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Who's the Greatest?

"Going out on a limb, and picking the best climbers on the globe...."

The World's Best

To apply the superlative "best" to a climb or climber invites an avalanche of dissent. Before getting your huggers in a bunch, consider this -- making it on the "The World's Best" is an honor of limited utility and even less tangible reward. Those listed below -- the best climbers in the world -- still climb for the sake of the activity itself, just like the rest of us.

Determining the leader in each of climbing's varied disciplines is a daunting task. The very standards that build the yardstick of performance are themselves subjective. The timing of this story -- The Millennium -- is arbitrary. Are you starting to comprehend? Despite these disclaimers and the slippery nature of our pursuit, human temperament leans towards comparison. Those true purists who disdain lists, grades, and measured equivalents should stop right here. Those among us who have ever debated grades, had heroes to emulate, or knew or cared that Everest is higher than K2, read on.

Defining categories was to sift the same grey zones that blur the boundaries of good, better, and best. The following names represent the current riders of the world's cutting edge. Our categories include Best All-Around Climber, Best All-Around Technical Climber, Best All-Around Rock Climber, Best Traditional Rock Climber, Best Female Rock Climber, and Best Boulder/Sport Climber.

The World's Best All-Around Climber

Tomaz Humar

Age: 30, married, father of two (daughter Ursa, 7, and son Tomi, 3)

Hometown: Kamnik, Slovenia

Last September, Tomaz Humar met with Elizabeth Hawley, a Nepal climbing historian, to discuss his latest project -- [a solo attempt on one of the last great problems of the Himalaya -- Dauhligiri's unclimbed South Face.] She listened, took notes, and in the end said, "He's crazy but he certainly isn't dumb."

Crazy? Maybe. Dumb? No. On November 3, 1999, Tomaz Humar chose life. He turned back just 170 meters shy of Dauhligiri's summit (8167 meters) completing his biggest performance to date after nine days alone on the 4000-meter-high south face. The heartrending decision proved his good judgment, tempered by years of experience in the deadly environment that has claimed several of his best partners. [Monstrous, hairy, and high, Humar's Dauhligiri South Face route is a fitting millennial apex in extreme high altitude solos. Another Himalayan soloist, the famed Reinhold Messner flew to Slovenia to greet and congratulate Humar at the airport.]

Humar reported difficulties of M5 to M7+ and WI6 on terrain of up to 90 degrees. [The weather was initially warm mutating the lower third of his projected line into a death trap of waterfalls, avalanche, and falling debris.] He threaded through a rotten buttress between thundering discharges. Here Humar reported via radio, "Only God can help me, everything I touch is falling off. I have never seen such bad rock and conditions..." At 6000 meters, Humar was struck by chunks of ice and rock -- by-products of a nearly constant barrage. His injuries were painful yet no debilitating. Above the rockband, Humar made rapid progress to 7200 meters, but not after being struck again on

the thigh by a falling stone. Bruised, fatigued and unable to force a passage through a rotten overhang, Humar traversed onto the west ridge.] After a tortuous bivy (he brought no tent) in the death zone of 7800 meters Humar made for the summit. At 8000 meters, he retreated in the face of body-tossing winds. On the descent he discovered the corpse of English climber Ginette Harrison, who perished the previous week on the Normal Route. He claimed the ascent was "100 times heavier" than anything he had climbed in the past.

[Humar knows how heavy things can get.] Last year he soloed El Capitan's Reticent Wall (modern A5, claimed to be the hardest aid line on the formation). It was his first El Cap route. In 1997 after climbing Lobuche East (6119 meters) and Pumori (7165 meters), both in Nepal, he completed the futuristic West Face of Nuptse (7742 meters). His partner was Slovenian, Janez Jeglic, considered by many as one of the best alpinists in the world. The pair simul soloed all but a short section of the 2500-meter wall. The ascent took three days with difficulties up to WI 5 and passages of hard rock climbing. Jeglic was lost on the summit -- apparently blown off the mountain. Humar nearly died on the descent after being struck by falling ice. He suffered frostbite on four toes.

In May 1996, Humar and Vanja Furlan climbed the Northwest Face of Ama Dablam (6828 meters). The 1700-meter route took five days. The pair experienced difficulties of WI 5 and A2+. They lost their ice screws below the crux ice face. With retreat impossible, the pair carried on to the summit in three days. Furlan and Humar were awarded the Piolet d'Or for 1996 -- a mountaineering honor bestowed by an international jury -- in recognition of the total commitment required to climb this imposing wall. Furlan, a leading Slovenian climber, died three months later in his home range of the Julian Alps.

