



AAC Publications

The Mountains Were Calling

Looking Back at the Early Days of Adaptive Climbing

Climbers with disabilities have accomplished extraordinary feats in recent decades. Hugh Herr, Mark Wellman, and other adaptive climbers made international news with their ascents in the 1980s and '90s, and in the 21st century, climbers with disabilities have summited Everest, climbed El Capitan in a day, flashed 5.13, and bouldered V11. Some even have become household names. But there's an earlier chapter to the history of adaptive climbing—the story of climbers who made impressive ascents long ago, yet whose names and accomplishments have been forgotten by many climbers today.

Speculation about the first adaptive climbers leads my imagination to run wild with possibilities. In 327 B.C., Alexander the Great's troops used mountaineering skills, with cords of flax and tent pegs for pitons, to conquer a fortress in what is now Uzbekistan. In the Southwestern United States, examples of people living on cliffsides go back to the 10th century. The idea that some of these early climbers might have been injured from a fall or battle wounds yet continued to climb is not at all unlikely.

In the 19th century, accounts of technical ascents by climbers with disabilities began to appear in newspapers and books. In 1868, John Wesley Powell, a Union officer who had lost most of his right arm in the Civil War, made the first well-documented ascent of 14,259-foot Longs Peak in Colorado, one year before his famed descent of the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. The one-armed explorer and his party followed an arduous multi-day route that involved 3rd- and 4th-class scrambling over several peaks.

More than a century before Erik Weißenmeyer began climbing high peaks around the world, Sir Francis Joseph Campbell, who was born in Tennessee and lost his vision after running into a thorny bush at age three, climbed Mont Blanc in the Alps in 1880, at age 47. He went on to summit many mountains in the Alps, including the Jungfrau, the Wetterhorn, and the Eiger.

"At first the guides expected to drag me up," Campbell wrote in a letter to *The Times* in England, describing the Mont Blanc ascent, "but...I was resolved to make an honest climb or give up the ascent. I took my place on the rope in the ordinary way, except that the distance between my son [who also climbed the peak] and myself was only a few feet. This enabled me to follow his footsteps closely.... With the exception of cutting very extraordinary steps for me, the guides during the ascent did not assist me in any way."

In his adopted home of England, Campbell established a school for the blind that was unlike anything that had previously existed. The Royal Normal College and Academy of Music for the Blind was created at a time when society considered its blind citizens to be essentially useless. Sir Francis dedicated his life to erasing these stereotypes, and believed strongly that being both physically and mentally fit would lead to greater self-confidence and subsequently a better quality of life for his students. Helen Keller described his impact by saying: "Wherever he went he started things moving, he always knew what to do, and before the sun of his spirit obstacles melted away."

Like John Wesley Powell, the British mountaineer Geoffrey Winthrop Young lost a limb in wartime. Before World War I, Young was among the most accomplished alpinists from Great Britain, with impressive first ascents including the huge south face of the Ta schhorn in Switzerland, climbed in 1906 and not repeated until 1943. He was 38 when the war broke out and was a conscientious

objector; instead of fighting, he joined the Friends' Ambulance Unit. In the mountains of the Italian-Austrian front, in 1917, an explosion necessitated the amputation of his left leg above the knee.

Young had climbed in the Alps with his good friend George Mallory, and just a fortnight after losing his leg, he wrote to Mallory of his plans to continue climbing with an artificial leg: "Now I shall have the immense stimulus of a new start, with every little inch of progress a joy instead of commonplace. I count on my great-hearts, like you, to share in the fun of that game with me." His ascents post-amputation included the Matterhorn, the Dent du Requin, the Dent du Géant, the Zinalrothorn, and Monte Rosa, and he continued climbing until 1935, then aged nearly 60. He was perhaps the first mountaineer to create prosthetic legs suitable for various climbing applications, with variable lengths and attachments for rock or ice. In 1920, Young co-authored *Mountain Craft*, an instruction manual that was the *Freedom of the Hills* for a couple of generations of mountaineers. A lifelong educator, Young collaborated with German emigrant Kurt Hahn on the formation of the prestigious Gordonstoun international school in Scotland, and later helped Hahn with the creation of the Outward Bound program. From 1941 to 1944, Young was president of the Alpine Club in the United Kingdom, and was instrumental in the formation of the British Mountaineering Council (BMC).

