

SportCLIMBING+

The positive approach to improving your climbing

Adrian Berry
Steve McClure

"I would recommend this book to anyone who is looking to take their climbing to the next level. The authors put their wealth of climbing experience into an entertaining and easy-to-read manual."

Chris Sharma

"Finally a climbing improvement book has given tactics their true place alongside technique and training, to offer a balanced way forward for any sport climber to draw from."

Dave MacLeod

"This book is an excellent addition to the 'How to Climb' genre, offering techniques and tips from a modern perspective. The appealing layout helps to make this book an essential tool for people climbing at all grades, wanting to improve their sport climbing skills."

Lucy Creamer

"This book provides essential reading to anyone who wishes to fulfil their potential in sport climbing."

Neil Gresham

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www.ukclimbing.com

Cover: Francesca Sanders on *Magic Flute* (7b), Bernia Ridge, Costa Blanca, Spain
This page: Steve McClure in the Grande Grotta, Kalymnos



Matt Heason on *Cedar Rouge* (6c) Rocklands, South Africa. Photo by Sophie Heason.

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The origins of sport climbing and the basics for those who have never been sport climbing.

Essential ropework skills for getting up and down your first sport route and advice on making the switch from other types of climbing.

Gear (32)



All the gear that you need for sport climbing, from ropes and shoes to more advanced items like clip-sticks and bolts.

Ropework (50)



The next level of ropework skills. Includes techniques for improved efficiency as well as safe practices for climbing and descending.

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The special techniques and skills required when climbing longer sport routes with more than one pitch.

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How to maximize your onsighting potential, covering advanced skills like route-reading and advice on your attitude and tactics.

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What is redpointing all about and how it can help you achieve your maximum potential. Advice on preparation, advanced route working methods, multi-day projects and tips for success.

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Rational fears and means of working them to your advantage. Dealing with lack of confidence in your own ability leading on to some advanced mental preparation techniques.

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How to develop good technique to improve your climbing performance.

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Straightforward training advice from planning your training to what works best for specific improvements.

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Onsighting

An onsight ascent is the purest style of rock climbing and perhaps the most rewarding. It is also the most difficult to achieve. An 'onsight' is an ascent without the aid of any information, other than that gained from observing or 'reading' the route from the ground, or during the actual ascent.

Onsight climbing has a thrill that is hard to match, knowing you only have one chance focuses the mind and getting the moves right first time is a great feeling! The flip side is that onsighting is a tough game; when onsighting at your limit there will be failures. Rests can be missed, sequences got wrong and crucial holds not seen. The chances are that you'll blow some of the routes you have been aching to onsight – c'est la vie!

To onsight or not to onsight?

Whatever your situation you will always have both limited climbing time and limited energy. In our drive to climb lots of great routes it is tempting to try to onsight everything simply because it is so quick. Below your limit, onsighting is the way to go. You can cover a lot of ground and gain valuable experience in movement and boost your confidence. Closer to your limit a little more thought is required before diving into a hard onsight attempt. Be ambitious, but realistic at the same time. If your hardest recent onsight is 6b, then you'll probably want to push yourself to 6b+, or even 6c if you're feeling confident and the route favours your strengths. However, it would be an unwise use of time and energy to jump on a 7a, or even a 6b+, that does not suit your style.

If there's a special route that you really want to climb then be realistic in your style of attack. Assuming you give it your all and fall at around three-quarter's height, you'll be so tired that it's unlikely you'll have the energy for a redpoint attempt that day. Returning the following day most of the moves will be forgotten and you'll be starting again from scratch. A better strategy would have been to spend the first day working towards a redpoint in the afternoon, with the result that you will save the next day to pursue a more likely onsight prey. An alternative strategy might be to watch someone else on the route and quiz them about the moves – getting 'beta' on how to do it – allowing you the possibility of 'flashing' the route, which might well be within your reach if you get the right 'beta'. Though the onsight is the most coveted style of ascent, the 'flash' is also highly respected and for many the most enjoyable as it gives an onsight 'feel' without missing crucial or unobvious holds.

Pick your route

Sport routes are generally graded for a redpoint ascent. The exception to this is easier routes which tend only to be onsighted. Where the grade emphasis switches from one to the other is a grey area but most grades above 7b will be redpoint grades.

