



AAC Publications

State of the Art

Expanding the Coverage of Women's Climbing in the AAJ

Jewell Lund (left) and Chantel Astorga below the Denali Diamond.

In June 2015, Chantel Astorga and Jewell Lund completed the Denali Diamond, one of the testpiece routes up North America's highest peak. When I learned of their five-day ascent I was impressed—and even more impressed upon learning it was the first time an all-female team had climbed a coveted Alaska Grade 6. So in August 2016, when I received a copy of the *American Alpine Journal*, I flipped through the feature stories at the front, expecting to see a glossy report about Chantel and Jewell's ascent. But I came up empty-handed. In the Alaska section I finally found what I was looking for—sort of. There was only a three-sentence summary of this impressive climb. This didn't feel right.

The AAJ is the world's preeminent record of each year's major ascents in the mountains and on big walls. And that record has been mostly about climbs by men. Between 2015 and 2019, the average number of reports from all-female teams in the AAJ was four, and the average number of mixed teams (female and male partners of equal strength) was 23—out of a total of more than 300 reports each year. A woman has graced the cover of the AAJ only once (Brette Harrington in 2017). With rare exceptions, a woman's climb has only been featured as a major story in the AAJ if it was groundbreaking for all climbers, one prominent example being Lynn Hill's first free ascent of the Nose, featured in the front of the AAJ in 1994.

Why haven't climbs like Chantel and Jewell's gotten more recognition in the AAJ? One important reason is that the AAJ has long defined the "world's most significant climbs" primarily as the first ascents of mountains, big walls, and other long routes—activities in which women have not historically participated in high numbers. As a result, years of impressive ascents by teams of women—not necessarily first ascents but "firsts" for women (some of which were, in fact, much more significant than other climbs reported in the AAJ)—have gone all but unreported. Was it time for a fresh look at the AAJ's criteria?

I recounted these observations to an international collection of friends while passing time in El Chaltén during the 2017–18 Patagonia season. Over the course of several weeks, we mulled over the topic again and again. Finally, while eating empanadas late one night, an action plan was crystalized.

In April 2018, I reached out to the AAJ editors with a proposal: Would the AAJ consider expanding its criteria and develop an objective way to elevate the most significant female accomplishments within the pages of the book, giving them more prominence than they've received in the past? Along with revisiting the criteria, I proposed that benchmarks were needed to assess when a woman's climb was particularly significant for women. I was arguing for "equity" in reporting women's climbs versus equality in reporting. "Equity is achieved," I wrote, "when we accept that men come to the table with a complement of physiological attributes and a long history of alpine folklore that sets them on a playing field above female alpinists. Equity would mean creating space to accept these differences and taking affirmative action to bolster the historical record of women in the mountains and purposefully celebrate their accomplishment."

As a methodology for achieving these goals, I suggested creating a panel of alpinists to support the AAJ editors in selecting the most notable female ascents for a given year. The first step of this panel or task force would be an extensive data collection phase. What exactly was the state of the art for

teams of women in alpinism and other forms of “AAJ style” climbing? This information did not exist in readily digestible form. By producing a document that defined the state of the art in a variety of climbing disciplines, the task force would be able to declare with some certainty when a team of women had equaled or broken through a barrier.

Secondly, when a women’s team did reach a high mark in women’s climbing, I proposed, the AAJ would offer elevated reporting in the publication, fitting to the accomplishment. To be sure, many first ascents by women in the mountains are already covered by the AAJ. But under this new proposal, the AAJ would increase its coverage of the most significant female firsts, including repeats of earlier climbs. In this way, I hoped not only to inspire other women but also to add depth and richness to climbing’s historical record.

Madaleine Sorkin on The Honeymoon is Over, Longs Peak, Colorado. Photo by Henna Taylor

The arguments for and against the separation of gender within climbing have been hotly debated in the sport’s media, and the reasoning crosses the spectrum of biological, social, and political theories. UCLA social scientist Martie Haselton argues for recognizing biological differences where they exist, but also emphasizes that there is “the misconception that as soon there is a biological explanation, there are no other factors at play, when we social scientists know that there is always an interaction, there are environmental inputs and everything occurs in a social context. It is always both.” (Making Sense, Ep. 135, August 2018.) Indeed, environmental and social factors are at work in alpinism, but I see them as peripheral to the argument that high-level women’s climbs should be recognized in new ways. Cutting-edge women’s climbs should receive more recognition because there are real differences between men and women climbers, regardless of how the differences originated. The argument for these distinctions is not just a contemporary one. In the 1980s, Wanda Rutkiewicz, regarded as one of the most accomplished female high-altitude mountaineers in history, urged for the same distinctions in mountain sports (Gugglberger, 2017).