Humar is a dedicated father whose preferred reading includes the Bible and Nejc Zaplotnik's (first Slovenian to summit Everest, died on the 8163 meter Manaslu in 1983) philosophic climbing treatise, *The Way*. Humar's climbing philosophy, so eloquently expressed in his actions, is simple, "I'm more convinced than ever that the maximum form of alpinism is solo, because it is here that a person's true ability is put to the test ... and the Himalayas, with the altitude, still continue to be the stage for the biggest performances." His two passions -- climbing and family -- though not mutually exclusive sometimes conflict emotionally. His last words before departing for Dhauligiri were, "I'll never again leave my children (his wife, Sergeja gave birth to Tomi while Humar was on Ama Dablam) in daylight, it's easier to go away in the cover of night..." Regardless, Humar remains the steadfast climbing visionary, "All my future ascents are focused on these most demanding goals... yet unclimbed Himalayan peaks which one can ascend only by devilish dangerous walls."

World's Best All-Around Technical Climber

Alexander Huber

Age: 31, single

Hometown: Berchtesgaden, Germany

Alex Huber first exploded on the American scene with the second free ascent of the Salathe Wall (VI 5.13b) on El Capitan. He was the first man to free every pitch. The year was 1995. In Europe, Huber had already garnered a huge reputation from his limestone ascents of 5.14c and 5.14d sport climbs and multi-pitch routes up to 5.13+. In 1996, Huber established Open Air (5.14d/15a), a candidate for the world's hardest route and as yet unrepeated. He must have felt his free standard adequate. For nearly two years now Huber's main thrust has involved ice, mixed, and alpine climbing. He ticked routes like Klammbaam (WI 6+/7-) - a delicate ice fang near Partnach, Germany,

placed second in the International Ice Adventure competition in Pitztal, Austria, and climbed a new M9- in Scotland. [In the mountains, Huber climbed the classic Eiger North Face, Flagrant Delire (a 5.10 A3 rock wall) on the Grand Capucin in winter, and a difficult mixed outing on the imposing North Face of the Konigspitze in the alps. In 1997, he went on to make the first ascent of the west face of Latok II (7108 meters), via a huge El Cap style aid route at 5.10c and A3+. He rounded out his experience with an ascent of the classic route on Cho Oyu (8201 meters).

Huber returned to Yosemite in 1998 to climb two new free routes on El Cap. His El Nino (VI 5.13c, A0) on the North America Wall and Freerider (VI 5.12d) adjacent to the Salathe. These two new routes are mere stepping stones in a path which Huber says, "will lead climbing into the next millennium: the combination of different disciplines at their highest levels." This year, an ever methodical Huber travels to the Himalaya again, this time to attempt the South Face of Shishapangma (8013 meters). The South Face is a bear -- the face is 2700-meters. It's miles harder than his past effort on Cho Oyu's -- isolated, with technical passages of steep ice and rock. Experience gained on increasingly demanding routes should put Huber in a good stead to up the grade in the high altitude game. Handsome, brash, often perceived as arrogant -- Huber, the former physics student, is meticulous and cocksure in his approach to training. Whether it's gymnastic rock or high altitude mountaineering, Huber is nothing if not ambitious. His impact will resonate well into the next millennium.

World's Best Boulderer/Sport Climber

Klem Loskot

Age: 25, single

Hometown: Salzburg, Austria

In a sport full of stratospheric numbers, incandescent talent, and fly-by-night adolescents, one man's achievements -- and size -- stand out. Klem Loskot is not your average featherweight sport jockey -- he tips the scales at burly 180 pounds.

Loskot first turned heads in 1997 when he did the second ascent of Fred Nicole's Radja (V13/14) in Switzerland. Both climbers have repeated each other's problems over the years. Today, Loskot's tick list includes an international roster of the free climbing world's hardest, including three V12 flashes, a 5.14a flash, and three 5.14d redpoints. His latest hit was a repeat of Nicole's Elfe (5.14d), [a 35-foot twenty move granite roof] in Switzerland last October. Success came on his second try, second day, after four days spread over a year. A witness, Udo Neumann, testified to Loskot's smooth grace which maximizes an apparently effortless momentum: "If you watch him climb Elfe, you get the impression that it can't be the hardest thing tried last year."

In the same week, Loskot also did the first ascent of Wrestling with an Alligator< (V14, in Austria) and 0 [0 as in zero] G (V13, in Germany). These achievements capped off a jetset year of international travel during which he established four V14's including <Cave Rave< (V14) and Ammagamma (V14), both in the Grampians of Australia.