In the United States, the most experienced climber with disabilities of this era may have been Jim Gorin, who lost his right leg at the hip to bone disease when he was nine years old. In 1941, then in his mid-20s, he went to a Sierra Club climbing meetup at Southern California's Stoney Point, where he was encouraged to find another sport. He watched two of these opinionated fellows struggle on a boulder problem and then promptly scrambled up it. He later figured out the moves on a problem no one had been able to climb. In time he became the chairman of the club's Southern California climbing chapter. Gorin owned a television and radio shop, and often scrambled around on the roofs of his customers to install antennas. His most impressive accomplishment may have been a speedy ascent of Nez Perce (11,901 feet) in the Tetons.

Gorin frequently was featured in newspaper and magazine articles, one of which, in breathless prose, gives some insights into his minimalist adaptive techniques: "His crutch gives him firm footing in ascending or descending steep mountain trails. Roped up for a high-angle climb over bare rock, he suspends his crutch from a sling around his neck and swings his leg and body from one hold to another by means of his arms. When asked what he gets out of toeholing his way up to heights usually reserved for airplanes, Jim replied, 'It's mainly a matter of meeting a challenge.... You just see a mountain and you want to climb it.'"

Two of the most accomplished and best-known adaptive climbers of the 1960s were Frenchwoman Colette Richard and Briton Norman Croucher.

Richard grew up in Versailles and lost most of her sight at age two. From an early age, she had an interest in the outdoors, and in 1953, as a teenager, she visited the Mer de Glace above Chamonix and, as she wrote later, "My dream of becoming a real climber never afterward left me. In all of us there is a sleeping star which, consciously or unconsciously, we seek to grasp." After taking a brief, intensive mountaineering course in her early 20s she was off.

During the summers of 1960 to 1962, Richard climbed numerous times out of Chamonix, usually moving directly behind her partner or guide, with one hand on the leader's pack for guidance. (One of her friends, Arthur Richard, climbed Mont Blanc without any eyesight in 1959.) Her climbs included Mont Tondou and Mont Blanc du Tacul. Richard also became an accomplished caver, often partnering with the well-known French caver Norbert Casteret.

In her book *Climbing Blind*, published in 1965 as *Des Cimes Aux Cavernes* ("From Summits to Caves"), she writes of overcoming her fears, the exhilaration that followed each success, and the galvanizing effect that each one had, propelling her forward and allowing her to develop a sort of sixth sense for finding her way. Friends, she wrote, wondered why she was so fascinated by mountains when they were invisible to her. "We do not need to see mountains in order to love them," she responded in the

preface to her book, “any more than we need to see, or even hear, a person who is dear to us. Their presence is enough.” In the foreword to Richard’s book, Maurice Herzog wrote, “She shows us that no difficulties are insurmountable, that it is a matter of challenging the world, challenging ourselves, and conquering our weaknesses.”

In 1960, at age 19, Norman Croucher lost both legs below the knee after he fell down an embankment while drunk and a train ran over him. He had begun rock climbing the year before, and once he was fitted with artificial legs, he began cragging again, but he dreamed of doing high peaks. After a frustrating experience on a small mountain in Wales, “finishing like a pilgrim, crawling on my knees through the snow,” he vowed to get into better shape so he could pursue his mountaineering dreams. In 1969, Croucher solo-hiked about 900 miles from the northern tip of Scotland to Land’s End in far southwest England. He then began climbing in the Alps and summited the Matterhorn, Mont Blanc, the Eiger, and a score of other peaks. On a trip to Peru in 1978, he and his team climbed Huascarán Norte and two other mountains. In 1981 he climbed his first Himalayan peak, White Needle (6,600 meters) in Kashmir, and eventually, in 1995, Croucher summited 8,188-meter Cho-oyu in Tibet.

“Obviously, keeping your feet warm in alpine climbing is a problem—but only if you have feet,” he joked. On a more serious note, he wrote, “One difficulty was choosing targets that were ambitious and at the same time realistic. I achieved my ambition of climbing a mountain of 8,000 meters by many stages and over many years as I explored my physical and mental limits. Time and again there were knock-backs, but winners must have the courage to fail, must get up again and go back to the mountain with a positive attitude.... There has been an added bonus that my climbing has been the base for campaigns promoting access, integration, and adventure sports for people with disabilities.” (Croucher wrote half a dozen books about his experiences, including *A Man and His Mountains* and *Legless But Smiling*.) Sir Chris Bonington said of Croucher: “There is no one like him. His extraordinary achievements have earned him a place in climbing history.”

