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Interviews

April 5, 2012

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Tom Randall on Training for Crack Climbing



Beta Climbing Designs, the UK importer for Sterling Ropes, have arranged for us to interview their team climber Tom Randall. Tom, along with Pete Whittaker are best known as the Wide Boyz! Tom has worked extremely hard over the last two years in a cellar in Sheffield honing his crack climbing skills. His specialising in this form of training has paid huge dividends. The Wide Boyz have just returned from the US, having repeated many of the hardest offwidth crack climbs out there, including the reputed hardest offwidth crack climb in the world, 'Century Crack'! In this interview Tom describes the training techniques he used to make these ascents possible.

Header image is Tom demonstrating the art of the double fist jam. Photo Randall collection. Please don't reproduce without author's permission

What drew you to training specifically for climbing cracks?

The main issue that I came across when trying to improve my crack climbing grade was that there just wasn't enough do outside! I had a small circuit of routes or boulder problems that I could do in the Peak District, but in the end I got to know the routes really well, so eventually there wasn't much training effect any more. I suppose also, there was a realisation that cracks are often climbed with "technique" and if I could train more than just this and work on "power" and "endurance" then that would be a good thing.

We aren't really blessed in the UK with many hard crack climbs, how did you learn the specific techniques required to climb cracks?

I initially learned to crack climb out in the USA, in Yosemite park. It's a good place to learn, but also a harsh one. There aren't any footholds or face holds outside of the cracks, so everything seems desperate at first. I met a guy from Montana, whilst in Yosemite, who seemed very happy to go climbing with me for a week and show me what to do on every size - I guess I owe him quite a lot!

What any aspiring crack climber out there should know though, is that every person starts off having a terrible time, cutting their hands up, dropping a million grades, and experiencing humiliation. The thing that marks out most good crack climbers is that they were prepared to go back and try again and to continue to experiment. My first crack was an HVS splitter hand crack (when I was face climbing E3) and I couldn't get more than 15ft off the deck after an hour's effort.



Tom training on his crack beam. Photo Randall collection. Please don't reproduce without author's permission

Can you describe a typical training session you used to develop the strength and technique for climbing cracks?

I don't really have a typical training session that I use, but I'll give you an example of some stuff I did in my offwidth cellar before going out to the USA.

I'd begin the session by doing a low intensity warm up, and would generally sample lots of different sizes to get a feel for how I was feeling that day. Was I strong/tired/sore skin etc, which would then dictate how my session would be carried out. On a good day I would spend an hour working on strength endurance sets (around French 8a/8a+) - so very hard moves and around 15-20 of them in a go. I'd combine them in continuous reps with variable rest until I started to feel I'd lost the "edge."

To finish off the session, I'd then spend another hour or so doing endurance training (around 7b+) doing lots and lots of mileage! This generally involved getting sweaty, losing some skin and wanting to have a shower afterwards.

You seem to have created a variety of innovative training techniques to help you get stronger at climbing cracks, such as crack situps. Can you describe what you did and how they helped?

I've always been quite analytical about my climbing and how I improve, so I broke down crack climbing movement/technique into its constituent parts. I then devised different ways of training each section of the climbing. For example, the upside down situps, were for Century Crack as I knew I'd have to sit-up and place stacks or Friends between my legs over, and over, and over again...

I noticed you training with a 20kg weight vest. What benefits did the vest bring to your training sessions?

The weight vest was used during the later parts of our training season when Pete and I felt that it wasn't possible to get a high enough intensity in our training sessions without it. When you can do endless laps on a horizontal crack without tiring, it's pretty much essential that you go back to basics and shock the body again.

The weights vest doesn't bring any benefits itself - it's more that it allows you to control the intensity of the training session. If you're not continually overloading the body, it'll stop adapting and growing stronger/fitter.

Did you also use weights in your training to help you target specific muscle groups?

I didn't do that much weights work relative to people that are really keen on it, but I did identify certain muscles as requiring a decent workout. In particular, the bicep was key to giving high standard of crack climbing (especially on very steep terrain) so both Pete and I did thousands and thousands of bicep curls. I can't remember the amount we did in 2 years, but it was a very large number!



The scars of crack climbing. Photo Randall collection. Please don't reproduce without author's permission

With the crack climbing you were trying is it important to have good overall body conditioning such as a strong core?

Having a strong core is very important in all sports, but it tends to highlight itself as a weakness in certain types of movement. Having said this, I've coached quite a few people who think they have a weak core, but in fact it's not always that simple - hip flexors and lats can have a massive effect on the chain of movement in your core.

Overall, it's important to have an overall body conditioning that is adequate to allow you to sustain a prolonged training cycle. Often people wade into a year of hardcore training without preparing the body beforehand. I suspect that early season injuries are a result of this in quite a few cases.

How did you develop the endurance required to climb a sustained roof crack?

The endurance to climb roof cracks is generated purely by lots and lots of mileage on that terrain. If I were intending to climb a 30ft roof crack, then I would make sure that in my training sessions I can climb at least 150ft of horizontal roof in each session. This amount can be broken down of course, but the total mileage is important as your body is almost over-prepared for the event in a way.

It's also important when trying to improve endurance that you don't spend too much time "totally boxed" as you'll be more likely to fail to complete the whole session. Take it easy, pick your pace and get the work done...



Tom bouldering out a crack. Photo Randall collection. Please don't reproduce without author's permission

How did you fit this

training into your normal climbing training, such as bouldering and circuits?

I didn't really to be honest! I had to make some fairly significant sacrifices in my normal climbing to achieve my crack climbing goals. I don't regret it though, as I have achieved something that I'm pretty content with and if I put a paper bag over my head down at the local wall, they'll never know it was me who's failing to get a up a crimpy V2.... 😊

I've seen you resting from your feet jammed in a roof crack. How did you develop the strength to get yourself into this position and then rest?

Again, this comes down to practice. At first, I spent ages working out all sorts of different sequences with my feet and what angles I had to have things in the crack and then, well, it was down to getting out there and doing it again, and again, and again.... You get the idea! When it comes to unusual things in climbing that people often see as some kind of mad trick, then it's about not being embarrassed to make a fool of yourself and just try it out. After all, you can never look as silly as me.

Our thanks go to Tom and Beta Climbing Designs the UK importer for Sterling Ropes and Climb On for arranging this interview. For more information on Tom visit his Blog. Tom is sponsored by:



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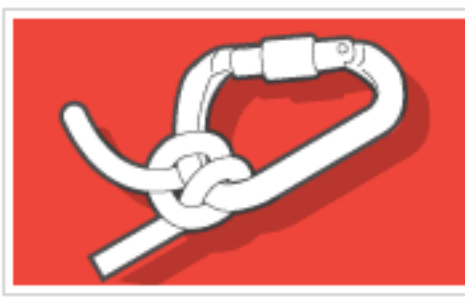
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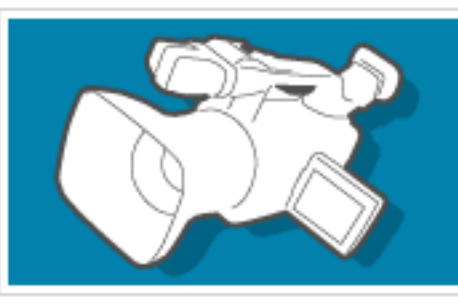
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