

WINTER '94-95

free

Allez

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S CRAG MAG

KEVIN THAW
HI-DESERT GUIDE
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REGIONAL UPDATES

A Man for All Seasons

From Stoney Point to the Himalaya,
aiding El Cap to ice in Chamonix.
Kevin Thaw lives by the motto:
Go anywhere, climb anything.

by Steve Edwards

It's a strange feeling to belay an A5 pitch high on a route. With pitches that take hours and a Gri-gri to minimize attention to the leader, belaying aid can be quite relaxing. But on A5, you spend your time knowing that any fall can be disastrous. Sure, you can take solace in the fact there's nothing you can do about it. However your mind never really stops running a series of possible death scenarios or self-rescues that could ensue.

So after an hour of listening to Kevin battle with a copperhead seam, I was elated to hear an audible sigh of relief.

"I finally got something good."

I instantly relaxed.

"What'd ya get?," I asked, visions of a buried #3 Camelot running through my head.

"A hook," said Kevin — Laughing!

A short while later, Kevin finished the seam and started out a roof toward easier climbing, and the last of our A5 pitches. I was just getting comfortable when I heard a crack. Kevin was airborne.

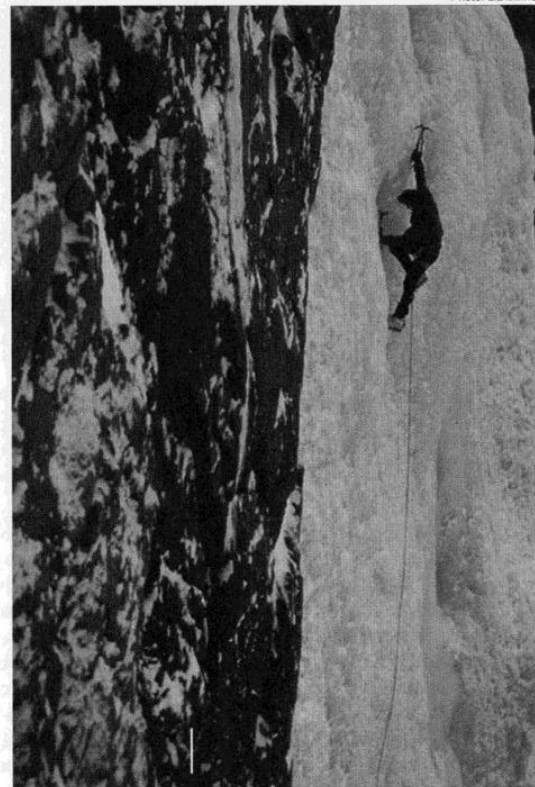
"Yeee Haww," was all he said when he came to a stop, 30' below his highpoint. Two pieces had pulled and all that was between Kevin and 80' of heads was an old, rusty knifeblade. Instead of being daunted by the situation, he sounded as though he'd just taken a bungee jump. Next he casually attached his jumars and set off toward his highpoint, boisterously laughing at the condition of the fixed pin and his proposition of taking a 200 foot fall!

And I'm thinking, "He's a cool one,

Kevin. Very cool."

I've known Kevin since I was a fledgling climber living in Yosemite and scraping my way up 5.10's. We met in the bar and went climbing the next day. Unlike most great climbers I'd hooked up with, Kevin didn't seem the least bit put off to have to climb below his limit. A soul climber, he just enjoys climbing, be it hard or easy. He just goes along climbing at whatever

Photo: Liz Minne



Kevin running it out on steep ice in the Sierras.

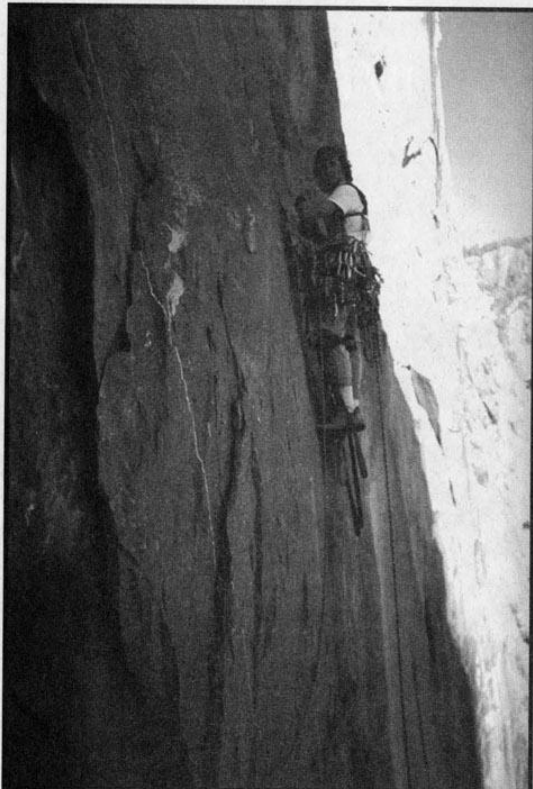
Facing Page: Kevin cranking La Ouita (8a), Buoux, France

Photo: Liz Minne

grade his partner wants until they tire, then catches a belay on something hard.