Routes with complicated sequences that are 'easy when you know how' can be considerably harder to onsight than the grade suggests. As a rule, longer, more stamina orientated routes tend to be easier to onsight than shorter, bouldery routes. Steeper routes have more obvious holds than vertical routes simply because they will be bigger.

The biggest aid to reading a sequence is to follow other people's chalk. Pale grey rock doesn't show chalked-up holds as readily as darker rock and so is harder to read from the ground. In addition, rain may wash chalk away; orange rock tends to remain dry in the rain (grey streaks show where the water runs).

At many venues, routes have 'extensions' beyond the belay of the original route. These are fun to onsight because when you get to the first belay, you have ticked the route and the pressure is reduced – you can view the extension as a bonus and have a go and see what happens!



Time is energy

One of the main reasons an onsight ascent is so much harder than a flash or redpoint ascent is because it's so easy to make a mistake. Though a mistake may not automatically result in a fall, more difficult sequences and corrections of mistakes take time and use up precious energy. As you become more tired, your thinking gets fuzzier and you become more likely to make mistakes, quickly falling into a vicious downward cycle until you simply don't have the strength to continue.

Knowledge is power

The traditional view of an 'onsight' is that you should walk up to the base of a route and climb it with no prior knowledge. If a climb is well within your ability, you should be able to climb it with the minimum of preparation, but the more ambitious you become, time spent on the ground will become increasingly valuable. Spending just five minutes eyeing up the route can easily make the difference between succeeding on the onsight, and having to come back for a redpoint. At the very highest level it is not unheard of for climbers to spend days working out the moves of a climb from the ground before setting off. This practice is known as 'route-reading' and more than anything else, learning this skill will add grades to your onsight ability.

As well as providing a physical advantage, knowledge of the route will provide a massive psychological boost. Imagine being really pumped only half way up and facing a desperate slap for a hidden hold. Knowing there is a rest coming up will drive you on when you are at your very limit.

This page: James McCormack on *Simone Larva* (6b+) Jerzu, Sardinia.
Left: Steve Ramsden chooses a route at The Cuttings, Portland.

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Route-reading

Route-reading is simply working out where you put your hands and feet, and in what order, before you set off. As you read the moves, explore different vantage points, check out the route from front-on, then move around to the side. If there is a handy tree, shin up that and you'll get another useful perspective. As you get higher up the route in your route-read, it will naturally become more difficult to pick out any details - a pair of binoculars is a handy tool for checking out the holds at the top.

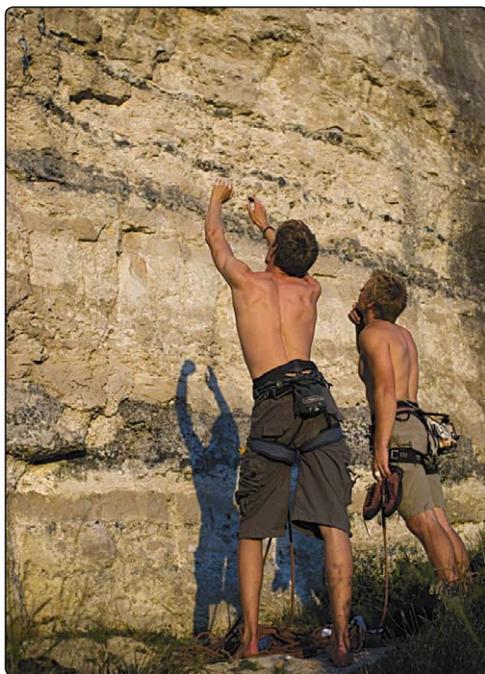
Before you start looking at individual moves, locate the line of the route; start by locating the belay. Next attempt to visually follow the line of bolts, this will also tell you how many quickdraws you need to take - if they're not already in place. Take care not to mistake the line of the bolts for the exact line of the route - follow the holds, not the bolts!

With the line clear, look for obvious rests or break points that allow the route to be broken down into sections. Finding a good rest will make a massive difference to the overall strenuousness of the route, as well as psychologically splitting the route up. For example, in the knowledge there is a good rest at half-height, you can start off aiming for half way as opposed to the top.

Obviously it is not practical to route-read a whole route from the floor unless it's very short. Attempt to distinguish between sections of difficult climbing and relatively easy climbing. It may be that only a few hard crux moves should be scrutinised, but briefly check the easier sections to ensure you know of the line and perhaps how you move into a hard sequence. Hard sections are generally obvious.

