

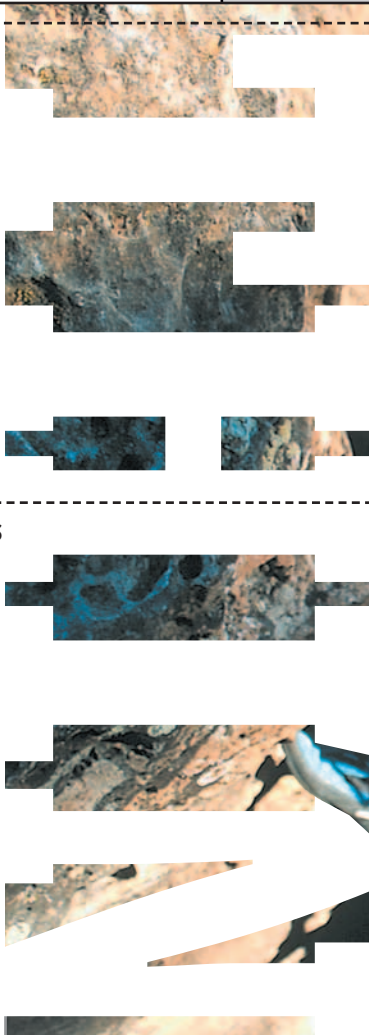


BY CLYDE SOLES

Could there possibly be a more competitive segment than rock shoes in the outdoor industry right now?! Don't think so. Competition is great but this is more like a knock-down, drag-out brawl, with retailers taking many of the blows.

According to Gary Neptune, owner of Neptune Mountaineering in Boulder, Colo., "The margins are so slim that I can barely afford to pay a salesperson to sell a pair of rock shoes. I'm seriously considering adopting the European model of retailing and just put all the sizes out on the floor and letting the customers help themselves." While his specialty store hasn't made this drastic step yet, it's indicative of how severe the situation has become.

Even before the Spaniards killed the goose that laid the golden eggs (SW Partners, the longtime Boreal distributor for the United States), an already turbulent market had become tumultuous. Failing to deal with rampant Internet sales from Europe has cost Boreal its once secure foothold in the North American market and



FOOTHOLD



PRICE WARS CONSUME THE CLIMBING SHOE MARKET, WITH RETAILERS CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE.

even with a new distributor, The Ralph Libonati Company, it's unlikely Boreal can become a serious player in the United States again. Ironically, as the Euro rises against the dollar, the deep discounts from that side of the pond are now drying up. The new challenge comes from Asia.

According to several industry insiders, there are approximately 250,000 pairs of rock shoes sold in the United States annually—a figure that has remained flat for several years now. The vast majority of that

pie is divided between Five Ten, La Sportiva and Scarpa—established brands most likely to be found at a serious climbing shop. Boreal once had a significant market share—heck, it owned the market at one time—but saw its numbers whittled away to the point that precious few retailers or sales reps wanted to carry the line.

Now there are more than a dozen other rock shoe brands hoping to steal a bite from the pie...most are just grappling for crumbs. Some of these

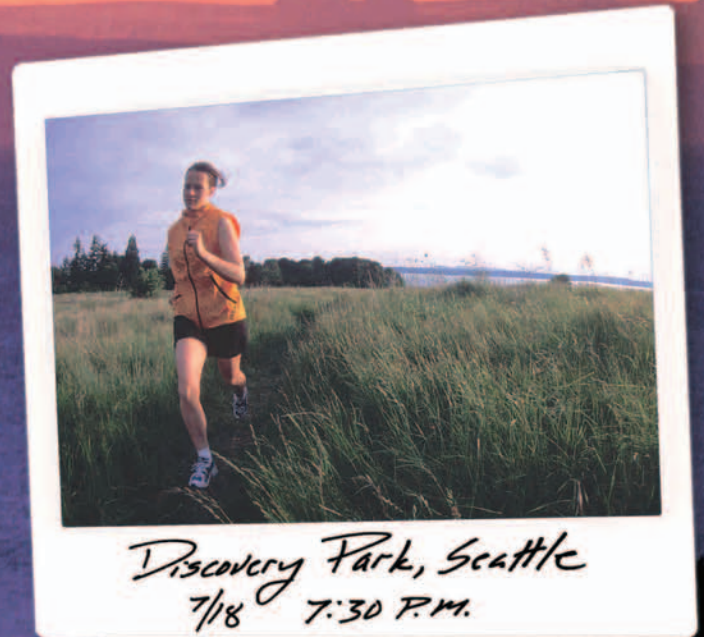
brands have been around for a while but still are relatively unknown. Other lines of rock shoes came and went so fast, they were pretty much on close-out from the beginning.

