

# REACHING FOR THE RINGS

## Can the United States overcome itself and help climbing into the Olympics? BY GAIL ROTHSCILD

*"Yes, Jim," says Robyn Erbesfield, looking pert in a blue network blazer adorned with the five Olympic rings. "If she can just stick the dyno, I think we're looking at another Olympic gold for the U.S." The camera zooms in on the climber's chalky fingers as she fires for the final jug on the short, steep Olympic wall. Television viewers around the country erupt with emotion. They have been glued to their sets all week, following the Cinderella story of this tiny orphan from the Midwest flatlands. As she stands atop the podium, while "The Star-Spangled Banner" plays, we gaze through teary eyes at the beaming face that will soon adorn Wheaties boxes. Sports agents and talk-show hosts are already negotiating deals.*

**I**s this dream a real possibility, or a wild goose chase? While the American climbing community is showing renewed interest in making climbing an Olympic sport, it's not an easy task. At the same time that other nations are displaying Olympic-level organization in their climbing-team selection and training, we remain mired in factionalism and disorganization. To a devoted fan it seems incredible that a sport so athletic, so sexy, so elemental hasn't made the big time. But a little research into the past reveals a sad succession of false starts.

### THE BIRTH OF COMPETITIVE CLIMBING

Competition climbing is not as new as you think. The Soviet Union held a national climbing championship in the Caucasus in 1948, while in America, outdoor comps such as the Stonemasters in Southern California, the Phoenix Bouldering Contest, and Idaho's Pocatello Pump, began cropping up in the late 1970s. By the mid-eighties, European sport climbing was exploding and competitions on natural and artificial surfaces soon followed.

The first truly international event was held in Bardonecchia, Italy, in 1985, with Russ Clune, one of the top American climbers of the time, competing for the U.S. "I left thinking there were some things that needed improving," Clune remembers, "but this was the future of climbing."

Between five and ten *thousand* spectators showed up to watch this new sport, among them another American, alpinist and climbing businessman Jeff Lowe, who happened to be traveling in Europe at the time. Winners were crowned, and Lowe had a new mission.

By 1988 climbing seemed poised to become the next big thing. Monied sponsors were sniffing around and even writing some pretty big checks, television networks were interested in broadcasting the new sport, and Dick Bass, the first person to climb the Seven Summits and owner of the Snowbird ski resort in northern Utah, had a venue.

Lowe approached Bass with an audacious proposal to stage the first world-level climbing competition in the U.S.

"We sold the first Snowbird to CBS," says Lowe of the event, which drew such stars as Ron Kauk, Catherine Destivelle, and Lynn Hill.



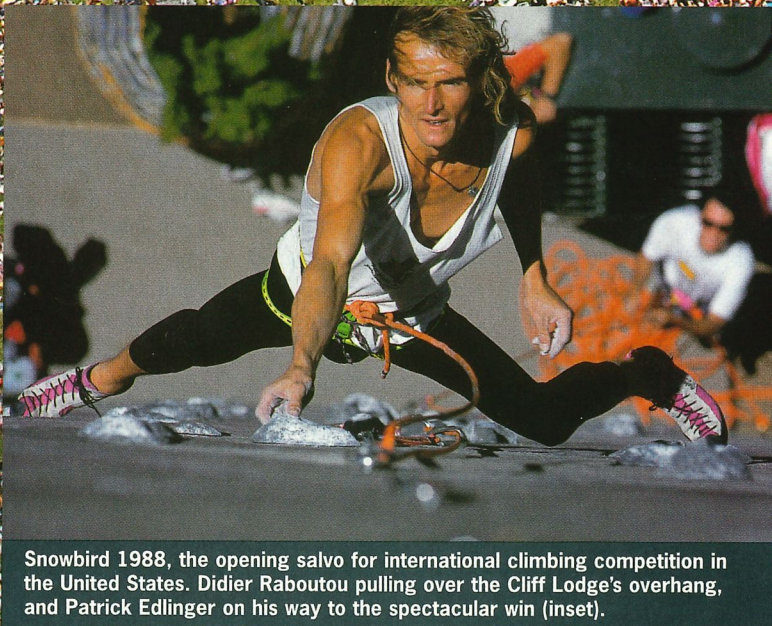
World Cup trophies at Imst, Austria in 2003. The road to Olympic gold medals will be a long one.

"Patrick Edlinger won with an amazing climb. It was a made-for-TV moment. We had feature articles in *Sports Illustrated* and *Outside*."

Today, the climbers get starry-eyed remembering their first-class treatment at Snowbird. "It was unbelievable, the opulence," says Verve founder Christian Griffith. "At the pre-competition buffet they must have spent \$10,000 on sushi alone. They put every competitor up in a \$150 room. I can't imagine what their budget was."

The public was drawn in by the new show, with crowds at the venue ranging from 2000 to 3000 strong. It was a heroic effort, but there wasn't yet an organization, or even the grassroots participation, in competition climbing to support the early momentum. Another Snowbird international comp took place in 1989, followed by America's first — and still only — World Cup competition, held in Berkeley, California, in 1990.

The Berkeley World Cup was going to be bigger and better than anything held before. Bill Graham, the famous concert promoter who worked with bands from the Grateful Dead and Miles Davis to the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan, produced the show at the Berkeley Coliseum. "It was the *American* World Cup. Everything was *big*," says Robyn Erbesfield, who has stood on more international podiums than any other American, ever. "It was a big event, in a big arena, in a great town."



Snowbird 1988, the opening salvo for international climbing competition in the United States. Didier Raboutou pulling over the Cliff Lodge's overhang, and Patrick Edlinger on his way to the spectacular win (inset).