As well as steeper sections of rock or smaller holds, look for well-chalked holds. A larger hold covered in chalk often indicates the start of a tricky section, or a rest, where climbers have chalked up repeatedly before setting off. Tick-marks are often drawn in chalk to locate holds if they are difficult to spot - for example around an arete - or require a dynamic move to reach. Observe from the floor where the tick-mark leads; does it take you to a jug or an intermediate side-pull? Knowledge will allow you to prepare and commit accordingly. Beware; ticks are often used to indicate footholds, which may well be far too small for hand-holds!

Another useful tell-tale sign is a huge amount of chalk and then very little, certainly signifying the crux section that may perhaps have defeated many attempts. If the last bolt has a karabiner or maillon in place, it's probably also a sign that a difficult crux section has forced retreat.



Route-reading at Portland. Photo by Duncan Skelton.



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Reading a long route like this - *Fanthkes O Panthere* (7a), a 38m route at Rodellar - is never going to reveal a huge amount, but you may be able to locate a few rests, which might be all it takes to get you through the crux.

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Reading the moves

For any difficult section the minimum amount of route-reading should be the location of holds. Exact sequences may be hard to read, but once you start climbing, if you are aware of the holds it is likely that fewer mistakes will be made. Many holds will be obvious in their use; flat edges and pockets for example. Pay particular attention to holds that are not obvious. Look for sections of a hold that are better than others - a pocket may only be good on one side or a ledge may have a change in angle, or width, that will be invisible when you are climbing.

To read individual moves think in terms of two interlinked sequences, one for your hands and one for your feet. Hand sequences are the first and most important to work out. Mentally project yourself onto the route and follow the holds. If they are well chalked-up, the chalk pattern will give clues as to how to use a hold. In particular the thumb leaves a distinctive spot on a pinch that indicates which hand is used, or at least which hand has been used most frequently. As a simple guideline, use the holds on the left of your body with your left hand and vice versa. The sequence in which you use the holds will usually link the shortest distances between the holds.

Some moves are easier to read than others. Complicated flowstone like the photo to the left presents a myriad of pockets, pinches and side-pulls to choose from. The absence of any chalk makes things more difficult. In a situation such as this, if the holds look good, you can take some comfort from the fact that you will almost certainly work out a satisfactory sequence when you get there.

Photo by Steve McClure.

For most of us reading the moves is one thing, but remembering them is another! Route-reading is a very specific skill and one that improves a lot with practice. Don't expect to be able to perform miracles early on. To help engrain movements into your memory, 'act out' the moves with your arms as you read them. Most hand movements are very simple - you move one hand to one hold, then you move the other to the next hold and so on. Hand sequences can become more complex when you need to match both hands on the same hold, swap hands on a hold, or reach an intermediate hold then 'go-again' with the same hand. If the act of reading a sequence leaves you clearly 'wrong-handed' and stuck, then it is likely that you will need to either swap hands on a hold or go-again. If a hold requires such a specific action, make a specific mental note of it - imagine writing an instruction on an imaginary 'post-it' note and mentally place it onto the hold.

Once you are happy with reading the moves for your hands, you can expand into reading the foot moves. Here the signs include chalk ticks and rubber marks. On steeper routes look for toe-hooks and drop-knee positions, they may not be obvious when you get to them. Obviously remembering a whole load of moves, hand and foot positions, and still being able to climb to your limit, and adjust to what the rock provides, is beyond most people. The key is to prioritise your knowledge. The majority of the climb will be climbed on instinct using your natural talent, especially footwork. However, make a note of specific moves where a key foothold may be required.

