

IT SEEMS TO ME THAT
SORT OF THING TAKES
ALL THE SPORT OUT
OF CLIMBING!

The poor climber in the picture who has tangled with the goat is obviously going to get no sympathy from the party doing the "Class 6" buttress. For these two rope-bedecked climbers are jealous to see him gain all that altitude so quickly without the labor of pounding pitons, drilling bolt holes and manipulating countless ropes.

We don't know, of course, that the goat episode is an accident. Probably the goat is merely defending its possession of a pleasant sunny ledge, but the other climbers seem to have suspicions of a cunning plan. Indeed the goat seems to have propelled our hero quickly past a troublesome blank spot in the wall, and he now has his hand on a "Thank God" hold that might put him within easy reach of the summit. It is just possible the goat has been carefully trained for this job, and the climber may have padded his pants well in preparation. If so, we feel sure he considers he is having much more sport than the pair hanging to the buttress in stirrups.

Certainly the new technique will have to be argued pro and con, on and on, by climbing devotees from here to Nepal before it can be generally accepted. Is it safe? Is it practicable? And above all, is it ethical?

The question of ethics in climbing is always good for a rousing argument. Any climber has handy on his tongue some scathing comments about techniques or equipment of which he doesn't approve. But to the non-climber the whole problem is somewhat obscure. For assuming one wants to get to the top of a mountain (strange as the notion is!) why is he not justified in using any method his ingenuity can devise?

Now ethics is usually defined as a code of moral or professional conduct. For climbers it should certainly

include consideration for the next party to climb. Be agreeable to local residents, with whom future climbers will come in contact. Don't leave a litter along the route or on the summit. Leave the cliffs as you found them, if at all possible, so they will present the same problems to the next climbers. (Only in special cases, it seems to us, where a particular club desires to set up permanent route on its own home rocks, is it desirable to leave hardware in a climb. However the matter is somewhat controversial.)

This much might be construed as "moral conduct". But when we get into "professional conduct" we are faced with a wide variety of opinions and no book of rules to set us straight. Here we encounter the controversy over the use of oxygen equipment in the Himalayas, and read furious arguments about "artificial aids" and mechanized climbing. We hear it rumored that Britain's renowned A. F. Mummery was once blackballed from the Alpine Club for climbing without a guide. And like as not we are told that our own climb up Practice Rock doesn't count, because we used our knees or hung on to a "vegetable hold". (Trees and bushes are illegal holds in several climbing clubs. Reaching a high ledge with the knees instead of the feet is sometimes convenient, if ungraceful. However, some folks stoutly insist it is "wrong".)

Climbing is a non-competitive sport and as such needs no standard set of rules. Climbing seems to appeal to individualists, who like to make their own rules. But most climbers discover, sooner or later, that they do need to make some kind of rules for their own enjoyment of the sport, whether or not they are like anyone else's.

Those who climb Everest or Kan-

chenjunga, perhaps, need make no reservations as to how they got there. That they stood on the summit is testimony enough to their climbing skill. But even in the world's greatest mountains it will not always be so. More and more high-powered equipment will make the ascents easier, while the remaining "firsts" get fewer. Can't you hear the British scream when the Americans, or the Germans or Russians, snag some last mighty peak by shooting porters and supplies to high camp by rocket?

In our domestic climbing, how we reached the summit is usually as meaningful as which summit we reached. Did we take the easy hiking trail or climb the difficult east ridge? Or did we put a new route up the face -- and if so, what technique was required? Or perhaps we made it a winter ascent on skis or snowshoes.

Wyoming's Devils Tower is an example of an all-rock peak where no easy route exists and anyone met on top would be presupposed to be a climber. Yet besides the two regular climbing routes and eight other routes requiring varying amounts of direct aid, folks have reached the summit by using a ladder of wooden pegs, by climbing a fixed rope with Prussik loops, by helicopter, and by parachute!