MARCO KUST

GREG EPPERSON (BOTH)





The first international climbing competition at Bardonecchia in 1985 drew the world's best. Among the judges for the event was esteemed alpinist Ricardo Cassin.

Many of the world's top climbers attended — Ben Moon, Jerry Moffatt, Didier Raboutou, Lynn Hill, Isabelle Patissier, Erbesfield — with Simon Nadin taking the men's win and Nanette Raybaud snagging the top spot for the women. A sizable American crew was on hand to compete as well, largely current or former Yosemite climbers including Ron Kauk, Tom Herbert, and Kurt Smith. Even renowned photographer Galen Rowell and *Climbing* publisher Michael Kennedy participated, putting on an exhibition on the women's semifinal route.

Behind the scenes, however, the situation was rocky. While there have been many World Cups of such ambitious scale outside the U.S. since 1990, Lowe was attempting something spectacular and unknown. Then, shortly before the comp, Lowe went AWOL, on an expedition to free climb Pakistan's Nameless Tower with the French rock star Catherine Destivelle, which Lowe now admits was a mistake.

Financially, Berkeley was a bust, with gate revenue a fraction of what was projected. "Losing money was common in the early World Cups," says Lowe. "I saw it would be another year or two before we made money — what you'd expect for any business to break even. And then Iraq invaded Kuwait and my bank pulled all their peripheral loans." It was left to the main sponsor, The North Face, to pay all the bills. "Whatever Bill Graham said the competition owed, The North Face paid," continues Lowe, who speaks only reluctantly about Berkeley. He not only spent The North Face's money, but his own as well, and in the end was forced to declare bankruptcy.

#### AMERICAN COMP CLIMBING GETS ORGANIZED

After Berkeley, sponsors were wary of the big events. Climbers, on the other hand, having been shown the big time, were hungry for competitions and the prizes that they'd come to expect. Competitor expectations, however, were at odds with reality. There was not even a federation to select a national team for World Cup competition. Snowbird and Berkeley tantalized climbers with a taste of fame and

fortune that even today has not materialized. Several competition series cropped up, but none lasted more than a few years.

Following European convention, the American Alpine Club (AAC) was then (and still is) charged with representing American competition climbing to the Union Internationale des Associations d'Alpinisme (UIAA), which in turn is the sole organization recognized by the International Olympic Committee to represent climbing. After Berkeley, the AAC felt that they could no longer meet the needs of competition climbing and climbers. The AAC board delegated Ralph Erenzo to draft a proposal for the new American Sport Climbers Federation (ASCF).

At an AAC board meeting in 1990 Erenzo presented the proposal and requested \$30,000 to start up the new organization. At the time, the AAC had a membership of just 2500 and no funds for a project of that scale. During lunch, board member Bill Putnam quietly went around the room and solicited the \$30,000. "I have always believed that the directors of the AAC have a personal obligation to put their own money where their mouths are — in particular as this pertains to what they vote to have the club do," says Putnam. "The ASCF was born out of the personal commitment of members of the AAC board of directors," says Erenzo, who became the ASCF's first Executive Director.

The ASCF became responsible for organizing and running local, regional and national competitions, culminating in the selection of a national team. Erenzo, with a background in theater and tradeshow production, knew how to manage an organization and stage a classy event. His best effort was in 1993, when he put on a National Championship that drew top competitors from around the country to Hunter Mountain, a ski resort in New York's Catskills, as part of a larger outdoor sports festival.

At the same time, many climbers, seeing the end of their competitive careers approaching and impatient to reap perceived benefits, wanted the ASCF to be a union for professional climbers. "They

skipped steps," says Erenzo, who remains unpopular among many of those competitors. "Climbers in America wanted to be paid and supported like pro climbers in Europe, but the German Federation had nearly a half million members. Same with the French and Swiss." At its peak, ASCF membership numbered only in the hundreds.

As an international judge, Erenzo spent much time observing European World Cup competitions and climbers. "The Europeans had the system down," he says, "they had government funding and eager volunteers. Competitions ran like clockwork." Americans also competed in World Cups in the early 1990s, but on a less-than-organized basis. Although climbers qualified through the ASCF circuit, there was no funding to send a team. "Whoever could afford to go, went," says Erenzo. A few, like Jim Karn, Erbesfield, Hill, and later Katie Brown, won. The most committed found temporary homes in Europe, most notably Erbesfield and Hill.