His seemingly limitless energy keeps him pushing the envelope. "He'd be really famous if he promoted himself," says ex-Rock & Ice editor, Nancy Prichard. But Kevin neither cares, nor has time. He's always climbing.

Allez — #2



Hooking on *Zenyatta Mondatta*, A5.

Photo: Steve Edwards

He began as a youngster in Manchester, England. At a local quarry, he and a friend would hang a clothesline down a cliff, then climb out. "If we got in trouble, we grabbed the line." As a teen, he excelled in many sports, but when he came into a small inheritance he decided to pursue climbing.

"I'm sure climbing has kept me alive. When I started traveling, I was doing a lot of motor biking, which was really crazy. We raced around these small roads at a hundred miles an hour. Quite a few of my friends from those days are dead."

So off he went, following no particular agenda or climbing style. Bouldering in Fontainebleau, granite in Chamonix, limestone in Aix-en-Provence. It didn't seem to matter, so long as there was climbing.

At 18, he headed to the Himalaya for a go at Annapurna IV. "We were young and very gung-ho, but really didn't have enough big mountain experience. We got stuck in a storm and all started hallucinating from being too long at altitude, we were lucky, and no one got hurt. We didn't make much of an impression on the route, but I'd love to go back now."

In '88, he got a job guiding in Montreal, bringing him to America for the first time. He climbed in the Gunks, then took a bus tour of the whole United States, ending up in California. Since then, he's split his time between France, England and Southern California, but spending most of his time in the latter.

"I really like California. The weather is great and there is always something new or different to climb... I miss the mountain granite in

Chamonix and the scene in England, but I can always go there. I'd rather be here most of the time."

He now lives in Chatsworth with his girlfriend, Liz Minne. Herself an excellent climber, Liz is often on the other end of Kevin's rope. "What makes Kevin so fun to climb with is that he likes to do everything: rock, ice, bouldering, soloing, aid. It doesn't matter to him. He loves it all." Last summer, Liz and Kevin did a new mixed route in Canada on Crowfoot mountain, the Thaw-Minne, which, according to Kevin, "is totally classic. Everyone should do it."

But what's interesting is that someone who has climbed in so many "classic" areas could be so psyched to live in the San Fernando Valley. A couple years ago, stuck in the Valley with no car, he did

every hard boulder problem at Stoney Point. I'd talk to him on the phone and he'd be stoked about a new problem on Boulder 2. Could this be the same person who's done the north face of the Eiger (twice), El Cap (12 times), the Walker Spur, the Central Pillar of Frenzy and climbed in Verdon? Many climbers I've known get so jaded after a trip to the (Yosemite) Valley that they never want to climb on any rock they deem inferior.

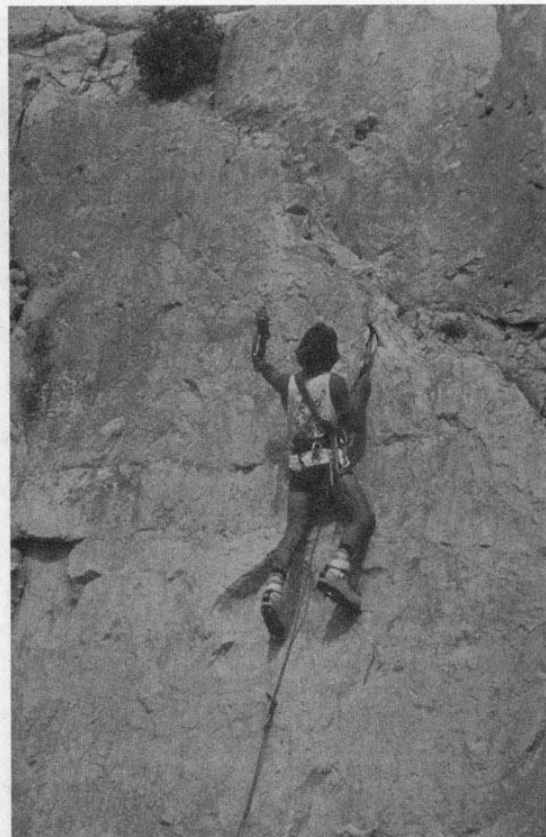
But Kevin deems no rock inferior if there's climbing on it. In fact, he has no particular favorite rock, nor means of ascent, "It's always changing. Depending on what I'm into at the moment."

