

A new sport – A new dimension



Dave Rundall

“Good olde-worlde gear”

Cogne February 2005

I just discovered a new sport and a new dimension to mountaineering. Its ice climbing!!

Now you might think "What's new? – 'bin doing that for twenty years". Maybe you thought you had. Probably you've done a goodly number of routes in Scotland over the years. But that's not ice climbing. Ice climbing is Cogne; with new leashless Quarks.

Dave reckons that they are the "boules de chien" – roughly translated, the "dog's bollocks". Dave is even prepared to move out of retirement back into paid employment again to get a pair of dog's bollocks. In fact, they are already on both the birthday list and the Christmas present list! One way or another, Dave is having a pair of Charlet Moser dog's bollocks before next February!!

I remember my first ice axe. It was the traditional wooden-shafted walking stick, the sort that every aspiring Himalayan chap used. I burnt my initials into the wood, just below the steel pick. JRT. I wonder where it is now – someone nicked it on a trip to the Himalaya. What a loss!!

Of course that was all the gear anyone needed in those days. Equally suitable at 28 000 feet or for chopping careful steps up steep gullies in Scotland. Learning to climb was reading Bradshaw. De rigueur were red, woolly socks; fine woven breeches; and leather boots, with those new(ish) vibram soles. You did not need to bash tricounis into the soles any more! No-one wore stretch pants, plastic boots or had "ice tools". True, a few tear-aways started wearing flare jeans and bandanas on the crags in summer. Someone invented a funny harness that seemed a bit better than the hemp waistline – well, you didn't need to replace it every six months.

I reckon I've gone through about 6 generations of ice gear. After the sad loss, the next was, I think, an axe with a fibre-glass shaft. A Curver, I think. Someone tried climbing with things in both hands and gave up the step chopping. Just hang around on sharp points sticking out from feet and hands. I tried a dagger. A bit like something to hold the Sunday joint down whilst carving away. A square-sectioned tool with a very sharp point, held dagger-like. It wasn't very good and I guess I used it only a couple of times. The magazines talked about something called an ice hammer. There were none in the climbing shops – you went to the ironmongers and bought a slater's hammer. This had a long, curved pick with a hammer head and was attached to the wooden handle with a metal brace, not just bashed onto the wood like an ordinary hammer. The pick could be given teeth on the underside, using a sharp file. This gear worked well and you could just keep going up steep snow and over short bulges of ice.

Then the revolution. Pterodactyls and Hamish McInnes. Wow!! "Terrors" were the first technical ice gear, although Chouinard had made a rather better wooden-shafted hammer and axe (which I couldn't afford) a couple of years earlier. We had to learn not to swing and chop at the ice. Rather, use an odd swing+plus+pull+down to get those sharp angled points to stick in. And there was a home-made wrist loop, made out of tape tied carefully to be just the right length with the right loop size. This took lots of time and much trial-and-error. But they were the business!!

I remember doing the Diamond Couloir on Mt Kenya with the pteras. A fine line in a fine place on a fine mountain, the upper pitch running straight up to the summit and the cosy, insulated aluminium bivvy box. But after the main pitch, I took an axe belay, hammering in the axe with the ptera hammer. The pick fractured, a crack running from a lower notch, and fell off. It was a good job that there were only snow slopes ahead. I got a replacement pick on returning home.

Then there was the (second?) ascent of Pistyll Rhayadeur in mid Wales, the longest waterfall in the principality. I heard about it whilst doing Great Gully up from the screes in Wasdale one Sunday during the coldest February I remember – three weeks of sub-zero temperatures with every water course across the UK a solid seam of hard ice. Someone had done the first ascent the day before in Wales, I found out from others on the crag. So the next Saturday, it

was a very early start along unfamiliar roads and lanes, with only a road map to locate the falls. I'd never been before (or since, in fact). I guess it's a bit of a touristy place in summer, because there is (or was) a café at the bottom and paths around the sides. But that Saturday, we had the place to ourselves. Today, there would have been queues of likely lads (and lasses) with smart pants, fancy jackets, tools and gear a-plenty. There were huge "umbrellas" of ice cascading from the top of the falls. The first pitch at least had a tree close by to get a runner on. But I don't remember ice screws, but perhaps we bashed in an odd ice peg or two. The ice had formed into beautiful, sculpted smooth glassy icy balls and bulges. It was not really possible to hack at it. Rather, careful placements over the smooth curves were required. The moves over the umbrellas were awesome – fine laces of ice, almost transparent and thin, very thin. No brute force here! I think it's a couple of hundred feet or so and we felt well pleased. It had been climbed the weekend before, but didn't seem to have had a recent ascent, so I reckon it could well have been the second ascent.

At the time, the pterodactyl was unsurpassed and we could not imagine anything better ever. True, bashed knuckles were the order of the day and their shortness, whilst making them neat in confined places, meant you could not stretch up far enough.