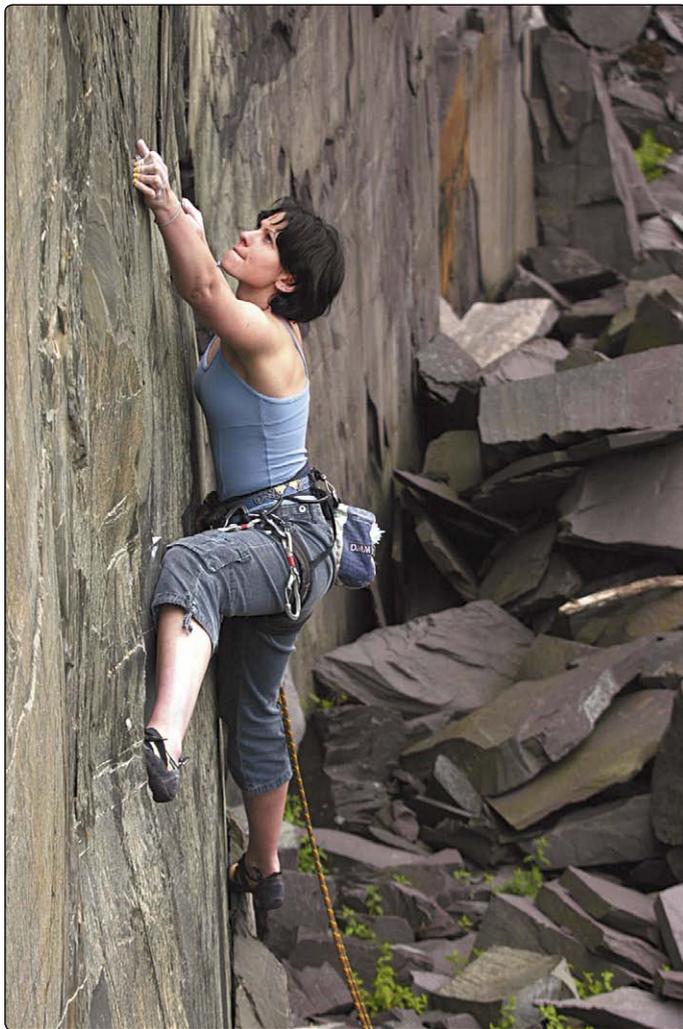
If you get to a section of a route where you are unsure of how it will go, don't be afraid to keep an open mind, at least you will be aware and ready for it when you get there.

Tactics whilst on the route

Regardless of how good your route-reading becomes, you will still need to keep reading ahead as you climb. The more moves ahead you can see, the better your chance of choosing an optimum sequence, saving both time and energy. It may well be that the sequence you read from the ground was wrong, in which case you will have to change it. One of the biggest mistakes is to become locked into a previously-read sequence that turns out to be incorrect. Learn to think 'outside the box' and adapt to what you may have missed from the floor.

Knowing when to back off is often essential for success. A complex sequence may take some working out, or a quickdraw could be hard to place. Retreat to a relative rest and then blast straight through knowing exactly what to do. Though not 'backing off', a quick down-climb to get 'in sequence' is often useful. The trick is being aware of the possibilities and 'going down to go up' may not cross your mind. *See page 78 for more on down-climbing.*

Compared to indoor climbing where the coloured holds are easy to spot, outdoor climbing offers many more options of how



Laura Hudson attempting an onsight of *Paradise Lost*, Rainbow Walls, Dinorwig Slate. Reading ahead whilst on an onsight attempt is crucial, even if you have spent half an hour studying the route from the ground!

to make a move. Speed is key and often the holds are fairly obvious. Don't be hesitant; if you picked a hard route it's going to feel hard. Sometimes you may miss a hold but generally people fall because they hang around too long waiting for more holds to materialise.

