Comment



62. John Innerdale, *Basingthang range*, Bhutan, chromacolour, 62 x 41cm, 2005.

DOUG SCOTT

Awards and Recognition in Climbing

The sweetest of all sounds is praise, commented Xenophon. And not only oneself but of one's children, if my parents are anything to go by. They entered me in a local baby show, August 1942, when I was 14 months old. It was reported in the *Nottingham Journal* that the actor,Tod Slaughter presented me with a rosette and the actress Patricia Hastings gave me a kiss for coming first in my category. Some are born famous, some seek fame, whilst others have fame thrust upon them, firstly in my case thanks to my doting parents.

Other awards have followed, and therefore in this exploration of the two issues of climbing as an Olympic sport and awards for alpinism, I am conscious my personal example comes under scrutiny.

My first certificate for climbing came from the Russians in 1974. Paul Braithwaite, Guy Lee, Clive Rowlands and I were presented with colourful certificates written in Cyrillic certifying we had climbed Peak Lenin in the Pamirs. The occasion was an international 'camp' set in the Achik Tash valley. Part of its purpose was to foster international relations amongst climbers and to gain foreign currency to enable Russian climbers to climb overseas. There was also a hidden agenda, and that was to persuade the IOC to admit high-altitude climbing as an event in the Olympic Games. When this proposal was voiced at any of the many meetings held in the 'camp' it was generally laughed out of court as for most visiting climbers the idea was anathema.

Pressure for climbing, in one form or another, to form part of the Olympics has never gone away – indeed, as I shall explain, mountaineering was within Coubertin's vision right from the start – however there is an important distinction to be drawn. The organisers of indoor climbing competitions and ice climbing competitions are working hard to gain entry into the Olympic arena. Most climbers, whatever their reservations, seem to think this is inevitable and not a problem so long as such competitions remain indoors or outdoors on purpose-built, artificial structures. What the mountaineering fraternity do question is the idea that there should be competition on natural rock and competitions in the high mountains.

Ed Douglas, in a balanced article entitled 'Faster, Higher, Stronger' in *Summit* (issue 54, 2009), raised the potential for an adverse impact on traditional recreational climbing should climbing become an Olympic sport and as a consequence the comprehensive work of the British Mountaineering

Council be compromised by too much focus on competition. The fear is that the organisers of competition climbing will have an influence on our sport out of all proportion to their numbers, as appears to have happened in the world of canoeing. Apparently access and conservation issues, for example, get sidelined as competition takes centre stage. Ed quoted one canoe stalwart as telling him that the British Canoe Union's relationship with competitions had become 'a case of the tail wagging the dog. It's the debate of the day in many clubs and is creating a lot of discontent.' The implication for climbing is clear; however as Ed concluded, 'competition climbing will only dominate the BMC if it's allowed to do so'. A weather eye needs to be kept on this developing situation.

There's quite a history to all this. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the French idealist and father of the modern Olympic Games, suggested giving recognition for achievement in mountaineering since he considered such a noble pastime exemplified his Olympic ideals. In Paris, at the founding Olympic Congress of 1894, proposals were put forward to award an 'Alpinisme' medal for the most impressive climb made in the four years between the Olympics.

No awards were ever presented and little mention of it was made until in a postscript to the August 1911 *Alpine Journal* it was announced: 'Olympic Games of Stockholm 1912 Mountain Ascents. A gold Olympic Medal will be awarded for the finest performance between the years 1908-1911. The leading Alpine Clubs in the different countries have the right to propose candidates for this prize.' The Stockholm Olympics came and went without any award for Alpinism, since the Swede, Erik Ullen, who had been appointed a judge, counselled against giving any award because of the impossibility of comparing different types of climb and the performance of the 'athletes'. Ullen was the first of many, right up to the present time, to recognise that any judgement made on mountaineering achievements is bound to be subjective and open to debate. In effect, this established the fact that mountaineering was of a completely different character from mainstream, competitive sports.

The idea, however, lived on. Medals were struck and given to the 1922 Mount Everest expedition under the category of 'Alpine and Mixed Alpinism', mainly because the expedition achieved a new height record of 8320 metres. The Baron, now President of the Olympic Association, presented the prizes at the 'International Sports' Week' in Chamonix during the winter of 1924. This event later came to be recognised as the first Winter Olympic Games. Colonel Edward Strutt of the Alpine Club collected the silver–gilt medals on behalf of the team since the leader of the expedition, Brigadier General Charles Bruce, had already left for India as leader of the 1924 Everest expedition. Coubertin suggested that the British should take an Olympic medal to the summit of Everest – a suggestion that was accepted but never carried out.

