



## AAC Publications

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### Change

The mental game behind the world's first 9b+

**I enjoy climbing as much as anything in the world. I indulge in that beautiful upward movement, feeling the breeze and trying to be creative and become a part of the wall. It is enormous fun. But I also love setting goals for myself. The challenge. Trying as hard as I can despite multiple failures. In climbing, I can have both.**

Since I started climbing, my passion for moving on rock has never changed. And new challenges have never ceased to appear. Nevertheless, the challenges have changed over time. In the past, I wasn't much into putting up first ascents. School limited my free time, so whenever I got the chance to go abroad I preferred to climb instead of bolting. Except for a couple of climbs at my home area, I had never opened a significant route. This changed when I finished school last May. I couldn't wait to visit an unknown crag, poorly developed and with enormous potential for extreme new routes.

This is why I decided to go to Norway. I had heard so much about this beautiful country, and I became even more motivated when I saw a picture of the cave at Flatanger. Instantly, I understood that this place was not to be missed. We packed our stuff in early summer and headed north—an unusual direction for a Czech climber. It was about 10 days before we got to Flatanger, and driving the last 30 kilometers was exciting. I was a little afraid the cave would disappoint me. But at first glance, the doubts diminished. I knew I'd found the place for bolting an ultimate project. I stared into the endless sea of light granitic gneiss as if it were the best TV program on Earth. It took some time to decide which was the perfect line, and in the meantime I did a couple of onsights and made the first ascent of a Magnus Midtbø project, Thor's Hammer (9a+/5.15a). Then it was time to bolt.

It is hard work bolting from the ground up through 55 meters of constantly overhanging terrain. I aided with hooks, Camalots, and 6mm bolts—one can never be sure whether these will pop off. But after two days the line was completed. The enormous advantage of this rock is that there were no loose flakes, and the surface was absolutely free of dust and moss. Finding such a steep cave with solid holds all the way is almost impossible on limestone; nowadays most of the hard-core routes tend to be reinforced with glue, or else the route would change with every ascent. Flatanger was different.

It was not clear whether the route was possible, especially because I found the lower boulder problem absolutely heinous. But searching for sequences, being creative, is one of the most interesting parts of climbing. And creativity paid off. The easiest way through the lower crux is one of the craziest sequences I have ever come up with. I started by kicking my right foot way out and making a long reach into an almost non-existent gaston in the seam below a roof. Then I turned the roof into a dihedral by bringing my left foot up, desperately, just below my left hand. I grabbed an intermediate with my left hand in order to bring my left foot even higher, dropped my knee and bent my spine as much as I could—all the while crimping desperately on a terrible gaston with my left—and stabbed my left hand into a two-finger pocket. It took me a long time to figure this out, and I am quite confident it is the easiest way through this section. Nevertheless, it still felt extremely difficult.

The route was beating me up. Three moves in the crux and I couldn't catch a breath. My back was sore, and the skin on my fingers was thin. But I made some good progress, and on the sixth day of work I sent the first pitch, which resolves 8b climbing into an 8B+ boulder problem. After about 20

meters, there is an anchor in a kind of dihedral where the rock is almost vertical. You can press onto both sides, releasing your hands while crouching under a little roof, pushing your head into the ceiling. Here I planned to rest before linking into the second pitch, obviously without making a belay in the middle.

I thought the first pitch was 9a+ (5.15a), and with a 25-meter, continuous 9a following it, I believed the whole route would be hard 9b. The ascent seemed within a reach, a question of a couple of days. But the more I tried it, the more I understood how difficult the first pitch was. I was unable to link that pitch again, even though I felt stronger at the bottom. Eventually I told myself I needed to quit, go home, train sufficiently, and return with full power.

Back home I began training power endurance for the World Championships in Paris, doing 30- to 40-move laps on a bouldering wall. At the same time, this was exactly what I needed for my project in Norway. I also did some pure power training on the campus board, and occasional shoulder-power workouts for that special move on the first pitch.

Mentally I was still in Flatanger. I couldn't stop thinking about the route. Even though I was training for the World Championships, I thought mostly about what would follow after the comp. In late September, we packed our car and headed north again. I was in shape, I had regained motivation, I thought it would go quickly. But not everything goes according to plan. The moves didn't feel any easier, the holds were humid, and my confidence was kicked down. Nevertheless, after a couple of days, I was back in the game and finally I repeated the first pitch cleanly. I had never climbed the whole second pitch, only six moves in—most times I would save myself for the next day. After linking the first pitch for the second time and resting beside the anchor, I slipped off a heel-hook in the crux traverse of the second pitch. But my mind was calm. I saw it was climbable.