When asked how it felt to be chosen for the World's Best, Loskot answered with a modest, "The best is the one who is having the most fun. In this respect I might deserve it. I don't believe in honors like this, but I appreciate you choosing someone from Austria doing his own thing just with a few friends ..." Loskot is all about fun. He partys

like a rock star, makes enough money to travel the seven seas, and is stars in a new video -- Udo Neumann's kaleidoscopic Evolution Revolution. Loskot's also working on a new book on training. He claims that his training techniques, "would fill an encyclopedia... I had to learn it all before I could forget it."

Loskot claims to enjoy surfing as much as climbing. He jokes, "I'm a 5.3 surfer, though actually one of the best in Salzburg ..." On two recent trips to Australia and South Africa, Loskot spent as much or more time in the water as on the rock. Of course he managed to squeeze in some quality rock time with a 5.14a flash, 5.14a first ascent, and some of the hardest moves ever done on rock.

World's Best All-Around Rock Climber

Yuji Hirayama

Age: 29, married, father of one (son, Yuta, age 2)

Hometown - Tokyo, Japan

In November 1999, Yuji Hirayama on-sighted Mortal Kombat in Castillon, France. The 120-feet of colonettes was originally rated an endurance 5.14c. Hirayama, who hung the draws the second half, pinched and pulled to the chains in an epic 45 minutes. Hirayama claims the route is 5.14a. Consensus calls it 5.14b. If consensus rules, then Mortal Kombat<is the hardest on-sight in the world.

Hirayama has been cranking at the top since 1986 when, at 17, he made his first trip to Yosemite. He redpointing routes like Phoenix and Cosmic Debris, both 5.13a. Over the next decade Hirayama showed cutting edge talent in the sport/competition game. In 1988 he redpointed Les Specialistes (5.14a), then considered one of the hardest routes on French limestone. The same year he on-sighted Orange Mechanique (5.13b) -- a world class effort. By 1990 he was living in France placing high (including one win) in World Cups. He had also on-sighted 5.13c.

"It's amazing how the bad things don't bother him and the good things really get him going," says Jim Karn, Hirayama's former roommate in France. "I remember when Yuji was injured and we were competing at Arco in 1991. We both did poorly -- eighth or ninth. That night I was bummed. Yuji says, 'We have to forget about today and focus on tomorrow.'" The next day Hirayama blew the field away, winning his second World Cup event victory.

Hirayama never forgot his traditional roots. He's applied the power gained from sport and comp climbing to the land of gear and runouts. In 1995, he made the first -- and only -- on-sight of Colorado's Sphinx Crack (5.13 b/c), placing all the gear on lead. In 1997, Hirayama made the first ground-up free ascent and third overall, of the Salathe Wall (VI 5.13b). He nearly on-sighted every pitch in two days. According to Hidetaka Suzuki, "It was one of the biggest accomplishments in the last 10 years." To prepare, Hirayama on-sighted two extreme crack climbs, Love Supreme (5.13b) and Excellent Adventure (5.13a). He also ran laps on Cosmic Debris (5.13a). How does he do it? Jim Karn says, "He's positive and mellow to start out with. He stays calm. Yuji has always been one the best at climbing out of trouble. He maintains his focus enough to analyze the situation."

Hirayama shows no sign of slowing down. The decade's close saw some of his greatest triumphs. He won the 1998 World Cup Title, got married, moved back to Japan, and had a baby boy. Prior to Mortal Kombat Hirayama visited the Las Vegas area. There he flashed a 5.13c, redpointed two 5.14b's, and redpointed a different 5.14a on three consecutive days. Prior he placed third in the 1999 Leipzig World Cup event and fourth in the 1999 X-Games. Always smiling and looking forward to bright new vistas, Hirayama might take his attitude to new heights, "We are part of mountaineering. I have always wanted to go to the Himalaya and do an 8000-meter peak, so one day I will, if I feel like it." Wherever they lie, expect to see Hirayama's ambitions for the 21st century exposed at the cutting edge.

World's Best Traditional Rock Climber

Leo Houlding

Age: 19, single

Hometown: Llanberis, North Wales

"Everyone forgets about trad climbing, and it's miles more fun..." So says the boy wonder, Leo Houlding. It's November 1999 and bubbly pretty boy Houlding is fresh from a trip to Sweden where he just finished Savage Horse (E9 7a, or 5.13c X). His new creation is protected with RP's and skyhooks! It's not that Houlding hasn't tasted the sporting life -- he did win the 1994 Junior World Cup in Birmingham and the British Junior Indoor title in 1996 -- it's just that, "I get a lot more out of [trad climbing]."