The following were the members to whom these medals were awarded: Charles Granville Bruce, Geoffrey Bruce, George Finch, George Mallory, Edward Norton, Howard Somervell, Tejbir Bura, Narbu Sherpa, Lhakpa Sherpa, Pasang Sherpa, Pemba Sherpa, Dorje Sherpa, Temba Sherpa and Sange Sherpa.

The Sherpa medals were awarded and given to their families posthumously since all seven had perished in the avalanche below the North Col that brought the 1922 expedition to an end. The whereabouts of the medals awarded to Charles Bruce, Mallory and Finch are known but not of those awarded to the seven gallant Sherpas from Darjeeling.

The brothers Franz and Toni Schmidt were awarded medals at the Los Angeles Olympics of 1932 in recognition of making the first ascent of the Matterhorn north face. The medals were collected on behalf of the Schmidt brothers by the President of the German Olympic Committee, Theodor Lewald, and were given to Franz and his father since Toni had been killed a few months earlier whilst climbing in the Alps.

Four years later at the 1936 Olympics, Günther and Hettie Dyhrenfurth were given Olympic gold medals for their mountaineering achievements in the Karakoram in 1934. On their International Expedition to the upper Baltoro glacier several first ascents were made including all four summits of Sia Kangri, the first of the great mountains of the Karakoram to be climbed.

There was general speculation that the ill-fated Austro-German team that attempted the Eiger north face in 1936 were hoping for an Olympic medal. The dramatic and very public death of the four-man team confirmed the suspicions of all conservative climbers, particularly in Switzerland and Britain, that attitudes to climbing prevalent in the eastern Alps were beyond reason. The censorious editor of the *Alpine Journal*, Colonel Strutt, had a field day, condemning not only the 'Munich Mechanisation' of climbing, but, through AC member Dr Oscar Hug of Zurich, he also aired condemnation of awarding of Olympic medals for 'Alpine Valour'. Hug wrote, 'An Olympic medal for mountaineering is to be deprecated at all costs. Mountaineering, as understood by Swiss and British climbers, is not an Olympic sport. Mountaineering contains some elements of sporting characteristics, but these are of a quite secondary nature in a form fostered by Eastern Alps' scrambling that smacks more of the Olympic Stadium where publicity is not unwillingly sought. Swiss and British mountaineers will have no dealing with Olympic medals.' The editor seemed to have forgotten that in 1924 he was in Chamonix collecting a whole clutch of Olympic medals.

In 1938, at the height of Nazi power in Germany and Austria, Hitler formally honoured Anderl Heckmair, Wiggerl Vörg, Heinrich Harrer and Fritz Kasparek for their first ascent of the Eiger north face. The fact that Hitler associated himself with awards in mountaineering may well have tainted the idea of awards in general, for none were given by the IOC for the next half century.

After the war, in September 1946, the IOC decided to abandon the idea of giving prizes for Alpinism as well as for Aeronautics. Alan Blackshaw

and Roger Payne, on behalf of the UIAA, attempted to find out more about why precisely and who at IOC was behind this decision. So far no documentation has been found on the subject. It is hoped that alpine member nations of the UIAA may discover archival material on the subject.

Then in 1988, at the Calgary Winter Olympics, awards were given to Reinhold Messner and Jerzy Kukuczka for their ascents of all fourteen 8000m peaks. Each climber was given, unsuspectingly, a silver medal, which begs the question as to what a climber has to do to go for gold. In actual fact there does not appear to have been much interest from mountaineering clubs and organisations to encourage the IOC to again make awards for Alpinism.

However the idea of competitive mountaineering is far from alien in the former Soviet bloc where competitions were first promoted in 1948. Ronnie Richards, a participant in the 1975 Pamirs 'camp', summed up the situation in an *Alpine Journal* article of 1975 (vol. 80, p. 90): '... most Western climbers ...value just those aspects of mountaineering which set it apart from conventional sports. It was reassuring to find Eugene Gippenreiter and other Russian climbers sharing our views.

'Conditions peculiar to the Soviet Union explain the proposals: firstly the existing framework has developed attitudes and an administration structure whose officials would gain in power, status and prestige – their voice is presumably influential in a political climate where organised sport is encouraged at the expense of individually instigated efforts. Secondly, mountaineering is something of a poor relation compared to other sports – elevation to Olympic status would increase resources available for more and better equipment and clothing...'.