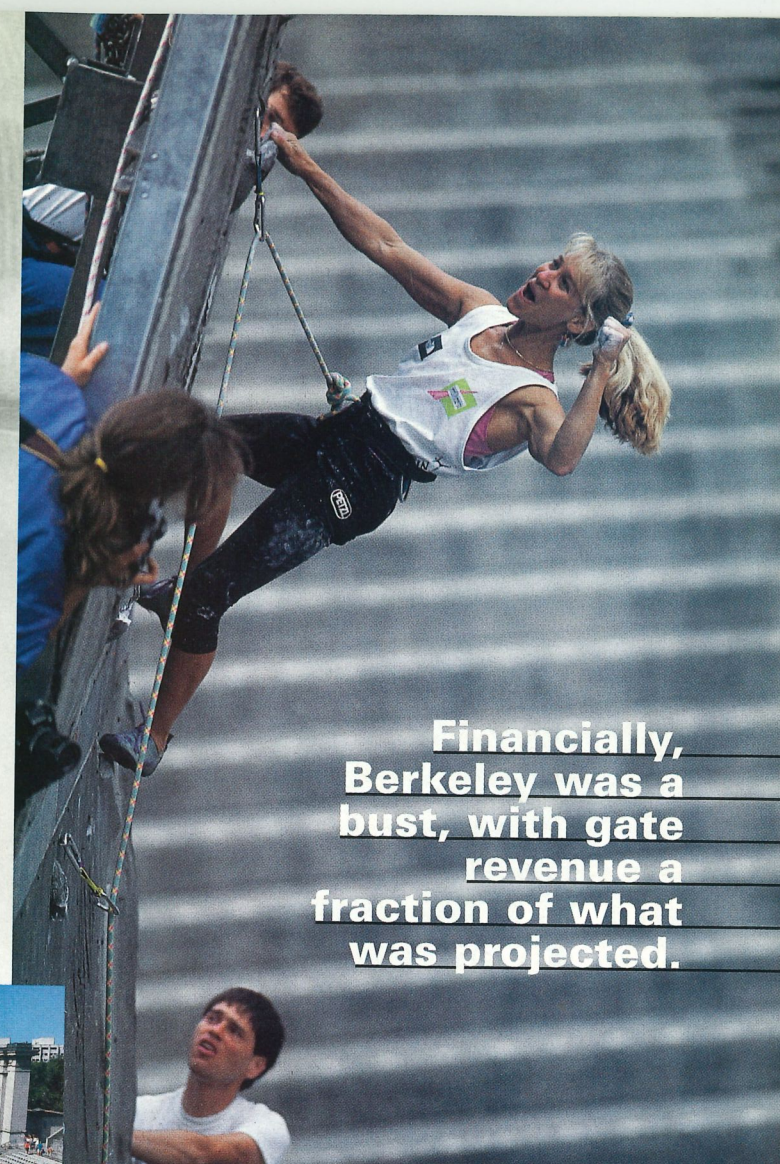
It wasn't until 1995 that America hosted another international climbing competition, when ESPN added climbing to the X Games. "It was the only affordable opportunity for Americans to compete against the best in the world," remembers Vadim Vinokur, 1998 X-Games bronze medalist. "And it was a great event. Unfortunately ESPN never figured out how to make it work on TV. The editing just didn't do the sport justice. They needed a Josh Lowell, someone who really understands climbing."

Jim Waugh, originator of the very successful Phoenix Bouldering Contest, twisted and tweaked the X Games competition format, attempting to create a television-friendly extreme event. But climbing isn't an "extreme" sport; there were no broken bones, no bleeding noses, not even big-enough falls. "In the second X Games," Vinokur recalls, "we were all required to compete in speed. I hadn't done that since I was a kid. They sent us up a fifty-five-foot wall on top rope, but halfway up the wall they stopped taking in slack. By the time we hit the buzzer at the top and jumped, we were in for a good forty-foot whipper. Poor Liv Sansoz, the French champion, was in tears. She was terrified." None of it mattered in the end. The network dropped first route-climbing, then bouldering, and finally — despite Tori Allen's spectacular 2002 victory — speed climbing from the X Games.

#### INTERNATIONAL COMPETITORS: NO FINANCIAL SUPPORT

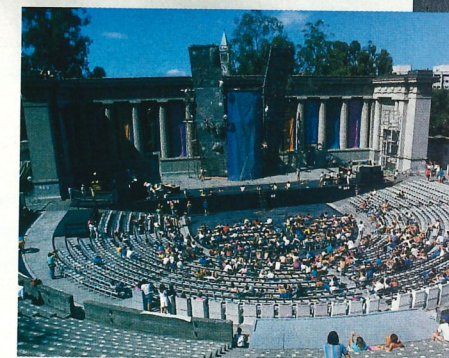
Timy Fairfield spent six years in the late 1990s living in France and competed in over 100 international competitions. He is one of only three American men to win a major international event — one of the Top Rock series (precursor to the Bouldering World Cup), plus a Speed Climbing World Cup title. Fairfield speaks from experience, not all of it good.

"I was in Europe from 1995 to 2000," he says. "The reason I didn't go back after that is that it's financially exhausting. The sponsors in this country are indifferent to international events. It was frustrating



Financially, Berkeley was a bust, with gate revenue a fraction of what was projected.

Robyn Erbesfield busting loose at Berkeley. Erbesfield is America's most successful competitor ever, largely through her own funds. A minimal crowd views the preliminary round at Berkeley, the first and only World Cup held on American soil to date (left).