If I seem cynical about the longevity of new brands, look at the also-rans who had new products for the seven rock shoe reviews that I wrote while at Rock & Ice magazine. From 1994 to 2001, the big four (Boreal, Five Ten, La Sportiva and Scarpa) always had something new in their lines. These other brands tried

BUTCH ADAMS PHOTOGRAPHY. COURTESY OF BLACK DIAMOND EQUIPMENT, LTD. ©2001

CERRO TORRE

Photos: Chase Jarvis www.chasejarvis.com



Kate Jarvis: Teacher, New Options Middle School, adventure traveler, runner

Inside Kate's Cerro Torre: Running shoes, dried mango (her favorite), fresh roasted almonds, digital camera (for the sunset shots), fifth period role sheet, student homework to be graded (the papers that didn't get eaten by the dog).

Booth 1211 - Outdoor Retailer Summer Market 2003
Please stop by and see our line of technical outdoor packs.

Cerro Torre USA
6821 South 220th Street
Kent, WA 98032

www.cerrotorreusa.com
Phone (253) 872-2058/2066
Fax (253) 872-0980



Delta 47L

to break into the market with little more than cheap shoes:

- » '94 Asolo, Kamet, K&F, Mekan
- » '95 Asolo, Climb Reavor, EB, Freeclimbing, Reebok, Saltic
- » '96 DiMel, Freeclimbing, Reebok, Saltic
- » '98 EB, One Sport, Saltic, Ushba
- » '99 Climblingshoes.com (Reebok closeouts), EB, Red Chili, Trango
- » '00 Acopa, EB, One Sport
- » '01 Bufo, EB, Freeclimbing, Mammut, Merrell, Red Chili, Rock Pillars
- » '04 Acopa, new Boreal, EB, Evolv, Climblingshoes.com, Mad Rock, Mammut, Montrail, Red Chili, Rock Pillar, Roc'terra, Saltic, Triop

Don't recognize some of those rock shoe lines? You get my point. Almost without exception, none of these brands brought anything new in terms of fea-

Rock & Ice magazines for value. While retailers and Mad Rock competitors argue that the reduced dollars earned per sale provides less incentive for stores that offer such frivolities as customer service, there is little doubt that the overall effect of Mad Rock's pricing has been to create the perception among climbers that high-end rock shoes from other brands are overpriced. Some prognosticators have argued that's the entire point: drive prices down, create demand, then focus on direct sales.

Next season, yet another player enters the battle. Long known for quality hiking and trail running shoes, Montrail entered the climbing market last winter with the introduction of its innovative ICE 9 mountaineering boot and crampon. At Outdoor Retailer Summer Market, the company fires a full broadside with five new rock shoes.

Normally, a boot company dabbling in rock shoes would be a cause for "uh-oh, we're having an Asolo/Merrell flashback."

Though La Sportiva is emphasizing the new rock shoes will offer comfort and performance—which usually translates to meaning a shoe has neither—the initial reports are very encouraging. So yet again, we'll have reasonably priced high-margin shoes from a well-known company that has good sales reps already servicing key accounts. It'll have a slight edge for having been in the game for so long but had better not rest on its laurels.

Yep, things are heating up in the rock shoe world!

In fact the first fatality appears to be Salomon, which, thankfully, has decided to hold off on rock shoes for at least another year (reportedly after getting a big thumbs down from REI). In all likelihood, Salomon will drop its rock shoe program altogether, which had been under development for a couple years—too little, too late. The great fear had been it would "pull another Reebok." When that athletic shoe giant entered the rock shoe scene, its ineptitude did nothing but

NOW THERE ARE OVER A DOZEN OTHER ROCK SHOE BRANDS HOPING TO STEAL A BITE FROM THE PIE...MOST ARE JUST GRAPPLING FOR CRUMBS.

tures or performance. And few did anything to establish credibility with climbers: lame advertisements (if any), lame sales reps (if any), lame community activism (if any).

