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CLIMBING TRAINING | PAUL FEARN | MARCH 13, 2012 12:21 PM | EDIT

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Beta Climbing Designs the UK importer for Sterling Ropes have arranged for is to interview James McHaffie. Until last year James was best known as one of the leading traditional climbers in the UK, with regular onsights of E7 and E8, as well as headpoints of E9. A few years ago he began to focus more on sport climbing with one day ascents of Predator 8b and Unjustified 8c, at Malham Cove. All his hard work came to fruition last year when he successfully redpointed Big Bang 9a, at LowerPen Trwyn. In this interview James talks about the training he did to give him the edge he needed to climb 9a.



James on Big Bang 9a, Lower Pen Trwyn

You are very well known for your traditional climbing. How did training for your ascent of the Big Bang differ to what you have done in the past?

Climbing hard sport routes is totally different from what I've done in the past. Usually I'd just go climbing all the time, nearly every day, and doing very little training. In fact pretty much no training other than some bouldering here and there and the odd fell run.

Climbing something at my limit and improving at it actually meant climbing less, as I'd need one and a half to two rest days before serious attempts and to be much more reflective about where/why I'd fallen.

I've got a proper sweet tooth which doesn't matter too much when you're ledge shuffling on E7s but I have had to have a break from them for steep hard sport climbs!

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The current background image is of the Ogwen Valley, North Wales. Taken from the top of Tryfan, by Richdown3rd.

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Can you describe a typical training week, on the build up to the successful redpoint?

Most of the training effect comes from trying as hard as you can on the repeat attempts themselves. I'd have three to four good goes on Big Bang, and then warm down on one of the 8a s down there. I'd have a break on the drive back home (two hours maybe) then do some fingerboarding pull-ups etc for an hour. I'd do some basic stuff the next morning before work, such as sits and press ups. Rest the next day then try to redpoint the route again. I'd be strategic and have a double session day on the Wednesday. Weighted pull ups and basic stuff for an hour before work, a few laps on classics boulders down Llanberis pass for 2 hours or so after work on things like Full Roadside, Barrel Traverse, Big Smile and Jerrys. Each one is about French 8a+ and I'd do about two to five laps on each (probably two on the big smile) then finish with a few pull ups/lock offs till I'm exhausted. I'd then have two rest days and not over eat the day before and I know I've done everything I can to feel good on the route.

The Big Bang is well known for its tough crimp finish. How did you develop the levels of power endurance needed to arrive at this section fresh enough to still get through?

I'd try it three to four times a session and literally would get a bit higher pretty much each session, until I was doing an 8c+ three times each session, touching the good crimp post crux, then falling. I was also getting progressively a bit lighter each time. Try doing a circuit with an extra three to four kg on and it makes a considerable difference. I didn't know how much of a personal plateau I'd broken till the day after I'd done Big Bang I went and did Melancholie 8b which I didn't get tired on and felt quite easy. I'd always thought it would feel desperate, when it didn't it give me a good gauge of how hard Big Bang was.

Did you do any specific finger training to give you strength required for the route?

Not too specific. Lots of volume on three finger drag pull ups and lock offs on fingerboard, but combined with loads of body power stuff. My main weakness is power which is easy to train (see gains made in weak areas) and I can make considerable gains very quickly through working it. I had footless projects at the Brenin climbing wall I thought were desperate in May, I didn't think I'd do them. Late July they felt ridiculously easy, showing what a bit of conditioning does.

Did you find that you had to modify your training to match the style of climbing demanded by the route?

I'd do everything I could to NOT match the style in any of my training. Almost all of the hard moves from half height on Big Bang involve crimping. I've never been injured but had a small tweak in one finger I expected to get worse and perhaps prevent success. Part of the imperative to stay light was to put less stress on the fingers.

Did you have any specific weak points you had to address prior to the red point?

My weakest areas were power, core strength and boredom threshold!

The main power stuff I did was in pull ups (200 in the morning, pyramids to warm up, then sets on a variety of different hold sizes), one arm lock offs, a bit of repeater training in the morning and evening (repeater training is hangs on a finger board for a set period of time and then rest for a set period of time) and the odd bit of campus boarding and curls. Again keeping it varied and focusing mainly on doing lots of volume of steadier exercises. I didn't follow a standard form of power then power endurance or stamina, as much of my training was an hour or two after attempts so that I could get more rest days in.

For core I did a few sets of sixty sit ups and a few press-ups between pull up and lock off sessions, as well as back curls and as much opposition stuff as possible to help prevent injury. Much of the power came from increasing upper body work and reduced weight, resulting in better power to weight.

I believe you also resisted cakes and beer for a number of months prior to your successful redpoint! Did the careful management of your weight make a big difference on the route?

As touched upon in prior points. Less stress on fingers and upper body, and four kg less to pull up on each move. I wasn't on some obscene diet. I just threw loads more fruit into my diet and had cheese and oatcakes for desert rather than cheesecake! If you eat like a healthy person should and you exercise regularly you become pretty streamlined and light. For me it was almost a placebo: I've done all I can do to get this. I was willing to go much further, that's the scary bit.



James on Careless Torque, Font 8a, Stanage Edge

How did you manage the mental challenge of trying to repeat a route which had rejected the likes of Ben Moon?

I really wanted it. Ben didn't spend much time on it. The crux feels horrific on the first few sessions and when you start linking to the crux properly it's about 8c just to get to there, so it can feel a huge undertaking. Neil Carson was a hero from when I first started climbing and

I never dreamed of doing his route. I had nothing to lose by trying it and everything to gain. I knew it suited me, very fingery, technical and a lot about recovering swiftly on very poor shakes. I like 'pulling things out of the bag' so to speak and having some surprise elements of ability where you manage things that don't seem probable from your normal performance. Some climbs suit me like Careless Torque which I did twice one day and again after doing Unfamiliar. Knowing this boulder problem that I'd done several times had repelled many strong candidates helped dispel the worry of being a weak traditional shuffler trying something way too hard for him (which let's face it is what most people thought).

What do you think was the biggest factor that helped you climb 9a?

There are two main factors, inspiration from close friends and the knowledge that hard, thoughtful work pays off more than 'talent'.

What are your targets for 2012?

Do Rainshadow 9a, at Malham Cove, which I did with one rest last year after five sessions. Complete the Melttdown in the slate quarries. Tons of great traditional and sport routes I'm keen on, throughout the UK.

I may have one big wall trip somewhere but will see what happens.

For more information on James and his coaching and route guiding services visit his [website](#). Our thanks go to James and his sponsor Sterling Ropes, we wish him all the best for his targets in 2012.

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Written by Paul Fearn

Paul first started climbing way back in 1989. Since then he's managed to climb E6 trad and 8a+ sport routes. Paul will be sharing his expertise to help you to become a better climber. Check out Paul's blog on [training for rock climbing](#).

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