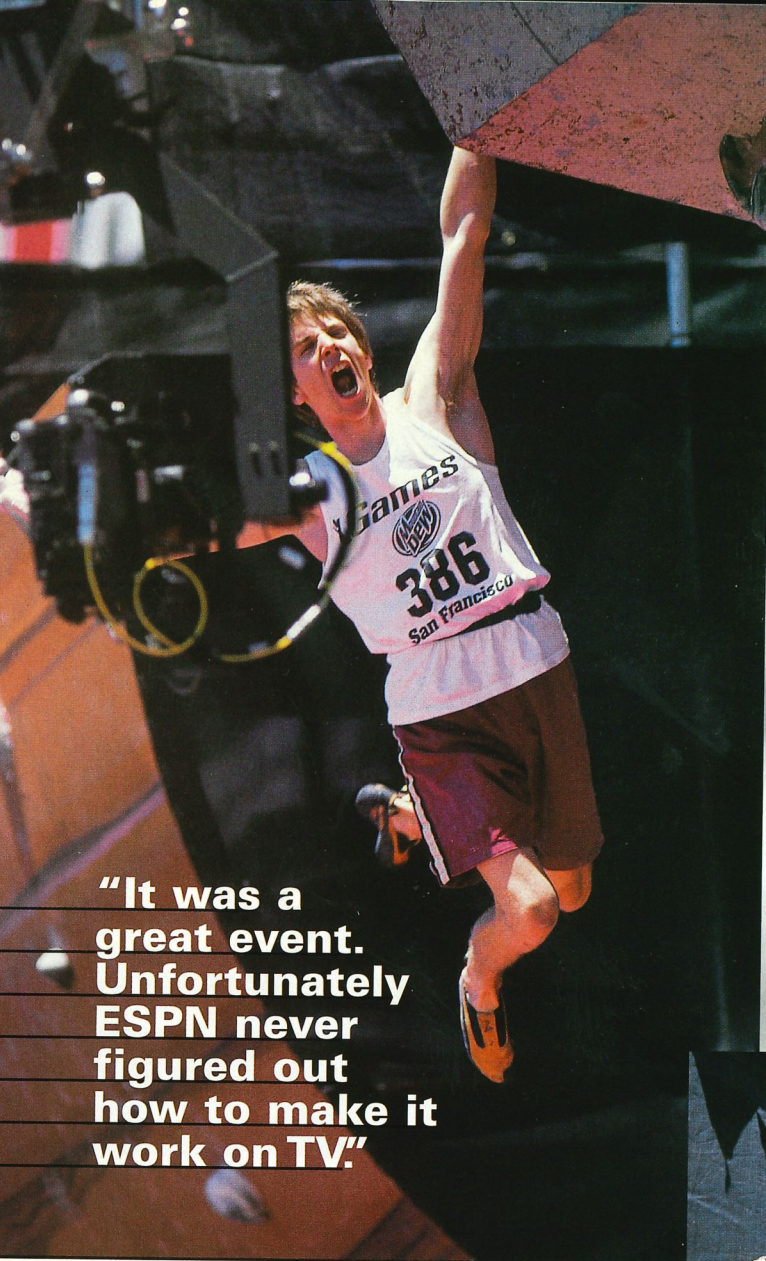
for me to come from the wealthiest country in the world and compete against people from much smaller, poorer countries who at least were provided with the necessary resources."

During his years in Europe, Fairfield — like Erbesfield before him — benefited from the French national organization. "In France they have coaches and trainers. I had a French coach because my own federation never provided me with a coach. I had support from the club in France where I trained. I have actually received more support from the French federation than from my own. When they got group rates for airfare or hotels, they let me in. The French have a training center. They understand the lifestyle they have to follow to perform well."

Philippe Moreau, president and director general of Entre Prises International, a major sponsor of the French federation, points out that "being a member of the French National Climbing Team really means something." And the results of that commitment show. In 2003 Alex Chabot once again won the overall World Cup Difficulty title and Sandrine Levet and Jerome Meyer won Bouldering.

And being a member of the U.S. Climbing Team? Only an empty name. "In the late '90s when I competed," Fairfield explains, "I would





**"It was a great event. Unfortunately ESPN never figured out how to make it work on TV."**

**Francois Petit creating a made-for-TV moment in an X Games bouldering comp. "Well, Chris, would you describe that last dyno as sick, or super-sick?" (right)**

go to some World Cup and hear from an official that, though technically I was ineligible to compete because the U.S. federation hadn't paid my entry fees, they would let me in because they wanted American participation to bolster the image of the sport to the International Olympic Committee."

Even when Fairfield won, the American press virtually ignored it. His Top Rock win netted him just a third of a page in *Climbing*. "When was the last time you saw one of the top comp climbers on the cover of an American climbing magazine? That's why other sports have left climbing in the dust," insists Fairfield. "Look at *Snowboarding* magazine. Climbing was having international competitions before snowboarding. If you look at climbing magazines in this country, you say to yourself, 'Well, this sport is about trekking in the mountains and trad climbing, and competition climbing is a completely insignificant part of the sport.'"

These days the World Cup season begins in April and runs through early December. While most of the events have historically been held

in Europe, that trend is changing, with exciting competitions taking place in Russia, Singapore, and China. For the 2004 season there will be thirteen Difficulty and nine Bouldering competitions. To achieve an all-important world ranking, a climber must attend a majority of these events. For an American, that means significant travel expense. Between airfare, hotel, and car rental, a serious U.S.-based competitor might spend up to \$10,000 for a season.

Cody Roth of Albuquerque is currently training with the Austrian team and supporting his World Cup obsession by such odd jobs as farm work and babysitting. "It's always been my dream," he says, "to see how I stack up against the best in the world." America is lucky to have such an idealistic — and motivated — representative.

#### COMPETITION AMONG COMPETITIONS

During the heyday of ASCF competition from 1993 to 1996, all the best American sport climbers competed. Nobody imagined that a few years later it would all end. Hans Florine, a former world champion speed climber, squired the ASCF through some of its better times. "We had men ranked to 390 and women to 190," says Florine.

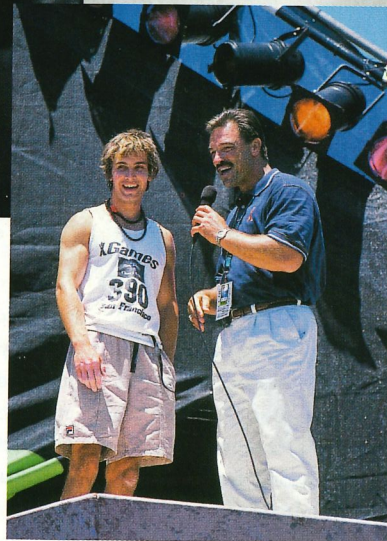
Committed individuals, then as now, have made all the difference in holding a national federation together and advancing the sport. Or letting it all fall apart. In 1996, the ASCF had a membership of about 400, half of those being juniors. But a rift was growing between the adult competitors and the juniors, as volunteers and competitors in the adult ranks dwindled. "In 1996 I gave the juniors a check and they took off running," says Florine. "The success of the JCCA speaks for itself."