On a trip to the Caucasus one summer, Plan B became an ascent of a fine route nestling next to Ushba, the Matterhorn of the "Kafkas". My Czech partners had banana picks and dropped a tool down to me before a hard, steep section. This was good, very good. Still able to swing these tools, but with only the gentlest of effort, these picks were really secure, weight pulling them into the ice. I had to have some! So I bought a pair of Mountain Technology "Vertige" banana picks, with straight shafts. I deliberately got the longer 55cm versions, to be able stretch beyond the crappy sugar which so often seems to plaster the difficult moves in Scotland. And it works! And a refinement was to buy, not craft, a pair of adjustable wrist loops. In fact, I got a second set of even better leashes later.

So to 2004. Winter climbing had taken a back seat for a few years. Fruitless trips to Scotland and a total lack of conditions in the Lakes and Wales meant that mountain biking and indoor walls were a more common way of passing the winter months. But then American John suggested a trip back home to New Hampshire and gave us the local club's website. Through December and January, you could read about the routes, see pictures and watch as the winter deepened and the bulges fattened. So by the time we arrived in February, the ice was as good as it gets. With pretty good weather, we enjoyed routes almost every day.

This was the time to try yet another generation of gear. Whilst my straight-shafted gear remains brilliant for Scotland, curved shafts and better-designed picks had been around for several years, mostly coming from the design houses of manufacturers in Europe where techniques pushed ahead once the safety of the ice screw was established. So we tried out each other's gear and I felt the improvements in design, especially on the longer vertical stuff where fatigues in the arms sets in and 100% placements in quick succession breeds success. I'd also forgotten to bring a holster and had to learn again about the tangles and frustrations of axes dangling from wrists whilst trying to twist in unhelpful screws.

So new tools were a must for 2005 and Cogne, just off the Aosta valley in Northern Italy, through the tunnel from Chamonix and a few miles beyond Courmayeur. Charlet Moser had brought out the Quasar a few years ago, but the Quark was a refinement, with annual tiny but important design changes. The picks are sharp along the top edge, so slicing outwards and upwards is easy, to avoid the difficulty of removing well-stuck pieces all the time. There is a neat little plastic addition on the end of the shaft, to protect the fingers and to prevent tired hands slipping off the ends of the shaft. But the piece-de-resistance are the removable leashes. I'd played with these in the shop in the States and guessed they would make some difference.

But reality was another dimension. The ice in Cogne is steep but plentiful. There are so many routes and such pretty valleys. The weather was cold but kind and the ice takes as many screws as you can carry and the routes even run to bolt belays and lower-offs or sturdy trees on most occasions. This is a new sport really – near to the equivalent of sports

climbing. Its all proper climbing!! As much technical difficulty as you can handle, yet without the blizzards or dodgy belays of Scotland.

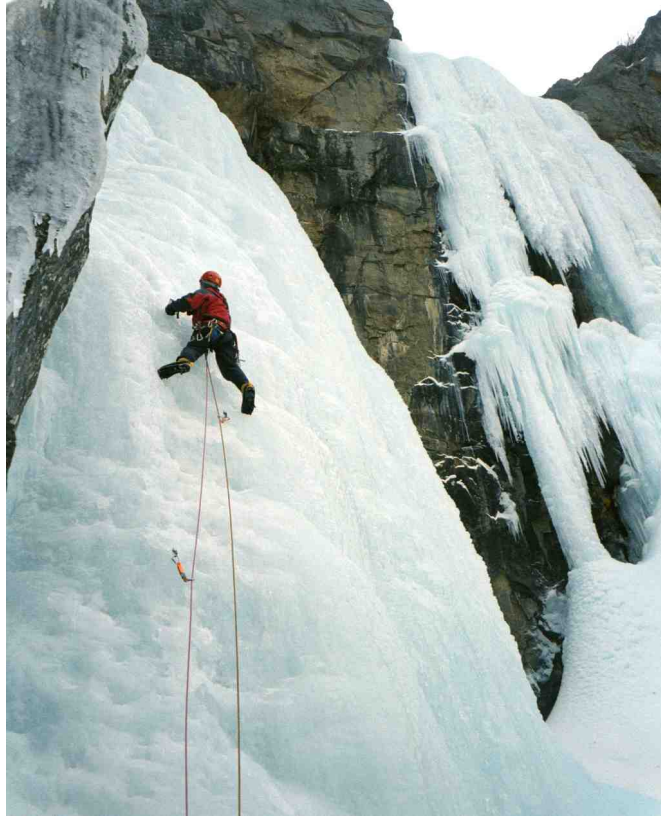
The Quarks really are the dogs bollocks! Precise and incisive. The joy of being able to leave a tool in the ice, unclip from it, get the gear off the bandolier, place it quickly and then clip back in and away is just wonderful. Almost all the faffing about disappears. The tools protect your knuckles, but the placements feel so solid.

So what next – is this the ultimate gear? People tell me that mono-point crampons are better, so I guess I will move onto these next year – the old gear has been filed to sharpness too many times . And there are already tools with cranked shafts, to hang on rather than to hold. But I reckon the gear is nearly as good as could be.

Or is there yet one more new sport and one more new dimension. Dry tooling? I could do that up the back of the house and never need to leave home ever again!

Somehow, I think it won't catch on.

Richard Toon





"American-John" Roberts

Charlet Moser Quarks

Cogne February 2005