Houlding has gotten quite a bit out of climbing. He started at the age of 10, in a traditional bastion of British trad climbing, the Lake District. Nine months into his career, Houlding, again with his father, climbed the notorious loose, exposed, and bird-shit-encrusted Old Man of Hoy. Something in the experience stuck. In 1996 at the age of 16, Houlding moved to Wales. That year he made headlines, on-sighting Master's Wall (E7 6b, or 5.12c X) in rock shoes a size and a half too big.

Though angelic in appearance, Houlding has always borne a streak of irreverent madness. At 15 he climbed Lord of the Flies (E6 6a, or 5.11d R) at 2 a.m. while wearing a headlamp. In August of 1998 Houlding made the headlines again, this time for a spontaneous tennis-shoe ascent of the Angel of the North -- at 65-feet, Britain's tallest statue. He was promptly arrested and let off with a warning. As he later explained, "It was easier to negotiate than most mountains I have tackled. I stood on the Angel's head and looked out over Gateshead. It's a very good view."

In September 1998, Houlding and a buddy, Patrick "Patch" Hammond, made a huge splash with the second ascent of El Nino (VI 5.13c A0) on El Capitan. Houlding on-sighted the two crux 5.13c pitches. He blew a complete on-sight by grabbing a draw -- once after a fumbled clip and once just above a stance to brush some holds. It was the pair's first ever big wall. Despite his then pathetic wall experience and a day-long storm, they completed one of the finest ever efforts in world free climbing. Thirty pitches -- six of 5.13, seven of 5.12, and five of 5.11 -- a near on-sight. (Leo has since set a record time of 21 hours 31 minutes on Lost in America, old A5, with Eric George and Russ Mitrovitch.)

In fall 1999, Houlding succeeded in redpointing a line (though not in a single push) on El Capitan right of The Nose all the way to El Cap Tower. Generally following New Dawn, his new creation frees steep slabs and corners to El Cap Tower. [Up to 50-foot] runouts, sideways dynos, and wild jumps characterize climbing graded V8/9 and 5.13d. Such exotic jumping movements are almost a Houlding trademark. His airborne antics have graced walls and boulders throughout the world. The route's unique feature is the Alpha Romeo badge pitch, the fourth. The Italian sports-car hood ornament, affixed to a blank section, could rank as the world's worst aid point. It's a desperate reach to get it. Once grasped, the hold spins. Then it's a six and a half foot dyno to the next hold... Says Houlding of his new creation called Passage to Freedom, "It's harder than El Nino for sure."

World's Best Female Rock Climber

Katie Brown

Age: 19, single

Hometown: Parker, Colorado (currently living in Coal Creek Canyon, Colorado)

Any doubt that Katie Brown is the reigning queen of female sport climbing was shattered in October, 1999 when she flashed a route rated 5.14a called Hydrophobia. The feat was completed with draws in place and a bit of beta. Hydrophobia, an endurance route in Siurana, Spain, came on the heels of another ground breaking effort -- an on-sight of Omaha Beach (5.13d) in the Red River Gorge, Kentucky. If it stands, Brown's flash of 5.14a also places her among the ranks of the top men. Elie Chevieux, Garth Miller, Chris Sharma, and Klem Loskot have all flashed or on-sighted 5.14a.

Brown first made headlines in 1996 when she on-sighted Convicted (5.13a) in the cavernous, arm blasting Mother Lode of the Red River Gorge. Brown was 14. Preferring on-sights to projecting, Brown's top redpoints have shadowed her maximum flash abilities. With Hydrophobia, Brown has actually exceeded her best redpoint grade! A Fossil of a Man (5.13d), her current redpoint best is a letter grade easier than Hydrophobia at a mere 5.13d. What's her secret? Brown moves with a deceptive smoothness and unworldly endurance. She also claimed in a recent interview, "I'm a little afraid of falling, but leading is better than seconding." Maybe fear of falling gives her the on-sight edge. It hasn't affected her bouldering -- when pressed on grades she admitted that she finds V7 "pretty easy."

Besides her achievements on rock, Brown showed a competition talent early in her career winning the Junior World Championships in 1995. She has also won the coveted Arco Rockmaster twice, placed second at Serre Chevalier, and won a World Cup event in Besancon this year. She's also won the much-hyped X-Games, not once, but twice.

Brown, 19, is shy and reserved. When asked about trad climbing, she replied, "It was fun and very different. I found I could hang out for a long time placing all the wrong gear..." Brown's 5-foot, 85-pound frame and subdued nature no longer take climbers by surprise -- she's too famous. Fame, a heady distraction for most youth, hasn't clouded a Brown's future plans, a strength derived in part from strong faith and family. When asked if she considered herself a professional, the answer was, "I do not know ... school is the most important thing now."

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