Traditional climbing remains one of the few athletic pursuits where men and women are held to the same measuring stick. The only Olympic sports in which men and women compete head to head include equestrian sports and sailing, where physical differences are secondary to a competitor’s success. In competitive climbing, men and women are usually ranked separately (with the notable exception of the mixed climbing competition at Ouray, Colorado, where women repeatedly have placed among the top three in the overall results). Research has demonstrated biological differences between male and female athletes in a variety of capacities. A 2012 study published in the *European Journal of Applied Physiology* indicated that, “Gender differences in performance by elite endurance athletes, including runners, track cyclists and speed skaters, have been shown to be approximately 12%” (Sandbakk et. al, 2012, p. 1.) Could it be that a similar physiological performance gap exists in the alpine arena as well—perhaps more so than on pure rock climbs?

As we began talking over these ideas among a group of editors and alpinists in the summer and fall of 2018, some of the main objections came from top women climbers. Some made it clear that they wanted to be judged simply as alpinists, not as female alpinists. They were opposed to the real or perceived patronizing effect that might result if the AAJ changed its criteria and carved out special coverage for women or published prominent stories of women’s ascents that didn’t “deserve” to be included. They also worried that if the AAJ were to establish, in effect, a quota of women’s climbs, ascents that were not cutting-edge might dilute the achievements of the most accomplished female alpinists. These discussions strongly guided the methodology that we ended up developing.

What we eventually agreed was that it was reasonable to rethink the AAJ criteria and account for the performance difference between men and women. And that by documenting the state of the art for women’s climbing, the AAJ would have a logical way to elevate the most impressive female ascents. In partnership with the AAJ editors, we began the process of putting these ideas into action.

Through much of 2019, a task force including 11 women and men, representing seven nationalities, began looking into the archives and history books, debating the “rules” we would follow, and selecting

climbs as benchmarks. We also sought comments from various outside reviewers. The result of all this hard work is a document we call the Baseline.

The Baseline examines two broad categories of women's climbing. The first is all-women teams, which we defined to include not only climbs by multiple women but also solo climbers, as well women who were supported by a man but where the accomplishment was all hers. (For example, a woman who free climbs a big wall with a man belaying her.) The second category is mixed teams where at least 50 percent of the team was female and those women contributed at least 50 percent of the "effort." (For example, an ascent where a female team member led the crux pitch or pitches.)

We then identified a variety of climbing disciplines, such as "Alpinism-High Altitude" and "Big Walls-Expeditionary," and pored over the historical record for examples of the state of the art in each discipline. We focused on the climbing styles normally reported in the AAJ (we did not examine the record for sport climbing or bouldering).

Two points are essential to understand about the Baseline. First, the example climbs in the Baseline are just that—representative examples. In most cases, other climbs are equally or nearly as significant. The goal was not to document all of the ground-breaking ascents in a given category, but simply to provide representative benchmarks for each, in order to guide the AAJ in future editorial decisions. (We have published some examples from the Baseline with this article; see chart above. However, to preserve a spirit of inspiration and not competition, the full Baseline will remain an internal document for use by the AAJ editors.)

Secondly, these examples represent the current state of the art of women's climbing, regardless of when the climb was done. A climb done in the 1990s might still be the cutting edge in one category; in a different category, the state of the art might be a climb done last year. What we are not doing is listing climbs that were significant "for their time."

The entire Baseline will be re-evaluated regularly. (The composition of the task force also will be updated periodically.) As climbing progresses, new ascents will replace earlier benchmarks in the baseline, and thus the bar will rise over time. In this way, we hope women will be inspired to reach new heights.

Had this process been in place in years past, many stories might have been told in greater depth in the AAJ. Consider Catherine Destivelle, who was one of the most accomplished female alpinists (and rock climbers) of all time. Between 1990 and 1995, the Frenchwoman soloed the Walker Spur in winter, the Bonatti Pillar on the Dru, and the north face of the Eiger in winter, and established solo over 11 days the Destivelle Route on the Dru. These ascents have never been surpassed by another woman in the Alps, yet they were barely mentioned in the AAJ. (The AAJ does not cover climbs in the Alps extensively, but there have been plenty of exceptions for male ascents.) In 1988, Lydia Bradey from New Zealand made the first female ascent of Everest without supplemental oxygen, and in 1995, Briton Alison Hargreaves did an unsupported ascent of Everest's north side, also without supplemental oxygen. The Hargreaves climb was only covered in the AAJ in a single paragraph, and coverage of the Bradey climb focused on disputes of her account later shown to be invalid.

Marina Kopteva on Great Trango Tower.