A few years ago in England, whilst on a gritstone binge, he did the second ascents of both *Appointment with Fear*, 12d, X (one piece of pro, after the crux) and *Thing on a Spring*, 13b, R. As well as the first ascent of *Breakin' For a Bogie*, 13b, R. "You probably wouldn't die, just bounce hard."

A year later, he changed modes, ticking the *Austrian Oak*, 8a+ (13c), *Rumble in the Jungle*, 8a+, and *Powerband*, 8b (13d) on English limestone.

When I ask him about his best accomplishments, he hesitates, "...I guess I had one season in the Alps I was pretty happy with: I soloed the north face of Les Droites and the Frendo Spur, really fast... oh yeah, and I did the Bonatti-Zappelli solo in winter..."

That's about all I get. So I ask Mike Thompson, who climbed with Kevin in



Shallow placements on the White Cliffs of Dover.

Chamonix a few years back if he can remember. "I couldn't believe everything he'd done. It seemed like everything I pointed to he'd say, 'uh-huh, I've done that.' It was as if he'd done so much he didn't remember until you pointed it out."

It's the same on rock. I recall one day in Josh with Mark Robinson. We were discussing a route Lynn Hill hadn't been able to do. Kevin walked up, and, thinking Mark could use some beta, offered some, not knowing it was Hill we were talking about. Mark, seeming slightly dubious asked Kevin if he'd done the route. His reply seemed slightly embarrassed, "Well, I redpointed it."

The next time I talk to Robinson he says, "That guy's done everything. I can't

believe I've never heard of him."

Anonymity is not due to a shy personality. Kevin loves to talk climbing, but perhaps not to the right people. He especially enjoys talking with beginners. Says Liz, "It's got to do with their raw enthusiasm. He loves talking to people that love to climb."

This was evident a few years ago when speed records were falling on El Cap. Kevin teamed up with Hans Florine to do the Nose in 6 hours and 1 minute. At the time this was the second fastest (now third) time ever. The ascent was written up, but Kevin's name left out. When I asked Hans how Kevin was he shook his head, "Fast, man. Really fast. At least as fast as me."

Another story of speed comes from John Mireles. I walked into the Mireles household one Sunday night to see John looking as if he'd been left for dead in a desert. A knowing smile crossed my lips when I remembered his weekend plans, "You've been climbing with Kevin."

John had invited Kevin for a photo shoot on Mt. Mendell, not knowing what he was in for. "I knew he was a good alpinist, but Jesus, he's extreme. The guy can't go slow. I'm just trying to get up this thing to take photos and he can't even wait for me. Every time I turn around he's soloing up something or down another."

But when inclined to, he can go slow. Not much is slower than aid climbing and Kevin seems to have no problem switching gears into what he calls, "slow mode". "I just get into wall life. Nice and slow. When I'm up there just plodding along one pitch at a time, nothing else really matters."

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"Last spring, I was really into bouldering. I took two trips to the Valley and didn't tie into a rope... I did *Thriller*, *Midnight Lightning* and some first ascent Sean (Myles) couldn't do... Then last summer I took two trips and only did aid. Warren (Hollinger) and I did the 10th trip up *Sea of Dreams*, A5; then you and I did *ZM [Zenyatta Mondatta]*, A5."

This fall, back into bold climbing, he freed an old, one pitch aid line on Little John pinnacle at the base of El Cap. *Penine Crack*, 12d (R). "It's a good top-rope, but I'm in no hurry to lead it again."

Then he teamed up with Brit Adam Wainwright to free climb the North Face of Sentinel Rock in Yosemite, grade V, 5.12a (R). 12 pitches, with only 3 less than 5.11. "Not as hard as the Nose, but sustained,

classic, and in need of an American ascent."

As for the future —

"It looks as though Warren, Liz and I will be heading to the Trango Tower (in Pakistan) sometime soon. We're currently waiting on a permit. Warren and I are going to Baffin Island next summer and I guess you and I are going to Zion in January."

On the way home from Yosemite, our conversation rolls around to money, jobs and existence type stuff.

I've landed a job working for Five-Ten, traveled all over the world (He's driven every mile of both US 10 and US 80. "He just likes to tick routes," says Liz.), climbed everywhere I've wanted, and had a whole lifetime of experiences. If I could do it all over, I wouldn't do a thing differently."

And I'm thinking, "Cool Kevin. Very cool."



FIXE Sport Anchor

The *FIXE Sport Anchor* is a stainless steel carabiner permanently attached to a bolt hanger. When you reach the end of a route, simply clip in and lower to the deck! No more untying and threading the rope through Cold Shut anchors, which aren't designed for climbing in the first place. Safety and convenience equals more fun! You may have already used them on the "Totem Pole", "The Hired Gun", etc...

Kevin atop El Cap after finishing *Zenyatta Mondatta*.

Photo: Steve Edwards