So what was the reason to stock another rock shoe line? Oh yeah, they're cheap. The problem, of course, was they weren't cheap enough to compete with Internet sales. And the better-known brands reacted with models that weren't too far off in price yet had name recognition.

PRICE WARZ

That was then; the future promises even more turmoil. This season Mad Rock has made a big splash on the climbing scene as the latest line to enter the fray. Unlike the other new competitors, Mad Rock jumped into the market with shoes that looked distinctive for gimmick-starved climbers. It came in with an aggressive marketing campaign that hyped its rubber and supposedly innovative features. Most of all, it came in with very aggressive pricing.

There is no doubt the Chinese-made Mad Rocks offer a lot of performance for the buck—six models priced from \$70 to \$90. It garnered an Editors' Choice award from both Climbing and

But Montrail appears to have done its homework and has the potential to make a real impact. According to a company spokesperson, "Price wars abroad have opened the door for competitively priced, high-quality product." While GearTrends would argue that door has always been open, it's the manufacturing facilities in China that are making a difference.

The new rock shoes are designed by Scott Franklin, formerly of La Sportiva, and will retail between \$80 and \$110. Though we haven't tested them yet, the shoes look good but not revolutionary. The real attraction for retailers is the 45 percent margin (40 percent has long been standard on rock shoes). Factoring in a solid sales rep force that is well-established in specialty retail and Montrail's good reputation among consumers, there is real potential to make inroads.

Since the Boulder Mountaineer started selling Mariachers in the mid-1980s, La Sportiva has been a dominant rock shoe brand in North America. While it continues to handcraft high-end shoes in Italy, such as the aptly-named Testarossa (priced accordingly), La Sportiva too has gone to China for better value. Next season, three models will be priced at \$85 or \$90 with a 45 percent margin.

screw up the entire market for several years. Heck, Climblingshoes.com is still trying to get rid of the old Reeboks!

It's likely that the next casualties of the shoe wars will be some of those off-brands that have had little success in becoming household names among climbers. With meager ad budgets, minimal sales support in the field and standard margins, a moderate-priced boring rock shoe just won't cut it anymore.

Though the Mammut rock shoe line doesn't break new ground, the name recognition and reputation for quality gives an advantage; plus the Climb High reps attend demos and clinic staff. Next season, there will be four new models (\$89 to \$125) in the Blaze series that, hopefully, are not orange.

While Five Ten and Scarpa are scarcely below the \$100 point on their offerings, their lines are so established that they aren't really threatened, yet. It's a rapidly changing battlefield and everybody had better keep on their toes.

HIGH LINE

All this scrambling at the low-price-yet-not-low-quality end of the market hasn't killed interest in the high-end shoes. Climbers fanatical about eking out that

last bit of performance, whether real or imagined, will still pay more if they believe a shoe gives them an edge. Shoes like the Five Ten Southwest, La Sportiva Miura and Scarpa Dominators will continue to sell.

Five Ten is rolling out the Escalante (\$134), which has an interesting Velcro heel adjustment to fine tune the fit. The shoe is made for comfort to wear all day long with a high degree of performance.

The new Venom (\$130) from La Sportiva is a further evolution of high-end slipper designs based upon its Testarossa shoes. Built around a radical last, the uppers are a new Vibram rubber material that is supposed to be sticky for toe hooking yet breathable.

Customers with particularly demanding requirements might consider a pair of Evolv rock shoes. There are three models (\$89 to \$115) designed by yet another former Five Ten employee. What makes the brand unique is the ability to order a pair of different sized shoes (Five Ten has long offered this) and to make custom high-performance shoes for the most finicky of climbers.

GALS JUST WANNA HAVE SHOES

Female-specific rock shoes also remain a significant category for the three major lines that hasn't been challenged with pricing issues. The girls are so happy to finally have performance shoes that fit, cost is less of an issue. Fashion counts too, so it's a bonus if the color and styling is feminine but not girly.