Or consider the Russian/Ukrainian trio of Galina Chibitok, Marina Kopteva, and Anastasia Petrova, who, in 2013, climbed an extremely difficult route up the 1,900-meter northeast face of Teng-kangpoche, with a 52-hour nonstop summit push. In 2009, Ines Papert from Germany teamed up with Lisi Steurer from Austria and free climbed two long 5.12+/5.13- routes in Canada's Cirque of the Unclimbables, one of them a new route—both are at least as hard as any route climbed in these mountains since the Great Canadian Knife in 1992, but that route got a feature article in the book while Papert and Steurer's climbs netted only a few paragraphs. (Papert is certainly one of the

foremost ice and mixed climbers of the modern era—male or female.) In the case of the Denali Diamond, the very first ascent of the route, by two men, merited a feature article in the AAJ, in 1984, but the subsequent first all-woman's team ascent was judged a barely significant repeat, buried in the back of the book, even though Alaska climbing expert Mark Westman called it "by far the most significant [ascent] done by an all-female team in the Alaska Range" at the time.

Under the AAJ's long-held guidelines, it made sense that these climbs got limited coverage, because they weren't first ascents or weren't the standouts among all climbs that year. But they all were extraordinary ascents for women, and under revised criteria for the AAJ, their stories could have been highlighted to a greater degree.

With creation of the Baseline well under way by the time the 2019 edition of the AAJ was in production, the editors elected to highlight Chantel Astorga and Anne Gilbert Chase's ascent of the Slovak Direct (9,000', 5.9 X M6 WI6+) on Denali's south face in 2018 as a very significant moment in women's alpinism. Chase's feature article about this ascent was an important step for ensuring the history of women's climbing is thoroughly and prominently documented in the AAJ. [AAJ 2020 highlighted four "Overlooked" climbs that might have received greater coverage in the AAJ earlier had the guidelines discussed in this article been in place: The Denali Diamond, by Jewell Lund; Riders on the Storm, by Mayan Smith-Gobat; Eiger north face solo, by Catherine Destivelle; and Magic Mushroom, by Barbara Zangerl.]

In an interview with Planet Mountain after completing the Slovak Direct, Chase expressed points of view we heard from other top female climbers. She was asked, "How would you like your ascent to be remembered and celebrated?" And her response was, "Honestly, I don't care too much that we were the first females to climb the route, and that was not something we thought about when we climbed it. However, if our ascent inspires women to go into the big mountains and achieve their dreams, then I am all for it."

I hope this project will lead to the AAJ providing many such examples for ambitious female climbers. As more great women's ascents are highlighted in these pages and elsewhere, I expect women's climbing will progress farther and faster than before. Furthermore, the history of alpinism and big-wall climbing will be enriched with the voices and experiences of women who pursue the sport with fervor equal to their male counterparts. Publishing their stories will provide a more complete, accurate, and colorful picture of climbing's ongoing evolution.

About the Author: Sarah Hart is a social worker and longtime climber who lives in Terrace, British Columbia. She wishes to thank the team of climbers who invested countless hours in this project. She also acknowledges that this project and article may contain blind spots, and it is her hope that these will be addressed as the work continues.

A Note From the Editor: The American Alpine Journal has committed to enhancing coverage of significant female climbs, using the guidelines and tools set out by the Women's State of the Art Project. As noted in Sarah Hart's article, the AAJ already reports many climbs by women (including dozens in the 2020 edition), and the standards outlined here will not put new hurdles in front of female climbers. Far from it. Rather, they offer a logical way to increase coverage of women's climbing.

We understand that many climbers, of any gender, are not interested in seeking first ascents, pursuing risky climbs, or setting new standards in climbing performance, but simply enjoy climbing for its own sake. Bravo, we say. But the AAJ's focus—our *raison d'être*—is documenting "firsts" of various kinds in the mountains and on big walls. The State of the Art Project gives us new tools for accomplishing these goals.

We also acknowledge that the AAJ and other publishers of climbing history may have insufficiently documented various ascents by other people who do not enjoy all the advantages of traditional,

mainstream climbers. We are working to expand some of their stories as well.

Like climbing, the AAJ evolves. In some years, few changes may be noticeable in the book as a result of these initiatives—the standards for expanded coverage have deliberately been designed to encourage methodical, thoughtful evolution. But over time, we expect, the impact will be substantial.