Fueled by a committed, mostly volunteer base of parents, the JCCA continued the early ASCF tradition of solid structured competitions, local and regional, all culminating in the Nationals, to choose a team to represent the U.S. at the Junior World Championships. Their success at the Worlds proves that the junior system works.

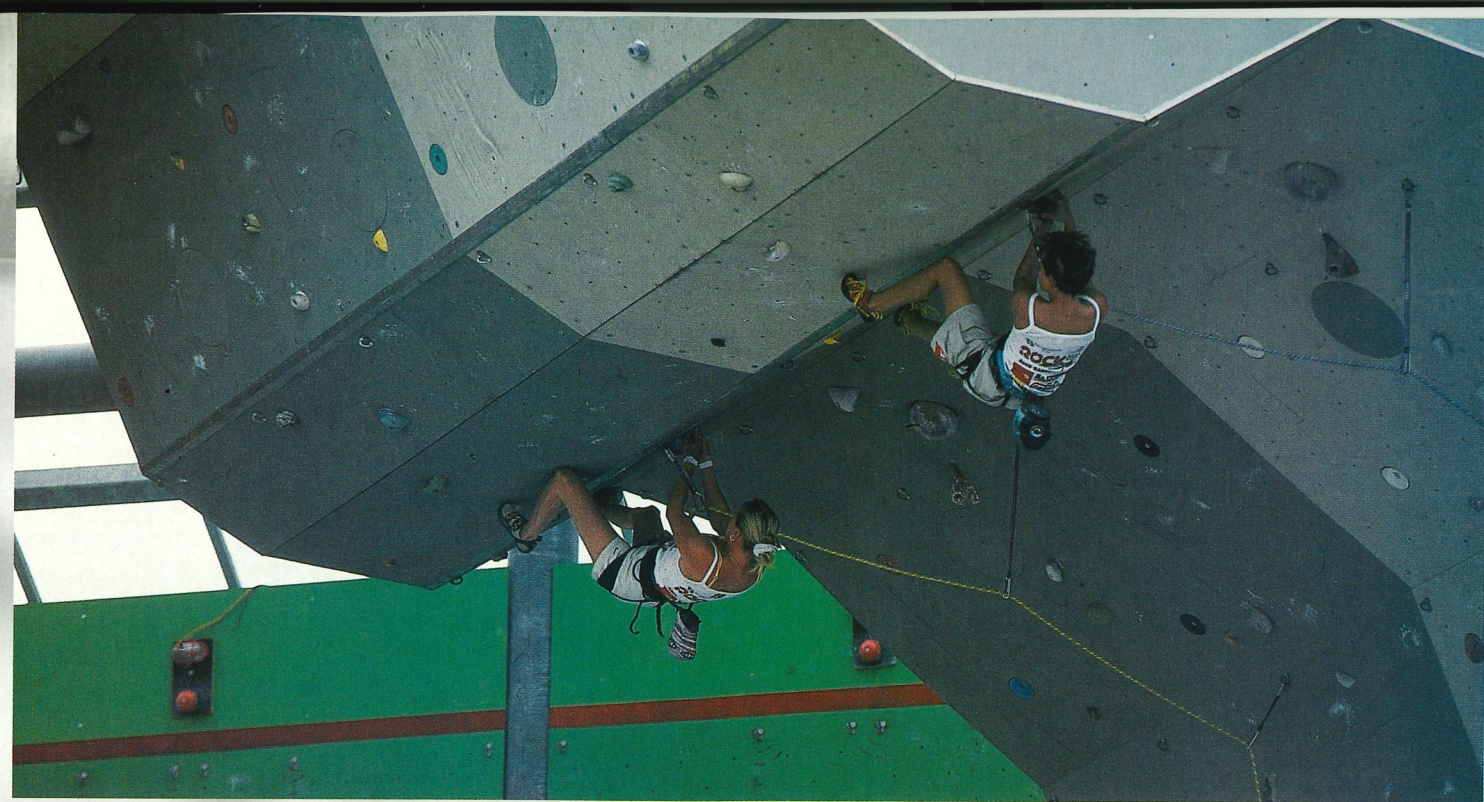
With Florine's departure in 1996 to pursue other goals, the adult U.S. federation became moribund, which explains why Fairfield's World Cup entrance fees were delinquent. There was no one at home. Though a few sanctioned competitions sporadically

took place, comp organizing was left to motivated gym owners, and the ASCF leadership let the organization die a slow death.