Helicopters can go almost anywhere nowadays. New flying gadgets the Army is experimenting with may be even tougher competition for the climber. When we say, like Mallory, that we climb the mountain "because it is there", we lay ourselves open to the question, "But why don't you go by helicopter?"

So we should recognize that we climb, not because we must reach the summit, but because we like to climb. Climbing is a game and as

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Ethics and Mountain Climbing - - -

by herb and jan conn

"anything for safety, nothing for direct aid"

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such needs some rules and regulations. Just as a fisherman restricts himself to the use of a light line for better sport, so the climber will decide what methods best suit his idea of sport on the rock at hand.

There is much to be said for the British rock climbing tradition which dispenses with pitons and other mechanical tomfoolery. Certainly it is a job to climb unburdened with hammer and hardware, and there is doubtless fun (if your judgment is good and your nerves are steady) in making long relatively unprotected leads. Climbs of a high degree of difficulty have been done this way, and the British climber, to become a leader, must develop skill and balance he wouldn't need if he climbed with pitons. Naturally, there are many places he cannot go without pitons, but it is equally true that if nothing is impossible, neither is anything a challenge.

The weakness in this system, we believe, is that courage plays a bigger role than skill. There is always the temptation to take chances, and he who is willing to take chances (or who lacks the good sense to know he is taking them) can go places a safer climber will not.

Most U.S. climbers prefer to use at least an occasional piton for safety. One set of standards, which we

personally prefer, is anything for safety but nothing for direct aid. In this system we use pitons for belay purposes -- perhaps too liberally -- or, if we can flip the rope over a handy rib for an upper belay, well and good. However, we are particular to climb the rock as if the rope and hardware weren't there. So we can be as chicken-livered as we like, but there is still ample challenge to our climbing skill.

Our principles do lead to the ridiculous at times. We remember well the hee-haw we got from Sierra Club climbers when we made a "climbing ascent" of Half Dome using the tourist hand-rails for belay points. However, we climbed strictly on the natural rock and at least satisfied ourselves that the face is climbable.

Some folks are of too practical a mind to drive a piton and then not use it. Some, indeed, seem not to realize that merely by standing on a piton, or by making a simple rope pendulum, they are crossing the line into direct-aid climbing. Others prefer this sort of climbing because it calls into play adeptness and ingenuity with ropes and equipment. And, of course, it gets one to places he could not otherwise reach.

On the other hand, direct-aid climbing lacks freedom of movement and the fascination of solving natural

rock problems which are never twice alike. To a large extent it replaces the challenging question, "Can I climb this pitch?" with the less enthusiastic, "Is it worth the effort?"

But direct-aid advocates usually set limits to their mechanization too.

For many years, it was customary to justify a direct-aid pitch by saying it led to an enjoyable "legitimate" climb above that would have been inaccessible otherwise. In this limited sense pitons for direct aid had become quite fashionable at the time of the first Shiprock ascent. But the use of two expansion bolts (for safety only) on that climb seemed to require a lot of explaining. Another point of view was demonstrated on Yosemite's Lost Arrow. Feeling the first party cheated by lassoing the summit and climbing the rope in Prussik loops, another group undertook the arduous job of doing a straight-forward tension climb with pitons and bolts from the bottom.

The ultimate in mechanized climbing is now available, but as far as we know it hasn't yet passed any climber's code of ethics. It is a bolt gun, used in construction jobs, which fires a bolt into masonry or rock with an explosive charge. It is only a matter of time, most likely, until someone introduces this gadget to the climbing field. The gun will be heavy to carry, but the saving in time and energy drilling bolt holes will be tremendous. And think of the new routes it will open!

In the years to come other marvels may appear, adhesive grippers for hands and feet, or anti-gravity devices. They may divert the climbers for a while, and certainly they will give the old-timers something to scream about. But fortunately the old climbs will still be there for those who want to climb by more primitive methods.

Though it will surely be annoying when jet-propelled sightseers spiral around us as we labor up the cliffs, there is at least one consoling thought. In the long run only those forms of the sport which are essentially worthwhile will survive.