The Soviet attitude to mountaineering suffered a severe setback with the death of eight Russian women mountaineers set on making the first all-women traverse of Peak Lenin. They perished in a terrible storm at 7000m. They lacked the experience and suitable equipment, but also they were, it seems, blinded to the build-up of danger by their overwhelming ambition to succeed. They were locked into a pre-planned itinerary that made for inflexibility and determination to meet targets precluded changing direction as conditions dictated. The considerable back-up of guides out on patrol with radios and with helicopters in the area may also have induced a false sense of security. Here was laid bare, for all to see, the problem of external organisation and procedures subverting the small group from taking responsibility for their own lives through flexible self-reliance and prudent decision making.

This tragedy brought home to many the folly of promoting high-altitude mountaineering as another competitive, Olympic sporting event. If ever it was to become part of the Olympics, with the whole world looking on, one can only imagine the increasing number of similar disasters amongst teams of Olympic alpinists.

A year after the Pamirs camp came our successful ascent of the south-west face of Everest. No award was expected and none was received, at

least not directly. Chris Bonington, our leader, had already been given a Gold Medal from the RGS in 1974; in fact I had stood with Don Whillans underneath the newly gold-embossed entry of Chris's name up on the panelling at the old entrance to the Society building. Don, who was not getting on with Chris at the time, since Chris had dropped him from his Everest plans, looked up and quipped, 'What exploring 'as he done? I've done all his exploring'. He then went on to quote Annapurna, oblivious to my suggestion that Chris had done a lot more than lead the successful climb of Annapurna's south face. These awards obviously don't go unnoticed and can cause consternation in others. However I heard no grumbling when eventually Chris was made a CBE: after all, he was with justification the main spokesman for British climbing, had climbed more than most and had probably sat on more committees than any other climber.

Rumour has it that Dougal Haston and myself as summiteers of Everest might have expected some recognition from Her Majesty if Dougal had not served three months in one of HM Prisons during his misspent youth. Still, we did get an invite to No 10 where we met Harold Wilson who asked us what part we had played in getting the summiteers to the summit! Many of the Everest expedition members were invited to the Man of the Year 1976 lunch and duly certificated as 'Men of the Year' after listening to the noble Lord Jack Ashley who, although stone deaf, spoke a lot of sense, much more so than the other speaker, the very tipsy Lord Boothby. It was surprising who you got to meet at such soirées.

In 1994 I received a letter from the Ceremonial Branch of the Cabinet Office, Westminster, asking if I would accept becoming a Commander of the British Empire. This came as a complete surprise as I had had no inkling from anyone that such a possibility was even being discussed. I have to say I accepted without a second thought and have never regretted doing so. My parents were overjoyed with my father saying, 'Thank God I have lived to see this day' – it being the culminating point in his lifelong ambition to see his son honoured for everything he did. In general being a CBE has only been of help in fundraising, helping friends abroad obtain UK visas and generally getting things done more quickly. It was rumoured that since Rebecca Stephens, a relative newcomer to climbing, had been awarded an MBE, the climbing establishment thought a token old timer should be awarded something too, hence my award.

It came long after I had done my most demanding climbs and was to honour a lifetime of climbing and unravelling the mysteries of Himalayan mountains rather than as a reward for one particular event. This was the case with fellow climbers, Chris Bonington CBE, George Band OBE, Pat Littlejohn OBE, and very recently Joe Brown CBE. None of us seems to have attracted any criticism so far for accepting these awards. Objections only seem to arise when such gongs are given directly after a spectacular event and especially if it is perceived that non-climbers are influencing events behind the scenes.

There have long been prizes given for exploratory mountaineering

but the first awards made on a regular basis began in 1830 with the foundation of the Royal Geographical Society. Early recipients included Younghusband, Whymper and the Duke of the Abruzzi, and more recently, myself, 1999, Reinhold Messner, 2001, and Harish Kapadia, 2003. We all quite unexpectedly received the Patron's Gold Medal after the Queen had approved what in the UK is the highest honour, along with the Founder's Medal, for contributions to mountaineering and the knowledge of mountains.

In my acceptance speech I told of my consternation when sitting on the train, reading the *Daily Mail* on my way to the RGS, I had read that David Hempleman-Adams was our greatest living explorer, which must mean, I thought, that Wally Herbert (amongst others) was dead. I was able to announce the good news, after a few enquiries, that Wally Herbert was very much alive (sadly no longer).