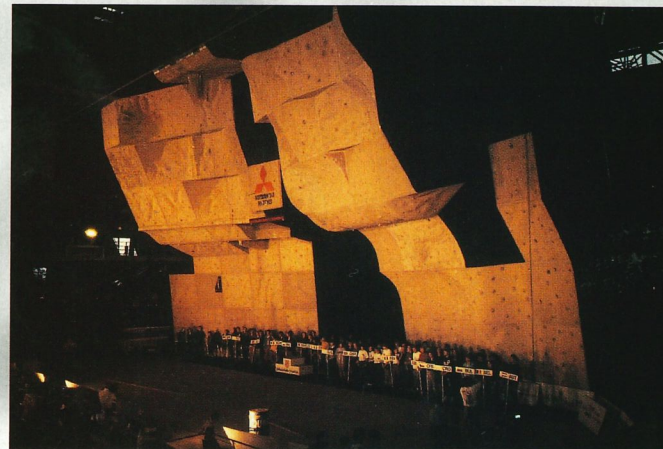
In the meantime, however, participation in the sport was booming. Climbing gyms were springing up everywhere: in sleepy suburbs, in schools; in many cases bringing the sport to locales far from any rock. Gym owners, wanted cool events to bring excitement to their gyms, with high participation and low cost. Since there was no longer a functioning national body organizing adult comps and recruiting sponsorship, independent competition organizers stepped in, each with his own vision, fighting over the limited pool of top athletes and industry money.



JIM THORENBURG (BOTH)



**Competition on the world stage, where lead, not bouldering, comps attract the largest crowds. Sandrine Levet and Muriel Sarkany battle at the 2002 Arco Speed Competition (above). The dramatic 1992 European Championship venue in Frankfurt, Germany (left).**



MARCO KOST, MARCO SCORIS (INSET)

Since 1999 the Professional Climbers Association has presented flashy bouldering competitions with big prize purses. When asked about a coordinated effort for the future of the competition climbing and the Olympic goal, PCA organizers coyly insist, "We're just doing our thing." But they leave the door open, if only a crack. "Everyone says the PCA doesn't want to play ball," says partner John Londoner, "but we're willing to listen. You put a good deal on my table and I'm glad to sign it."

Other organizers are more outgoing. In 2000, Scott Rennak, whose drive made up for his lack of industry connections, started the American Bouldering Series (ABS). In its debut season the ABS just held four events; now there are 160 comps spread across the country and the organization boasts a membership of 1600. "We have a structure now," says Rennak. "We need the industry to back us up. We need magazines to publish what we do. We need sponsors to write into athletes' contracts that they must show up at sanctioned national competitions."

Another entry into the field of bouldering competition is the Petzl Rock Comp, based at Maryland's very successful EarthTreks gyms. Chris Warner, president of EarthTreks, guides big-mountain expeditions — three on Mount Everest — and has bagged numerous first

ascents in the Himalayas, but isn't shy about expressing his enthusiasm for competition climbing. Last year EarthTreks partnered with Petzl to produce an "industry-organized professional event." The Rock Comp was a hugely successful multi-media show that drew 750 spectators and 250 competitors.

"We have all the elements and some resources," says Warner, "and we frankly need an organizing body. Because whether you're a college in the NCAA or a team in the NFL, you do not go to ABC individually, you go to ABC collectively. I've shopped the video from our competition to TV producers and it really caught their imagination. 'This is amazing for television, beautiful men and women half-naked, incredibly athletic. We'll do a whole tour. Just get the Commissioner of Climbing to sign a contract with the network.' Who? Television is ready for us; we're not ready for television."

Many concur with Warner's assessment of the need for a unified organizational body. Among them is Michelle Burnett, who represents two top climbers, Lisa Rands and Chris Sharma, as well as several professional female basketball players. Burnett points out that many sports have gone through growing pains similar to climbing's. "When I was at Nike, I handled beach volleyball. There was infighting among businesses that wanted to make it a viable product. Then you had players who didn't want to lose control of their organization. It took a long time to finally get the sport into the Olympics. What stood in the way were all the splinter groups running conflicting competition series. Everyone was looking around to see who was drawing the best players and the sport was getting nowhere. Finally USA Volleyball said, 'If we're going to be in the Olympics, we have to unify.'"

Thus, there are essentially two directions that competition climbing can go in America. Either complete anarchy, wherein each group competes for media and sponsorship; or the various groups, while maintaining some autonomy, recognize a common goal. The brightest hope



for unifying all these groups is USA Climbing, the new not-for-profit ASCF- and JCCA-successor federation. Officially, USA Climbing — through the American Alpine Club — is now the U.S.'s sole voice in the UIAA for international competition climbing matters. As with any national federation, the organization's prime responsibility is still to host international events and select U.S. representatives to international climbing competitions in all three disciplines: Bouldering, Speed, and Difficulty.

Debbie Gawrych, newly elected head of USA Climbing, realizes that she faces an uphill battle to establish the credibility of the federation and create a new role for it as the unified body of the sport. She is a serious recreational climber and triathlete with an impressive business résumé. An MBA who has handled the rough-and-tumble of investment banking and is now CEO of a management-consulting firm, Gawrych appears to possess both the professional savvy to build serious sponsorship and the leadership skills to bring America's fractious competition climbing community together, and has already made steps toward unification. This year USA Climbing has agreed to sanction the ABS Nationals to select a national bouldering team.

"We want to be in a position to provide these world-class athletes support on par with other teams representing the United States in world- and Olympic-level competitions," says Gawrych. "This includes uniforms, coaching, travel, and training facilities. We have sent out company-specific proposals and are having discussions with major corporate sponsors that support Olympic sport organizations. But the reality is that to attract these sponsors, we need to provide benefits similar to what they receive from other competitive sport organizations."

Eric Meade, CEO of Entre Prises USA, and board of USA Climbing and its Olympic committee, sees the value of working together with USA Climbing. "Growing the sport is good for all the manufacturers," says Meade, who is prepared to put the resources of his company behind his passion for the sport's future. "I will build a wall for World Cup competition, free. We want to see all arms of climbing involved: Bouldering, Youth, Speed, Difficulty. And we want to see a comprehensive plan for the long-term."