Next season, the girls will be able to dance on the rocks with Five Ten's Prima (\$118), which is claimed to be inspired by ballet slippers. Designed for gym climbing and bouldering, it's a lightweight, flexible shoe designed to give toe power.

CUSHY HEELS

When Five Ten introduced the Ascent several years ago, some people scoffed at the padded heel with treads as a gimmick. Once climbers discovered how comfortable these made the shoes, particularly at belays and on descents, it became a desirable feature. The company now has three models (\$104 to \$132) with heel wedges and climbers' feet are grateful.

This season, the Scarpa Marathon (\$140) also sports a cushioned heel and it's been widely acclaimed, including Editor's Choice from Climbing. Seeing the writing on walls, La Sportiva will offer the Rock Jock (\$120) next season. Based on the Cliff last, it has a unique lacing system in addition to the foam

and tread under heel.

RUBBER HYSTERIA

Like oenophiles are picky about grapes, rock climbers are sensitive about rubber—in both cases, reputations sometimes don't live up to the reality. With little to distinguish many of the shoes on the market from one another, the battle of words about rubber have heated up again. This rivalry of "who's stickier" and "which edges better" has gone on for years but sometimes erupts when there isn't much else to talk about.

It promises to be even more raucous this time because Mad Rock and Montrail are both claiming their new proprietary rubbers are superior to the reigning Stealth C4 from Five Ten. Poppycock says Charles Cole, albeit not as politely, who essentially founded his company on its rubber. Certainly Vibram, which makes the rubber for La Sportiva and Scarpa, has its opinion on the matter as well.

The fact is that this is mostly a religious debate since there is no data to back up any of the claims. When it's time to resole, climbers choose their rubber because of what their friends tell them—not ad hype.

The running world has injection-molded different rubber compounds into different areas of the outsole for a decade. This concept is now making it to rock shoes (Five Ten and Mad Rock) and will probably become even more sophisticated. Boreal was the first to use 3-D molding but the rubber didn't compare favorably to others.

MOUNTAINEERING BOOTS

The good news for female alpinists is that La Sportiva's Nepal Extreme is finally coming in a woman's last. This insulated, leather mountaineering boot (\$420 for men's or women's) remains one of the best for technical winter climbing. The bad news is that it will only come in lime green.

Expanding upon last winter's introduction of the revolutionary ICE 9 mountaineering boot (\$350), crampon (\$185) and gaiter (\$85), Montrail is adding two new boots and a new crampon. Its integrated climbing system features a cleat



underneath the flexible boot that accepts either crampon to make the boot rigid; quickly converting the boot from walking comfort to climbing performance.

While the ICE 9 is an insulated boot for winter, the new Olympus and Lotus GTX are intended for summer mountaineering. The Olympus (\$235, also available in wide) is a beefier model with waterproof leather uppers, while the lightweight Lotus GTX (\$210) has synthetic uppers and a Gore-Tex lining. All the boots accept the nice gaiter (made by Outdoor Research) that does not require a strap under the instep. The new Khumbu crampon (\$135) is a general mountaineering design with dual horizontal frontpoints.

Adding these products to the line was a crucial step for legitimizing the ICE 9 system for both retailers and consumers. Since the crampon does not work on normal boots, they needed convincing the system will still be around in a few years.

BUTCH ADAMS PHOTOGRAPHY. COURTESY OF BLACK DIAMOND EQUIPMENT, LTD. ©2001



THE SKINNY (AND FAT) ON NEW ROPES, LIGHTWEIGHT 'BINERS, AND AXES THAT WEIGH LESS THAN A POUND.

BY CLYDE SOLES



WET GHT

WATCHERS



Despite recent obesity studies by the U.S. government, some things in this world keep getting lighter. Take climbing gear. The latest ropes and tools barely move the scales, giving climbers the edge in the never-ending attempt to defy gravity.

Unfortunately, these wonders in weight-loss are lost on many consumers. Few understand the basics, much less the fine details of the latest plum products. But it's part of our culture. You have to really hit Americans over the head. I mean, we're pretty dense. For example, the FDA is going to separate out "trans fatty acids" on food labels. This is so you'll finally be able to deter-

mine that Oreos are bad for you.