— Dougald MacDonald, Editor

Images

THE WOMEN'S BASELINE REPRESENTATIVE CLIMBS*

ALPINISM — HIGH-ALTITUDE

- **All Female**
 - North ridge of Everest (8,848m), Tibet, with no O2 and minimal support, Alison Hargreaves, 1995
 - Second ascent of Kuryka-Loretan-Troillet route on southwest face of Cho Oyu (8,188m), Tibet, in alpine style, Yuka Endo and Takao Nagao, 1994

- **Mixed Teams**
 - First ascent of Samalir Direct (8,800m, WS+ MS+) on southeast face of Kamet (7,756m), India, Ket Tariguchi and partner, 2008

ALPINISM — MID-ALTITUDE

- **All Female**
 - First ascent of the Bottle for Love (1,900m, 6b A2) on Tenglangqoché (6,479m), Nepal, Galina Chibrik, Marina Kopeva, Anastasia Petrova, 2013
 - Ascent of southwest buttress (Scottish Pillar) (3,300m, 5.9 A2) of Bhagirathi II (6,454m), India, in alpine style, Fanny Tomasi-Schmutz and Elisée LaCombe, 2016
 - Repeat of Slovak Direct (2,700m, WI6 M6 A2) on Denali, Alaska, Chantel Astorga and Anne Gilbert Chase, 2018

- **Mixed Teams**
 - First ascent of Lost in China (1,200m, WI5+ M6) on Ngajj Astar (6,842m), China, Ines Papert and partner, 2016
 - First ascent of Stealing Beauty (1,150m, M6 6b A2) on Ngajo B (6,366m), Nepal, Marina Kopeva and partner, 2013
 - First ascent of Obscure Reception (1,400m, WI5 M6 A2) on Nishanth (6,596m), India, Chantel Astorga, Anne Gilbert Chase, and partner, 2017

ALPINISM — LOWER ALTITUDE

- **All Female**
 - Winter solo ascent of the Walker Spur (1,300m, E2) on the Grandes Jorasses, France, Catherine Destivelle, 1993
 - Solo ascents of six "great north faces" of the Alps in one season, Alison Hargreaves, 1993
- **Mixed Teams**
 - Ascent of No Siesta/Bonath/Vaucher linkup (1,000m, M7) on north face of the Grandes Jorasses, France, Ines Papert and partner, 2017

ICE AND MIXED CLIMBS

- Ascent of Ritter der Kokonuss, Kandersteg, Switzerland (95m, M2 WS), Ines Papert, 2015
- Ascent of the Hurting, Scotland (40m, XI, 11 trad), Ines Papert, 2015
- First ascent of Sapina (50m, 5M), in Vail, Colorado, Lucie Hrozová, 2016

BIG WALLS — ACCESSIBLE

- **All Female**
 - Solo ascent of Wyoming Sheep Ranch (800m, A4) on El Capitan, California, Silvia Vidal, 2000
 - Solo first ascent of the Destivelle Route on the Petit Dru (800m, 5.11 A5), Mont Blanc Massif, France, Catherine Destivelle, 1991
 - Speed ascent of the Nose, El Capitan (4 hours 43 minutes), Mayan Smith-Gobat and Libby Sauter, 2014

BIG WALLS — EXPEDITIONARY

- **All Female**
 - Solo first ascent of Life is Lilac (870m, A4+ 6a1), on Shipton Spire (5,852m), Pakistan, Silvia Vidal, 2007
- **Mixed Teams**
 - Ascent of Riders on the Storm (1,300m, free up to 5.13a) on Paine's Central Tower, Chile, Ines Papert, Mayan Smith-Gobat, and partner, 2016

LONG FREE CLIMBS

- **All Female**
 - One-day free ascent of the Nose (950m, 5.14a), El Capitan, California, Lynn Hill, 1994
 - Free ascent of Die Unendliche Geschichte (250m, 5.14a) in Rajkon, Switzerland, Ines, Capier and Barbara Zangert (each repointed), 2015

- **Mixed Teams**
 - Free ascent of Magic Mushroom (900m, 5.14a) on El Capitan, Yosemite, California, Barbara Zangert and partner, 2017
 - Free ascent of the Yugoslav Route (800m, 5.12) on Trango Tower (6,239m), Pakistan, Catherine Destivelle and partner, 1991

SINGLE-PITCH TRAD CLIMBS

- First ascent of Meltdown (5.14c) in Yosemite Valley, California, Beth Rodden, 2018
- First ascent of Gondo Crack (5.14b) in Cippo, Switzerland, Barbara Zangert, 2017
- Repeat of Magic Line (5.10a) in Yosemite Valley, California, Hazel Firdley, 2019

* EDITOR'S NOTE: These climbs are representative examples from the Women's Baseline. The comprehensive Baseline is an internal AAJ document.



Jewell Lund (left) and Chantel Astorga below the Denali Diamond on the southwest face of North America's highest peak.



Marina Kopteva during the first ascent of Parellelniy Mir on Great Trango Tower in Pakistan.



Madaleine Sorkin on the Honeymoon is Over, Longs Peak, Colorado.

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