Mark Richey, president of the AAC, sees the need for long-term planning as well. "We care about climbing because it is our passion and we see it as the ultimate sport," says Richey. "But what the Olympic committee is looking for are sports with many licensed competitors, good organization of events, and a long history of successful competitions that were financial successes and brought many spectators. This is exactly what we're lacking, especially in the United States. And no amount of lobbying or special connections will get us into the Olympics, despite what some people think. The question is how we present our sport."

#### ASSESSING OLYMPIC POTENTIAL

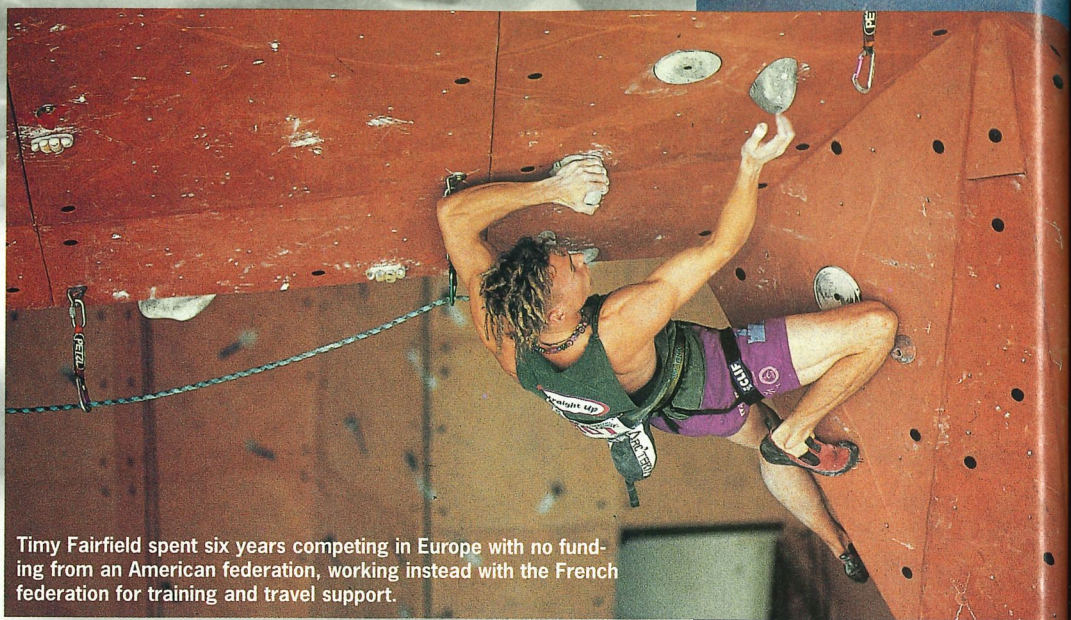
While the American competition climbing community sorts itself

out, Marco Sclaris, a genial Italian with the diplomatic skills to navigate the stormy seas of international sports politics and head of the UIAA's International Climbing Council (ICC), is traveling the world promoting the sport's future.

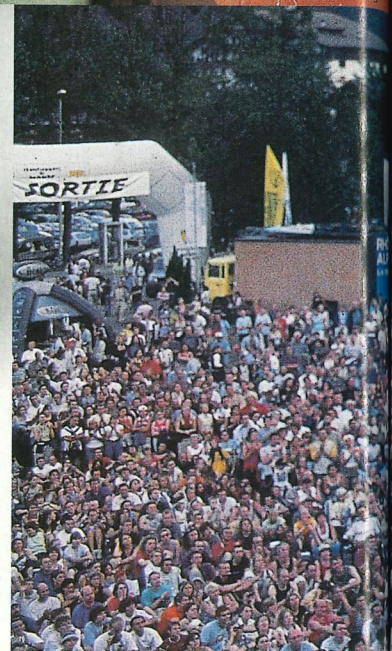
"As a sport, Olympics is the goal. There is a strategic plan," says Sclaris. "We are working on other events including the University Games and the Asian Games. We would like to invest in developing countries, in Asia, and in South America. We are working well with China. China's interest demonstrates that this is a sport that can be very popular at a very low cost. We are going to have a World Cup in China this year and next and then, in 2005, the Youth World Championship."

Last year's World Championships were held in the mountaineering mecca of Chamonix. The Bouldering and Speed events were fast-paced and audience-friendly, drawing crowds of around 6000 each. The glamour event, the Difficulty final, included American Emily Harrington and drew 17,000 enthusiastic spectators. Held under spotlights in the shadow of Mont Blanc, the event was truly spectacular. Two giant screens flanking the wall brought the details of the climbers' every move to the audience. The event demonstrated what Olympic climbing would look like: a sporting event as different from the average American comp as a Broadway show is from a high-school play.

But despite such good promise, climbing still faces an uphill battle against better recognized and organized sports like bowling. The ICC has made a proposal to the IOC for Olympic inclusion. For the moment that's where the matter rests. The IOC will only consider proposals after they have established new criteria for the admission of new sports, a process that won't take place until after the Athens Olympics in 2004. The Summer Games are filled to capacity, so for a new sport to be