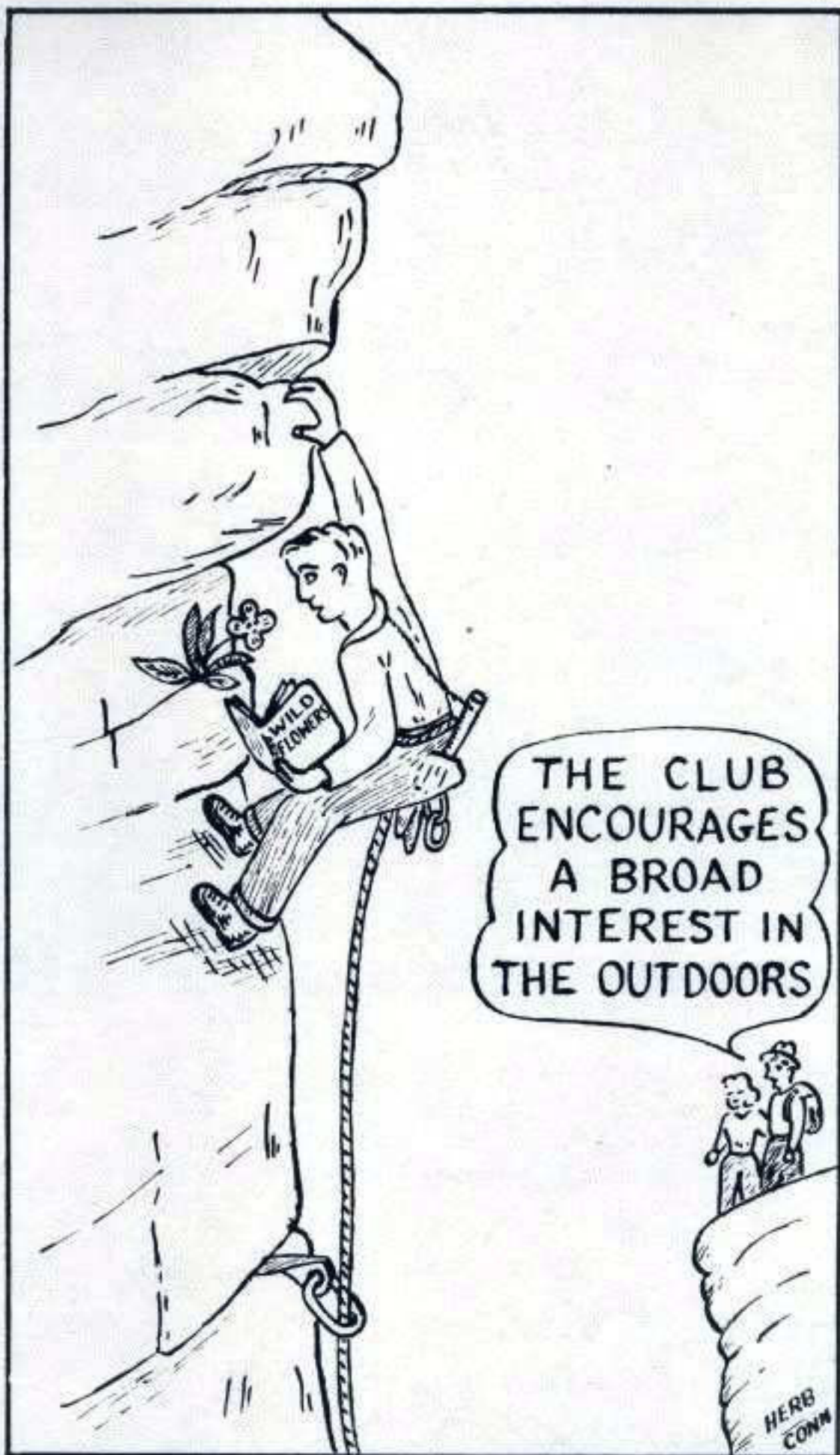
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