Two friends with impeccable climbing credentials illustrate the pros and cons of accepting or rejecting awards. Voytek Kurtyka, one of the foremost mountaineers of the 20th century, turned down a request from the organisers of the *Piolets d'Or* to sit on the jury of what is arguably the best known international award in mountaineering. Voytek was approached by Christian Trommsdorff, President of the Groupe de Haute Montagne and the main organiser of the revamped *Piolets* of 2009, along with Manu Rivaud of *Montagnes* and Claude Gardien of *Vertical*. Christian himself has in recent years, with his great friend Yannick Graziani, made climbs worthy of a golden axe but being an organiser is ineligible for consideration.

Voytek said that he was sorry but he could not be part of the jury as he understood 'the world is suspended on a monstrous structure of wild competition and consequently of award and distinction ... this structure is an enemy of true art ... where award and distinction rules the true art ends.' For him climbing was a means to physical and mental wellbeing and towards wisdom, whereas award and distinction only led to vanity and egocentricity. 'Taking part in the game of award and distinction is dangerous for the climber ... I cannot accept your offer.'

Christian thanked Voytek for his 'sincere reply', adding, 'personally I totally agree with you about competition; this is not the spirit we want to promote at the GHM now but we choose to take an opportunity to be present in today's world and promote our values the best we can rather than to be absent and let others occupy the space ... people driven by competition ... maybe some of them could be inspired by people like you to change their attitude.'

Voytek did not take part but those who did, including myself as Jury President, saw to it that most of the revamped *Piolets* criteria were applied to the recipients. Paramount was that the awards should be given to those climbs exhibiting commitment, e.g. no drilling equipment carried, no fixed ropes and eschewing other aids that would diminish the uncertainty principle of the climb, such as walkie-talkies, satellite phones to weather forecasters, etc. Other key criteria were that the climb should be original, the 'leave no trace' principle should be observed, and local people treated with respect. The 2009 award in fact was given to three different climbs that more or less met the above criteria. Not having a single winner was seen as a step forward, lessening the competitive element of the *Piolets d'Or* and creating a system that endorses all those making inspiring climbs in an inspiring style; the 'winners' thus were not winners but ambassadors representing the best traditions of our sport.

With the revised charter and a new spirit established for the *Piolets*, Christian felt confident enough to approach Voytek again, this time to accept the 2010 Golden Ice-Axe Career Award to 'help promote our common values in Alpinism'. Voytek's reply was predictable: 'This is a devilish offer ... I always run to the mountains with great expectation that I can elevate myself above my human weaknesses and you try to put on me the most dangerous one ... the illusion that I am a person of distinction ... all my life is a sort of struggle with that illusion ... the greatest trap of our ego and a proof of vanity, I can't accept *Piolets d'Or*. The climber possesses an exceptional awareness of freedom. I hope you will understand my uneasiness in face of such a great honour.'

Christian, with understatement that would have impressed the British, commented to me and others: 'Maybe a little more work and he would accept?' We all have some sympathy for Voytek and with his statement that, 'seeking the distinction betokens vanity, rejecting the distinction betokens vanity'. It was a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' dilemma for which he felt guilty. Voytek must know he is different from other climbers in that he has done what only a handful of other climbers could ever do. He is therefore distinct and cannot avoid the fact that everyone considers him so. Perhaps Voytek wanted to avoid a pitfall identified by Dr Johnson: 'Such seems to be the disposition of man that whatever makes a distinction produces a rivalry.'

The *Piolets d'Or* was the idea of Jean-Claude Marmier, President of the GHM, and Guy Chaumereuil, editor of *Montagnes* magazine. It came into being in 1991 with all the best of intentions and an idealism echoing that of Coubertin in launching the modern Olympics nearly 100 years before. It would salute the climbs that captured the imagination and essence of our sport. If the *Piolets d'Or* holds to this ideal it will remain the flagship award, a marker in the sand as to the best way forward to the good of climbing everywhere but especially to those former communist and far eastern countries where an outdated industrial ethos has clung on in mountaineering.

In recent years leading Russian climbers such as Alexander Klenov have questioned their country's system of high mountain competitions. He feels it has held back Russian climbing from breaking new ground in a committed style without bolts and fixed ropes. Anatoli Moshnikov is quoted on the web as saying, 'competitions today are not relevant and are displacing the essence of mountain climbing'. Ian Parnell in an excellent article in *Alpinist* entitled 'Victors of the Unwinnable' quotes the Russian Yuri Koshelenko as saying: 'The *Piolets d'Or* has helped me to understand

better the ideals of European mountaineering.' So much so that Koshelenko made a valiant effort to climb Menlungtse's north face in alpine style.