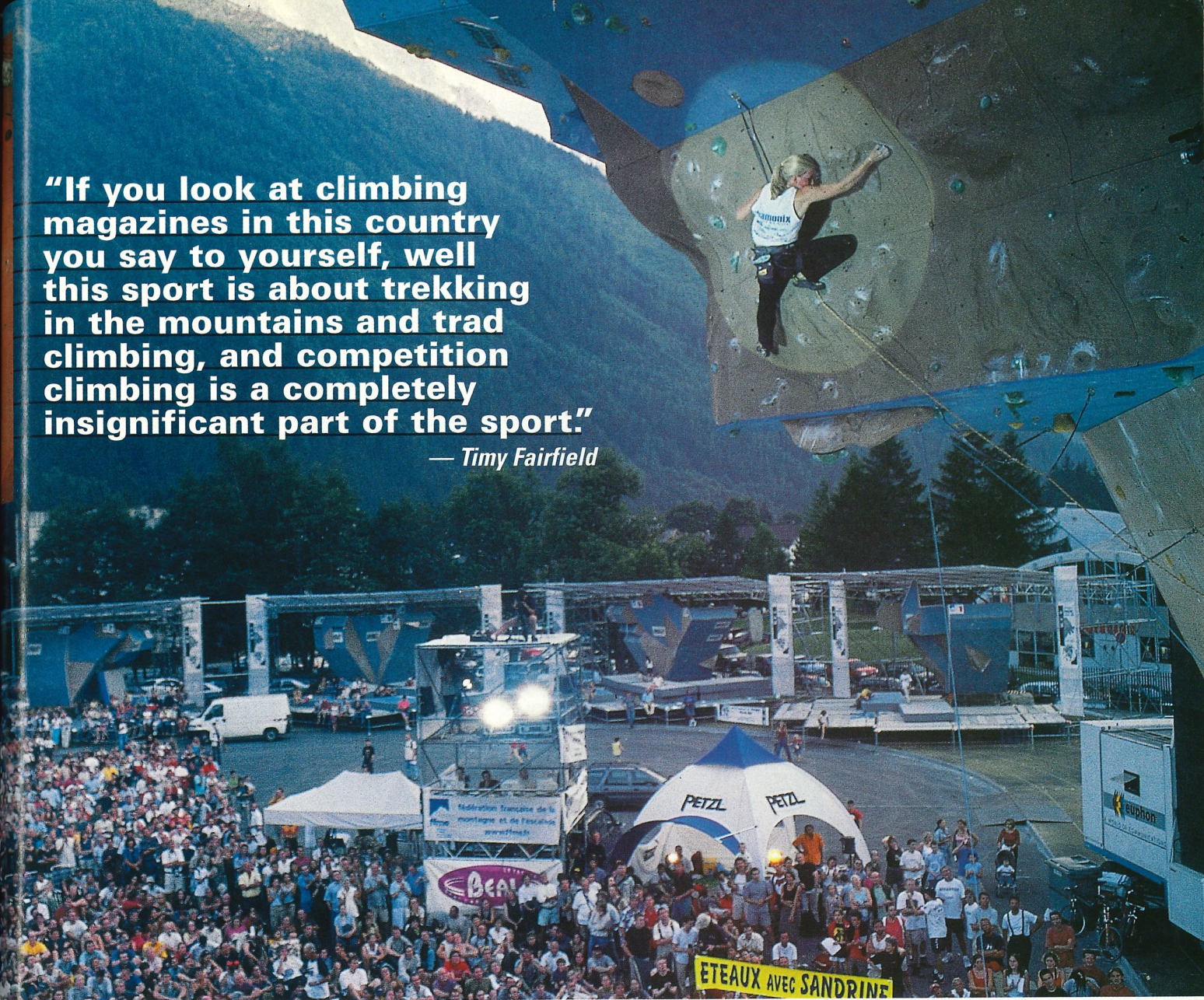
Timy Fairfield spent six years competing in Europe with no funding from an American federation, working instead with the French federation for training and travel support.



JIM THORNBURG

**"If you look at climbing magazines in this country you say to yourself, well this sport is about trekking in the mountains and trad climbing, and competition climbing is a completely insignificant part of the sport."**

— Timy Fairfield



American Emily Harrington climbing in the spotlight at the 2003 World Championships. A crowd of over 16,000 attended.

introduced another must be dropped.

The ICC has to be able to present to the IOC a unified system of participating countries that can all demonstrate a solid structure for training, athlete selection, and organization. The U.S., as the world's most prominent sports country, has to get up to speed and present a national system, support a national team, and host World Cups. Worldwide, Olympic dreams depend heavily on America getting its act together.

In August 2004, America is scheduled to host its first World Cup since 1990. Everyone hopes that the Indianapolis World Cup will be a great success, but hopes even more that it will show that the U.S. can be a player in international climbing competition. While one successful American World Cup will not lead to the Olympics, it

is clearly a step in the right direction, especially if it lands an international field, a happy crowd, and television coverage.

Another possible stepping stone for climbing could be the World Games, a venue for non-Olympic sports that can lead to Olympic status. The seventh installment of this multi-sport international competition, held under the aegis of the IOC, will be held in Duisburg, Germany, in 2005, and will feature its first-ever climbing competition. Boosted by international television exposure, the World Games have enabled a few sports — baseball, taekwondo, and badminton — to gain entry into the Olympic Games.

Competition climbing has been a child star, a greedy, short-sighted adolescent, and may finally be emerging as a wiser, mature

sport with true potential. "We try to emphasize the atmosphere in this sport," says Sclaris. "The mutual respect is unique between climbers, judges, and officials. In the super-final of an international event, competitors discuss sequences and help each other. In isolation I see climbers talk about routes they have done recently and make plans for rock trips. This sport is really something special. We hope the IOC recognizes that. We are a big family."

This is the real Olympic spirit. It's time America caught it.

*Contributing Editor Gail Rothschild has been covering the international comp beat for four years and has entertained audiences with her attempts to compete in Bouldering and Difficulty World Cups.*