all the best competition climbers regularly train. It is steep and although not massive, does have more hard climbs than any climbing centre I have ever been to. The average grade being around 7c and going up to 8c+! No wonder the Austrians are so good! After 3 days at Tivoli I felt a little better physically but mentally it was terrible. Just about every team from the World Cup was there and they were all cruising up harder routes than I was doing. Already at a low ebb from Bern, I was completely psyched out when the Imst competition finally came around.

World Cup Imst

The Imst wall is basically a giant roof. Something that there isn't a lot of to train on in Scotland but nevertheless a style I like. This competition was to be different from the other World Cups I had been to in that the IFSC were experimenting with the format. There were 2 qualifying routes that we all had to try. In addition, climbers could watch each other climbing.

Certainly the competition atmosphere was a lot more relaxed but I didn't really like the format. As it was on my first qualifier I climbed well until 4 moves from the finish where I made an error with my footwork and I was off. I was relatively pleased with this performance and I was far from being the worst on this route. Although most had completed it, I could see that I wasn't far from that level. The second qualifier turned out to be a disaster. From the moment I left the floor I was tense and felt heavy, like my muscles just could not pull. I was worn out. I was the worst competitor on this climb. The two scores combined left me with my worst result yet, 59th out of 61 climbers.

France 2

With the pressure of the World Cup competitions over I felt much more relaxed and we decided to extend our trip for a few more weeks. This would give me time to address my other goals. We headed back to the South of France via the Italian coast for a little relaxation by the beach. When we started climbing again, first at the cliffs near Nice, I was relaxed, confident and climbing well. On my first day back on the rock I surprised myself by onsighting a notoriously hard 8a at the cave of Peillon. By the time we reached the Gorges du Tarn about 2 weeks later I was on top form and peaked with an onsight of a route graded 8b in the topo. This turned out to be over graded but was definitely 8a+, meaning I had achieved one of my outdoor goals for the trip.

Spain

After Gorges du Tarn we moved on to Rodellar in Spain. An area I had been desperate to get to for some time. It did not disappoint in fact it was better than I had imagined. After lots of onsighting and with only 4 days left till we had to leave I decided that I should try and address the goal of redpointing something hard. I didn't think I had enough time to climb an 8c so decided on a route that lay somewhere close, given 8b+ but rumoured to be 8c after a hold broke at the crux section. The crux, right at the end of the route was indeed desperate and I was unsure that I would be successful. In the end my first attempt saw me surprisingly close, the route was possible. After 3 days of efforts and no success it came down to the last day. The pressure was on. My first go on the last day was a disaster and I thought I was going to come home empty handed. After a relaxing lunch and a pep talk from Hannah I was persuaded into one last go. To my surprise I felt brilliant and topped out on my hardest route to date. An amazing way to finish a trip.

Summary

This trip was a great learning experience as far as competing in World Cups and travelling and trying to climb at my best. It is clear that to compete on the World Cup circuit in future I am going to have to seriously raise my game. The experience of these competitions has however been constructive and I can use what I learned to go forward. As for my outdoor goals, after a slow start things really took off. I achieved my goal of onsighting 8a+ and although my hardest route was perhaps not 8c, it was close and I know I can climb much harder than this in future. Beyond the climbing we met many fantastic and very inspiring climbers and enjoyed immersing ourselves in the different cultures of the countries we passed through. In the end we overstretched our budget a little spending a little over the £3000 figure but it was well worth it. I would like to thank the MCoFS for granting me this bursary as it has allowed me to improve as a climber and grow as a person. For the future I hope to improve upon my performances and achieve those goals that I did not meet in 2008.