It's clear that if you want consumers to understand anything, you must explain it carefully.

ROPES

It's fair to say that the average consumer and the average salesperson don't have the foggiest idea of what to look for in a climbing rope. This broad lack of awareness is largely due to misleading claims that confuse everyone. Add to the mix the typically poorly trained retail staff and rope sales get tangled in misinformation.

Very few people understand the numbers on rope tags, so purchases are mostly based on color and price. Recognizing this fact, PMI hasn't changed its rope construction for next season but the entire line is revamped with "very powerful 'boy

colors." So far, nobody makes a girl's rope...but it's just a matter of time.

In the world of climbing ropes, the mid-fat (10.2 mm to 10.5 mm), mid-length (60 meter/200 foot) forms the bulk of everyone's sales. These are beefy enough to hold up to a lot of use, yet aren't too heavy. While 50-meter ropes aren't dead yet, they are fading in popularity and 70-meter ropes are still insignificant except in certain locales where they may have an advantage.

While the mid-fats are the most popular, the skinnier ropes get most of the attention. A favorite of sponsored climbers, who don't have to worry about how quickly they wear out, the narrow ropes do handle well and make for good ad copy.

One common misconception is that narrower diameter means less weight; while true on the broadest scale, it's totally false when comparing similar ropes. For example, Bluewater has re-worked its Dominator rope by increasing the diameter from 9.3 mm to 9.4 mm while keeping the weight the same at 55 g/m. The new version will offer a softer catch (8.3 kN versus 8.9) and better handling.

Next year, Mammut is introducing the first 9.0 mm single rope, which will scare the bejeebers out of old-timers who recall when a 9 was a half rope. The new Revelation weighs in at 54 g/m, making it the latest to wear the lightest crown (barely), and has an impact force of 9.5 kN.

Sterling has added an 8.4 mm half rope

BUTCH ADAMS PHOTOGRAPHY. COURTESY OF BLACK DIAMOND EQUIPMENT, LTD. ©2001

to its popular Marathon series, which now comes in 10.6, 10.3, 10.0 and 8.8 mm. Built with a beefy sheath, these ropes are designed for greater durability without sacrificing handling.

Metolius is introducing its own line of dynamic ropes. Monster Ropes will come in two diameters (9.8 mm and 10.2 mm) and two lengths (60 m or 70 m); no dry version but the ropes will include a storage sack. The ropes are made by Lanex, a large, 54-year-old rope manufacturer in the Czech Republic, and designed by the same person that developed the Edelweiss Stratos along with a lot of input from the Metolius crew. While it's a tough market to enter, the longtime Mammut ropes distributor is in a good position to capture a share.

One dangerous problem with the trend to longer ropes is some climbers are starting to put in rappel stations spaced for 60 meter ropes, while there are still a lot of climbers with 50 meters. Unfortunately, guidebooks and articles don't alert many people who may happen across the anchors. Somebody needs to develop permanent tags for bolt anchors that will indicate distance and direction to the next station.

HARDWARE

There won't be any new camming devices next year since HB has decided against releasing its micro cams for the time being. However, Metolius has added a trick new sizing system to all of its cam sizes. The cam lobes will have a green, yellow, red visual indicator that will help climbers evaluate their placements. Very cool.

Trango is introducing a new auto locking belay device, called the Cinch, that will adapt to ropes of any diameter. Meanwhile, Petzl will offer a smaller version of the Reverso that works with half and twin ropes down to 7.8 mm.

Assuming it can get insurance coverage, a big IF, Anker Climbing Equipment (ACE) is ready to ship its new portaledge. The company, which was originally A5, has spun off The North Face and is again trying to deliver high-end bigwall gear. Conrad Anker has spent enough time on portaledges (portable hanging tents) in outrageous locations around the world that he's buffed out the design to the max. The rigging is done by Yates Gear, so you know this thing's made for abuse.