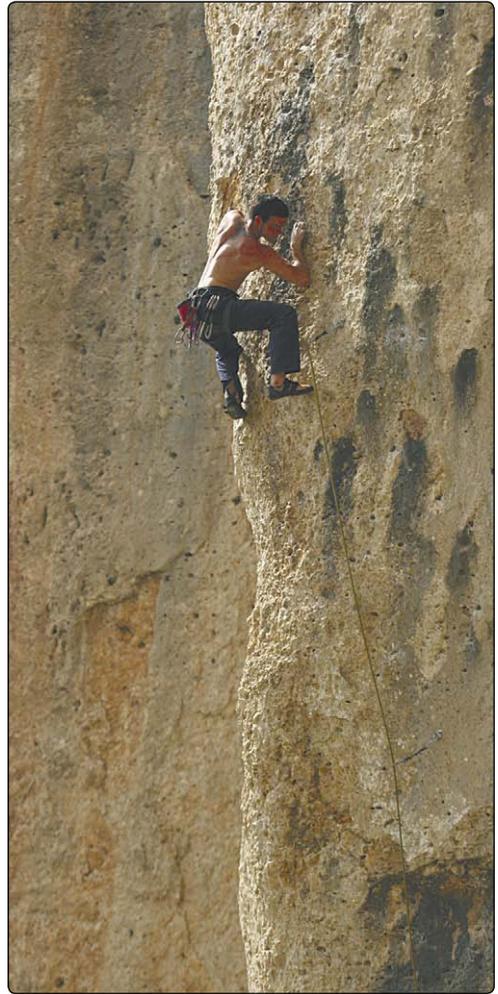
Onsight attitude

Whilst we want to minimise the number of mistakes we make, there is a danger that we will become perfectionist in our approach. An onsight ascent always involves some mistakes. A good onsight climber can accept this and not let errors deflate their confidence and focus. If you make a mistake, correct it as quickly as possible and move on. As a general rule, it's better to be quick and a bit wrong than slow and flawless. The latter approach will get you half way up in style but you'll be pumped beyond salvation. The key word here is 'decisiveness'. Unless you are recovering at a rest, keep moving, preferably upwards. However, it is better to reverse to a rest than get 'stuck' at a move and wither away.

Getting 'stuck' at a move is where many an onsight ends. This may be because you cannot see the next hand-hold. Try switching your focus from your hands to your feet. Look at building your feet up, this serves to move your point of view up and away from the rock as your head is raised. Often this is enough to get a better viewpoint enabling you to see the way ahead and break through the impasse.

You generally get stuck because you cannot commit to a move. Perhaps because you feel too tired to make it, are unsure about the hold you are reaching, dare not because the following moves also appear difficult, or simply because you cannot work out what to do. Route-reading solves most of these problems, for example:

- 1) You know the hold you are reaching for is good
- 2) The next section of climbing is easy
- 3) There is a rest coming up



If you find yourself 'stuck' on a move, switch your focus to your feet. Often this is where the problem lies and simply stepping up on a hold may give a whole new point of view!

Photo: Unknown climber at Montsant, Spain.

Remaining cool is the key to success. Make a big effort to stay calm - not only will you be able to access all the information you gathered from the ground, but you will climb better and absorb information from the rock around you.

Destination web sites

The following websites are well established and present good information on sport climbing in their home countries. Many of them often have friendly forums where you ask questions about climbing in a particular country or crag. Some of them have online shops (or links to online shops) where you can buy area guidebooks. Also try Google of course.

Mainly UK

www.rockfax.com - see box to the right
www.ukclimbing.com

Rest of Europe

www.planetmountain.com - Italy
www.kairn.com - France
www.escuelasdeescalada.com - Spain
www.klettern.de - Germany
www.czechclimbing.com - Czech
www.climb-europe.com

North America sites

www.rockclimbing.com - USA
www.climbing.com - USA
www.supertopo.com - USA
www.urbanclimbermag.com - USA
www.gripped.com - Canada

Rest of the World sites

www.railay.com - Thailand
www.climbing.co.za - South Africa
www.climb.co.nz - New Zealand
www.sportclimbingaustralia.org.au - Australia

Personal coaching

A lot of performance coaching information can be found on the Internet.

Adrian Berry has his own site -
www.positiveclimbing.com

Forthcoming Rockfax Sport Climbing Books

France : Languedoc - Roussillon (2011)
 Ardèche to the Gorge du Tarn, France.

Peak Limestone (2011)
 Trad and sport climbing on Peak Limestone, UK.

Dorset (2011)
 Sport and trad climbing in Portland and Swanage, UK.

Costa Blanca (2012)
 Costa Blanca in Spain.

Yorkshire and Cumbria Limestone (2012)
 Trad and sport climbing in Yorkshire and Cumbria, UK.

Current Rockfax Sport Climbing Books

Mallorca (2011)
 Sport and DWS on Mallorca, Spain.

France : Côte d'Azur (2010)
 Marseille to Monaco, France.

France : Haute Provence (2009)
 Céüse to Buoux, France.

El Chorro (2008)
 Andalusia, Spain.

Clwyd Limestone (2005)
 Trad and sport climbing in Clwyd, UK.

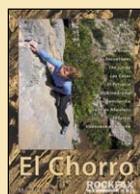
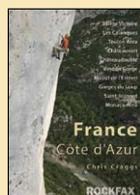
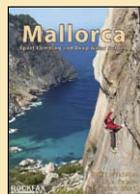
Current Rockfax Performance Books

Trad Climbing + (2007)
 Traditional climbing performance.

Winter Climbing + (2009)
 Winter climbing performance

In total we have 25 books in print, 22 of which are less than five years old, plus over 50 downloadable PDF MiniGuides.

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www.rockfax.com



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