Over the next few days, though, the route suddenly didn't seem doable anymore. Some days the rock felt humid, but then cool days with wind came and still it felt desperate. I couldn't understand it. I would be perfectly rested, warmed up, the wind would be blowing, and I couldn't hold onto the rock. My self-confidence froze at the point of zero, my mind overwhelmed with doubts. Did I even enjoy this? Why was I doing it? Wouldn't it just better to go climb something easier? Every day started with hope but ended with more doubts. It was like going into a factory from 8 to 4. I even started to plan another trip; I needed some change.

I still believed I could do the climb, but I had to find the day when everything clicked: power, conditions, mental strength, and luck. The last two factors are closely interdependent. Luck is something you can influence a lot. On a route like Change, when you have only two goes a day, it is super-difficult to stay calm and focused. You need to climb everything as efficiently as possible, which can mean taking risks with your feet and how hard you grip the holds, which can lead to numerous errors. If these errors happen, doubt may enter your mind, making it impossible to climb at your limit. But at the same time, you can't over-grip to prevent errors or you'll never have enough strength to finish the route. It's a vicious circle. Mental strength is the key; luck might be the consequence.

During one rest day, a horrendous wind came up. I stared through the window at the leaves of the trees being blown away, with the blue fjord in the background, and all of a sudden I felt happy. I had an irrational feeling that the next day would be it. I couldn't sleep that night, listening to the wind—I felt a mixture of calm and nervousness.

The morning began as usual: oatmeal, green tea, jogging. That irrational feeling came over me again as we were approaching the cave, and my warm-up felt exceptionally good. As I set off, I felt strong, flowing through the first meters and entering the crux. I made a slight mistake, placing a foot one centimeter too far to the left, but held on. After clipping the first anchor, I stayed in the no-hand rest for a long time. Here, the crux is not getting distracted. You've got plenty of time to think about failure. And from this relaxed mode, you need to switch immediately into fighting mode.

The second crux is traversing the lip of a roof by compressing and heel-hooking very flat holds, followed by big reaches on crimps above. I did everything with perfection, but I was getting pumped, and the closer I was to the next rest the more desperate I felt. When a jug appeared in my hand, I couldn't catch a breath—another 20 meters of solid 8b+ remained. The game was on. I tried desperately to de-pump my forearms in the rests and sprint through the easier sections. The higher I got, the better the rests were, but still I felt more desperate. Four meters below the anchor I made the only mistake on the upper route—falling off flashed through my mind, and I surprised myself as I latched the final jug. After 26 minutes of climbing, this incredible route was free, as was I. I felt too tired and thirsty to realize what I had just done.

I had been thinking about the grade for a long time. While attempting the climb, I didn't admit that it could be 9b+. But the longer I tried it, the more desperate it felt. I had done all of my 9b routes way faster than this climb. And Change actually fit my style pretty well. I had never had a nemesis like this. It drained me, frustrated me multiple times, but the patience paid off and the whole process came to a beautiful ending. With slight hesitation, I am proposing the grade of 9b+, as it seems reasonable to me.

It is privilege to be among those such as Wolfgang Güllich, Ben Moon, or Alexander Huber who established one of the first routes of a new grade. I sometimes wondered what drove Wolfgang or Ben to keep trying routes that were rumored to be impossible, over and over again, training for them specifically and succeeding eventually. What audacity! But now I am getting the hang of it myself.

I am the kind of guy who is never satisfied. As soon as I finish a project, I want to climb another. It is endless. It is not a question of pushing the limits of sport climbing; it is about pushing my own limits. And with first ascents it is even more motivating. Take a look around—you might find your own line. Clean it, treat it well, and have fun climbing. You will make something for many climbers to enjoy, but most of all you will find out how great the process of first ascents can be.

## **Summary**

First ascent of Change (9b+/5.15c) in the Hanshalleren cave near Flatanger, Norway, by Adam Ondra. After five weeks of attempts spread over two visits to Norway, Ondra redpointed the pitch on October 4, 2012.

## **About the Author**

Adam Ondra, 20, is a professional rock climber who grew up in Brno, Czech Republic, where he began climbing at age 6. In February 2013 he completed the first ascent of La Dura Dura in Spain and graded it 9b+, saying it was harder than Change, but also reaffirming his belief that his route in Norway was the world's first 9b+.

Adam Ondra - Change - Backstage movie from BERNARTWOOD on Vimeo.

## Images



Adam Ondra working on Change in Norway's Hanshalleren cave.



A view of the crux traverse on the second pitch of Change



The gorgeous setting of the Hanshalleren cave near Flatanger, Norway.



Adam Ondra does the last hard move of the crux of the second pitch on Change. Still 20 meters to go! During the redpoint, he linked the two pitches.



The line of Change (9b+) in Flatanger's enormous Hanshalleren cave. The circle marks Ondra, climbing near the end of the first pitch.



Ondra does the dirty work, bolting the second pitch.



Ondra does the dirty work, bolting the second pitch.



In the middle of the crux boulder problem, itself around V14.



Ondra on the second-pitch crux traverse.



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