The inaugural award went to Marko Prezelj and Andre Stremfelj who had climbed in impeccable alpine style the south-west ridge of Kangchenjunga South Peak – as original and committing a climb as the founders could have wished for. The problem was to keep the *Piolets* on course and that would depend upon the judgement of the jury members and the integrity of the sponsors. There needed to be eternal vigilance to ensure the award structure never lost the plot: was never diverted from the ideal for one reason or another.

If there is inappropriate motivation behind this award, or any award for that matter, because it has fallen into the hands of those who are ignorant of its *raisons d'etre* or with hidden agendas to gain power, wealth, fame, praise, increased status or to compete with other awards' organisers, then it will fail. If a recipient is chosen for political or financial reasons then the award will lose respect and create disharmony during the award ceremony and beyond. One thinks of Steve House lambasting the *Piolets* jury a few years ago for having chosen the Russian siege of Jannu over other more committing climbs including his own solo ascent of K7. This, and other controversial decisions have led to passionate debate. This is all to the good of the game for this constant scrutiny out in the public domain will help foster inspirational climbs well into the future. In 1998, Marmier resigned his patronage of the *Piolets d'Or* as he considered its original ideals had been compromised and devalued. Now that the award is back on course perhaps Jean-Claude would consider rejoining in some capacity?

Twenty years on from its inauguration, the *Piolets* organisers must ensure that they have full confidence in all those nominated for the award so it can be given with a full heart. It should also be presented without too much fanfare and razzamatazz from sponsors that would detract from highlighting the main reason that the award was set up in the first place – to celebrate the spirit of alpinism.

'Praise shames me, for I secretly beg for it,' wrote Rabindranath Tagore in his poem *Stray Birds*. Think about it.

Postscript: Shortly after filing this feature, Doug Scott received a further accolade in the form of 2011 *Piolet d'Or* 'Lifetime Contribution Award'. Previous recipients of this mountaineering Oscar are Walter Bonatti (2009) and Reinhold Messner (2010).

LINDSAY GRIFFIN

Playing The Game

What do we define as trad climbing in the UK? Until quite recently there was simply *climbing* and also sport climbing. The BMC, the representative body for climbing, mountaineering and hill walking in the UK, feels it is represented by a route with little or no in-situ protection or main belays. However, on certain trad routes extra protection (occasional pegs or bolts) will have been placed (and left in-situ) because of the perceived extreme difficulty of protecting the route with nuts and cams. This fixed protection will not significantly alter the character of a route. Even that can never be a clear statement, because it will be down to the first ascensionist to decide whether the natural pro on his or her creation is satisfactory, marginal or unsatisfactory.

Within the UK there are many areas, and indeed crags themselves, that have sport climbs and pure trad climbs – and even some crags that are a mixture of both styles. Two of the most well known venues featuring both are Malham in Yorkshire and the Llanberis slate quarries in North Wales. By and large, climbers in the UK are pretty comfortable with this and respect the different styles.

Before the 1960s climbers used to carry piles of little stones, which they placed in cracks and threaded, or used jammed knots like the Czechs on their sandstone towers. Then there were large machine nuts with the threads drilled out so they could be used on rope slings. John Brailsford, a blacksmith, made the first purpose-built nut in 1960, and a poor version of wired nuts followed a little later. Placing pitons on our crags has always caused ethical debate. But even when I was climbing in the early 1970s, many climbers would habitually carry a peg hammer and a few pegs for main belays. It wasn't 'the done thing' to place a peg for protection on a pitch, but establishing a good belay seemed acceptable.

In those days there was a lot more in-situ pro on the crags. Most of this rotted or rusted away and was never replaced, because equipment became more sophisticated in the form of small wires, RPs, cams etc. But as the gear was still generally poor compared to today, there was rather more jiggery-pokery; a bending of ethics that was rather glossed over at the time. However, the adventurous nature of the climb itself was not compromised.

Without sounding old-fashioned, because there are some fantastically bold young climbers around in the UK at present, the average climber in the early to mid 1970s was much happier on bolder climbs than the average climber of today; back then 'bold climbing' was simply the norm. You have to remember that this was the '70s when climbing was dangerous and sex was safe.