

The Polar Circus

By: Scott Kennedy

Modern ice climbing was born as the bastard child of traditional mountaineering techniques, trad climbing ethics and sport climbing bravado. Through the ages special skills and techniques have developed along with the sport of waterfall ice climbing. Cutting edge techniques have transformed the once cumbersome and clumsy discipline into a higher art, a fusion of gymnastic climbing ability, with the ragged edge commitment of alpine climbing. So whether your ice climbing goals include the gullies of the Southern Alps, or the classics of the game like Canadian masterpieces *The Weeping Wall* or *Slipstream*, a new skill set and, even more importantly, a new mindset must be adopted.

Clothing:

There is little point in mincing words - ice climbing tends to be a cold affair. But there is much that can be done to minimise suffering and maximize 'fun'. Boots are the first order of business and often the greatest source of debate. Plastic versus leather boots is often the big question. I believe that the best answer to this question is an individual one. You must ask yourself of you are a warm footed person or a cold foot sufferer. When you are skiing, do your toes nearly freeze solid before lunch? If the answer is yes, then plastic boots are probably the answer for you. Plastic boots are traditionally warmer, and can be easily modified to be 'super-warm' with products like custom ski boot liners and battery-powered heated foot beds.

If however you have never experienced cold feet (ok, we are talking climbing here remember), then you could be a good candidate for team leather. Leather boots fit closer and tend to be more comfortable for approaches and their performance are un-rivalled for mixed climbing. They can also be made warmer with the addition of an insulated gator. Destination is also a good question to ask, are you doing most of your climbing? Are you planning on a spring trip to Italy to climb bolted mixed climbs in zero degree weather, or are you planning a mid winter odyssey to Canada where minus twenty is a reality? These answers should steer you in the right direction.

The clothing you wear on a specific climb should vary drastically from one day to the next. Ice climbing can be very strenuous so over dressing can be a dangerous problem in sub freezing temperatures. Have a look at the climb; is it wet or dry? Is it in the sun or the shade? When climbing a sunny climb that it is dry, perhaps keeping your gore-tex in the pack is a viable option.

The advent of 'soft-shell' climbing clothing has been a much-accepted system within the ice community. Schroller fabrics are warm, stretchy, and very durable. It is a great fabric for climbing trousers as they repel water effectively, resist tarring when snagged with crampon points and are very comfortable.

An insulated coat for belays is a necessity when climbing in cold weather. Down is by far the warmest option, but can be worse than useless if it gets wet. Synthetic fill coats such as Primaloft are a good alternative. The warm when wet coats can be put on overtop of everything regardless of the conditions. Where a down coat must be worn under gore-tex when things get wet.

The glove versus mitt is another classic debate. Like plastic vs. leather, the real question is how cold *you* get. Mitts, being warmer, are a good option in super-cold weather. Or a hybrid approach where a mitt is worn on the left hand, and a glove on the right so that the carabiner-operating hand has the needed dexterity. Remember that you must have the dexterity to use carabiners with gloves on, so poor fitting gloves are useless.

Gear:

Ice tools are the tools of our trade, and in the modern ice world there are a staggering number of choices available. Every tool will have a different 'feel', so it is important to find a set of tools that match your swing and climbing style. Its best to try tools before you lay down the big coin. Borrow your friends tools, read reviews, do whatever it takes to see if they are the tools for you. Something worth considering is the size of your hand, a pencil thin shaft can get lost in a massive mitt, and a tool that is too thick is harder to hold onto with tiny fingers.

Look also at what type of climbing you will be using it for *most* of the time. If you spend most of your time climbing traditional mountaineering routes where you are most likely going to encounter steep snow, then the modern mixed climbing sports cars may be too specialized for your needs. The radical bend of some modern tools makes it nearly imposable to plunge into the snow or bang pins.

The trend de-jour in ice climbing is leashless climbing. This may be fashionable and cool looking, but remember the climbers that are preaching this new style are some of the strongest in the world. They turned to leashless climbing because they thought climbing with leashes was *too easy*. So unless you find yourself bored out there, get a good set of leashes and use em'!

Crampons have also specialized dramatically in recent times. Strap-on crampons were once the only option, but now step-in models are far outperforming them in pure technical climbing. When attached to a plastic boot or a stiff leather boot the step-in crampons become an extension of the boot. However, beware of an improperly fitted crampon. I have witnessed a crampon fall off the boot of my climbing partner, as he was 15 meters up a vertical sheet of ice with all of his pro still attached to his harness!

There is also the question of rigid versus semi-rigid designs. Rigid crampons will excel on vertical terrain, but will badly ball up with snow on alpine routes. Also mono-points are now an option on most models. The mono works well for mixed climbing and offers comparable performance on pure ice and snow climbs.