CARABINERS

Repeat after me: The most important number on a carabiner is open gate strength. This basic concept needs to be hammered home to anyone who buys or

sells carabiners: 8 kN is a minimum and 10 kN remains the gold standard. These connectors simply do not fail when the gate is closed so a high rating matters little. But dozens break every year because the gate is partially open during a fall.

There's been a lot of R&D going into carabiner designs lately, though not all has been the lab variety. Overall, 'biners are becoming easier to handle yet lighter and, sometimes, stronger.

Last year, Black Diamond introduced the Positron, which was its interpretation (a tad roomier, a tad easier handling, and a bit weaker) of the classic Petzl Spirit carabiner. Now, BD is bringing out a larger, slightly stronger version called the Dynotron that has the same nice gate, keylock nose and only weighs 50 g.

The new Trango SuperFly is a wire gate 'biner that weighs a mere 31 grams—it's the world's lightest full size carabiner. Almost half the weight of a normal carabiner, it has an 8 kN open gate and 25 kN closed gate rating.

Although 2 grams heavier, the new Wild Country Helium has a beautiful design that combines a wire gate with a keylock nose. The radical I-beam construction yields a 10 kN open gate strength and great handling. There will be a lot of climbers lusting after these!

Metolius has developed the Matrix Locking carabiner that allows climbers to suspend their beliefs about gravity and speeding projectiles—or so we theorize anyhow because the Metolius crew was too busy reloading to provide details.

MOUNTAINEERING

General mountaineering equipment continues to get lighter and more refined. For example, the Black Diamond Raven is getting upgraded to a dual-density molded grip yet still only weighs 570 grams. It's still available without the grip at just 485 grams and the Pro version which is an astonishing 382 grams.

The venerable Charlet Moser name has now been relegated to history as Petzl Charlet becomes the new moniker. Along with the name change comes the Cosmique, which has a polished steel head; it weighs 585 grams with a rubber grip and 480 grams without. The Snowscopic is a mountaineering ice axe that extends from 60 cm to 105 cm and comes with a trekking basket. Many companies have tried this concept but they all fell short so time will tell on this one.

Also new from PC will be the Sonic Ice Screw, which has a spinning hanger for fast placements. What is unique are screws that can be removed while still

clipped to the rope so they won't get dropped—cool, if it works.

The Grivel Air Tech Evolution is an elegant blend of a mountaineering and technical ice ax. The gently curved shaft and forged steel head will allow better overhead performance than standard axes yet still is fine on low angle terrain and weighs just 500 grams.

Equally exciting is the new Grivel Air Tech Crampon, which is a complete rethink of how alpine crampons are used. Due to the unique design, there are 10 points in contact when walking yet 12 points when traversing. These are intended for mixed use on ice and rock with modern boots (e.g., Asolo Summit, La Sportiva Trango Extreme). Completing the system is the Air Tech 22 Rucksack, a summit sack that only weighs 250 grams and stuffs into its own pocket.

If you haven't checked it out lately, the Grivel.com website is one of the best in the industry for its information on history, technique and ethics, as well as gear. The company recently opened a new factory near Venice, Italy, to help with production.

Also of note, the excellent Kahtoola approach crampon is now being distributed by PMI. This lightweight design fits nearly any shoe or boot and was recently used for the fastest ascent yet of Mount Everest.

SKI MOUNTAINEERING

The good news is that alpine touring bindings are continuing to evolve. The bad news is an intriguing new model from Silvretta will only be available in Europe or on the Internet this winter. The PURE binding allows Dynafit system boots to step in and switch to and from touring without stepping off the ski. At 1.2 kilograms, its 400 grams lighter than the Silvretta 500 and only 330 grams heavier than the Dynafit Tristep.

Fortunately, Backcountry Access will be importing the new Naxo NX01 alpine touring binding from Switzerland. A double pivot on the toe allows a more natural stride and accommodates both downhill and AT boots. While not as lightweight at around 2.1 kg, it is easy to adjust, appears to be rugged, and has DIN settings up to 12 for kamikaze skiers.

When the new Rottefella Cobra R-Series telemark bindings premiered at the show last winter, most people just thought the changes were cosmetic. Take another look. There are indeed many subtle improvements that reduce rocker launch, prevent icing, and increase touring and downhill performance. Beauty is more than skin deep. 