My own climbing story began in Yosemite Valley in 1977. As I learned the ropes and met the locals, Jim Bridwell and others told me about a seemingly mythical character, who, like me, had contracted paralytic polio as a child. With a permanently weakened right leg, Roger Breedlove’s capabilities on certain styles of climbs were limited, yet, in less than a decade he had put together a climbing résumé that would be impressive for anyone. While primarily focused on free climbing routes in the Valley and Tuolumne, he swung leads on an early ascent of the Salathé Wall in 1973 (likely the first adaptive ascent of El Capitan) and guided the Regular Northwest Face on Half Dome several times. Roger’s disability was well-known among Yosemite climbers at the time, but, unlike mine, his polio was not so severe as to be a defining characteristic. Nonetheless, after hearing of Roger’s accomplishments, my own dreams of climbing big walls were no longer abstract concepts. [Click here for an essay by Breedlove about his experiences in Yosemite Valley.]

I have dealt with post-polio syndrome since 1962 (though it was undiagnosed until the mid-1980s), as well as many other challenges. I have had 11 surgeries related to my polio, the first when I was an infant. One was botched so badly that it required an 18-inch rod inserted in my femur for a year and a half; four of those months were spent in a body cast. These events left me ill-prepared for the big-wall arena. But the fact that someone with a similar—albeit less restrictive—disability had found a way to make it up El Capitan was incredibly reassuring.

Through the assistance of some of the best friends a man could ever hope to find, I have managed to climb El Cap 24 times, the first time in 1990, by the route Zodiac. More than half of those climbs were done in a day, and a handful of others in a push—all of them first adaptive ascents. I have done other first adaptive ascents on the Diamond in Colorado, the walls of Zion, the Chief in Squamish, and other places.

There is nothing easy about these adventures, but everything about them teaches lessons I would never learn otherwise, and they keep the world looking much brighter. Their greatest meaning is knowing someone else might find strength and faith in hearing my stories, as I did upon hearing

Roger's. This thought has carried me through many grueling workouts and a great many difficult times, and at age 68 it continues to do so.

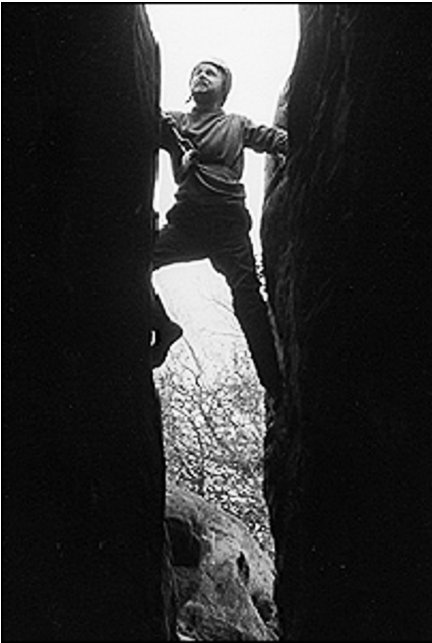
As humans, it is in us to seek adventure, to challenge ourselves and find out what we are capable of doing. As this article has shown, adaptive climbers have been embodying positivity in the face of adversity for well over a century— almost as long as mountaineering has been a sport. It is my fervent hope that these stories will encourage others to carry their own visions forward. Though living with a disability is not unchallenging, making vertical progress while disabled is a challenge that comes with a great many rewards, and, if you have the right mindset, a great deal of joy.

About the Author: Wayne Willoughby was born in 1952 and lives with his wife, Becky Sands, in Seattle. He is an oil painter, writer, and big-wall climber.

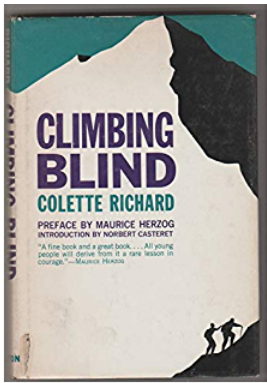
Images



Jim Gorin, who lost his right leg at the hip to bone disease, was very active in Southern California climbing in the 1940s.



After losing both legs below the knee at age 19, Norman Croucher climbed dozens of large peaks around the world.