Ropes are your link to your partner and the margin of safety we require. The best options are double ropes. Two ropes add a level of security when the

possibility of chopping a rope with a misplaced tool or crampon always exists. Clip both ropes to each piece of protection and do your very best to avoid kicking them. Dry treated ropes are a necessity, frozen water infused ropes are at best annoying to coil and at worst, unusable to belay or abseil with.

Ice screws have also made leaps and bounds as of late. Almost all companies are making screws with some sort of device to assist turning them in that reduces the time needed to place them. Stubby screws are also a viable option, tests have uncovered that a well-placed 10cm screw in *good* ice has the same holding power as a screw twice as long. Avoid titanium screws and older model steel screws, the time and energy taken to place them is not worth the money saved. Also ice hooks and other 'pound-in' devices have been found to be virtually useless as protection, so don't waste your time with them either.

Technique:

Good climbing technique and a strong mental attitude will get you up more challenging climbs than arms of steel and a 'summit or plummet' attitude. When you step up to a climb create a mental plan. Look for rests; plan where you can place gear from in a comfortable way. Standing on your front-points while placing gear is murder on your calves so look for places where you can stand with your feet flat on a feature of ice.

Start the climb off on a good note. If the first tool placement is bomber, then this trend will continue as you progress upward. Starting off with a dubious placement will only serve to rush you into a series of ever decreasingly good 'sticks'. Climb with your arms staggered; think of it like walking up a set of stairs. If you put one foot on each step, rather than both at the same level you will be much more efficient.

Learn to know by feel if an axe placement is solid. Testing a placement by loosening your axe within it is counter productive. To test a placement, pull straight down. Avoid the tendency to torque your tool around from side to side - this is a great way to break a pick!

If you can move efficiently, never rushing or lingering too long, you will develop a good rhythm. Painting yourself into a corner and stalling out can wreck havoc on the nerves, move through the crux, always looking for the most efficient way to solve a problem.

Like anything good technique will only come from practice. Climb as much as you can and have an attitude of constant improvement. Watch others climb and analyze their technique, find what works best for you and learn to excel at that.

Tricks:

- When leading I have a bent gate carabineer attached to my right leash. When I go to place a piece of gear, I overdrive my left tool and hang off that arm. I place my right tool off to the side and out of the way, again overdriving the tool. I take my hand out of the

right leash and clip the rope to the biner on my right (bomber) tool. Then I have a piece of intermediate protection as I place the screw. If my feet blow off and I fall the ice tool will hold the short fall.

- If you are right handed and will be placing pro with your right hand, rack all your gear on the right side. It's useless to have gear racked where you will never be able to reach it while climbing the pitch. Better yet, learn to place gear with either hand.
- A good place for an extra pair of mitts is in your gaiters. They are out of the way and toasty warm for when you need them.
- When you inevitably knock ice off toward your partner remember to always call ice. You can even use the sliding scale of calls depending upon the size of projectile. "Ice", for anything that would fit into a glass with some nice single-malt. "ICE!" For anything up-to and including rugby ball size. "I-C-E!!!!!" Now we are talking microwave oven size.
- When seconding use the axe holes and foot caves created by the leader. By 'drafting' in your partners used placements you don't have to swing or kick as hard saving energy as you go.
- Bring the second up on a tight belay. The feel of the rope will help him or her climb faster and speed is safety in the mountains.
- Practice climbing without your tools on top rope. It will teach you to use your feet more effectively, without the crutch of ice tools all of a sudden back-steps, stems, drop-knees and other rock climbing techniques appear as viable options.
- Learn to swing your tools only as hard as you have to. Over-driving your tools is a waste of energy, and often frustrating to remove. When the ice is soft, a flick of the wrist is all you need, save your energy for when the ice turns grey and hard as steel.
- Use load limiting 'screamers' on all dodgy placements. The secret weapon of most hard climbers these shock-absorbing slings can mean the difference of whether a piece holds or not.
- Above all, *don't fall*. Falling on ice is just bad news. With typically run-out climbing, above at best dubious protection, a fall is simply not an option. Often the real danger in a fall is what you do to yourself on the way down, besides the brown trousers, you have 24 crampon points, 2 pics, a hammer, an adze and a rack of ice screws all itching to stick into you somewhere. If you take the

attitude that a fall will always have serious consequences you will end up making decisions with a conservative attitude. There is a time and a place to suck it up and go for it. Knowing that time is the difference between great ice climbers and dead ones. Wait for the conditions to be right, your head to be in the game and the stars aligned to go for your test piece.

- No amount of physical training can overcome the debilitating handicap of a poor mental attitude. Let's face it, ice climbing is pretty heady stuff, and climbing as a 'cool confident optimist' is much safer than a 'blithering pessimist' who shakes and shivers his way up. Being mentally prepared to handle any one of the challenges that you may face on a climb is more valuable than any one piece of equipment or technique you take with you.

Modern ice climbing continues to evolve every winter. The next innovation is just around the bend. This winter climbers from all around the world will push the realm of ice climbing further towards impossible. The only question is, "are you ready for the next level...?"

"Well, are you?"