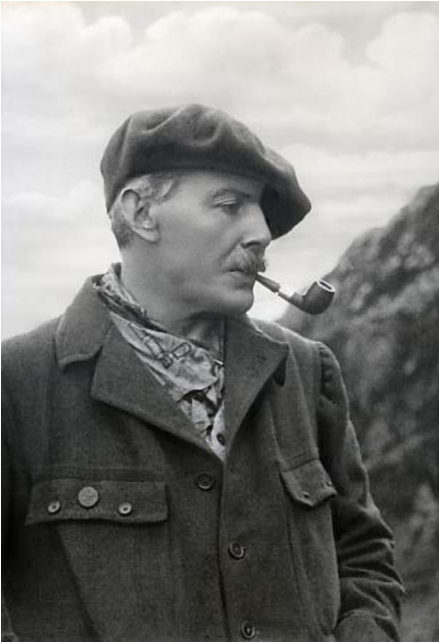
Colette Richard's book *Climbing Blind*, originally published in 1965 as *Des Cimes aux Cavernes* ("From Summits to Caves").



Colette Richard climbing near Chamonix.

MODERN ADAPTIVE CLIMBING	
BY CRAIG DEMARTINO	
1981	Nine climbers with blindness, deafness, or other disabilities summit Mt. Rainier.
1983	Hugh Herr, who lost both legs below the knee to frostbite, is one of several climbers to free Vandalia (5.13-) in the Bluewagons. Three years later, using custom feet for this crack, Herr climbs City Park (5.13c) at Index, Washington.
1989	Mark Wellman, who has paraplegia as a result of a fall in 1982, completes an eight-day ascent of the Shield on El Capitan with Mike Corbett, using a jumars and pull-up rig.
1995	Erik Weihenmayer, who developed retinoblastoma as a teenager and eventually lost his eyesight, summits Denali at age 26. In May 2003, he earns worldwide fame (and a <i>Time</i> magazine cover) by summiting Everest.
1998	Weldo climber Tom Whittaker, whose right foot was amputated, summits Everest on his third attempt.
1999	Adaptive Adventures is founded, offering outdoor sports to people with physical disabilities. In 2007, <i>Paradise Sports</i> is founded by climbers Malcolm Daly, Timmy O'Neill, and DJ Sadler to foster adaptive climbing.
2005	Brad Zdanivsky, who lives with quadriplegia, climbs Stawamus Chief in Squamish, B.C., using a custom-designed cart to move up fixed ropes.
2006	Wayne Willoughby, a polo survivor, climbs the Nose of El Capitan in 22 hours with Hans Florine and Tico Gargales. Willoughby did his first of 21 C.C. Cap ascents in 1990.
2006	The first international paraclimbing competition is held in Krasnodar, Russia. At the 2019 paraclimbing world championships, 158 athletes representing 24 countries compete.
2007	Craig DeMartino, who lost his right leg below the knee and fused his spine after a 100-foot ground fall, becomes the first amputee to climb El Capitan in less than 24 hours (via Lurking Fear). In 2009, DeMartino, Pete Davis (who is missing one arm below the elbow), and Jarem Frye (an above-the-knee amputee) make the first all-adaptive ascent of El Cap.
2007	Many Mountain creates the ARC (Adaptive Rope Course) harness. In 2010, TRF develops a climbing-specific foot with a shoe by Evolv, which eventually develops its own climbing system, the iLAK (iLAK Adaptive Foot).
2010s	Rand Abbott, who lives with paraplegia, begins leading crack climbs in Joshua Tree using aid systems he developed. In 2013, Sean O'Neill, a paraplegic climber, leads a Yosemite crack climb.
2017	Spanish climber Utku Carmona, who lost his leg above the knee from childhood cancer, flashes 5.13. Mattew Beck, who was born without one arm below the elbow, leads 5.12a outdoors. Roman Dickson, who lost his leg above the knee after a childhood illness, boulders V10.
2018	Justin Salas, who lost sight progressively from a young age, climbs V11.
2019	Josef Dufrenoy, a blind climber, leads all four pitches of the Old Man of the Wood (5.9) in Scotland.
2021	Solenne Petit, a Frenchwoman missing one hand and part of her arm, boulders 7B (approx. V8) in Fontainebleau.

Chronology of modern adaptive climbing highlights.



Geoffrey Winthrop Young in 1934. He lost a lower leg in World War I, then climbed for another two decades.



Wayne Willoughby during one of his many ascents of El Capitan.

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