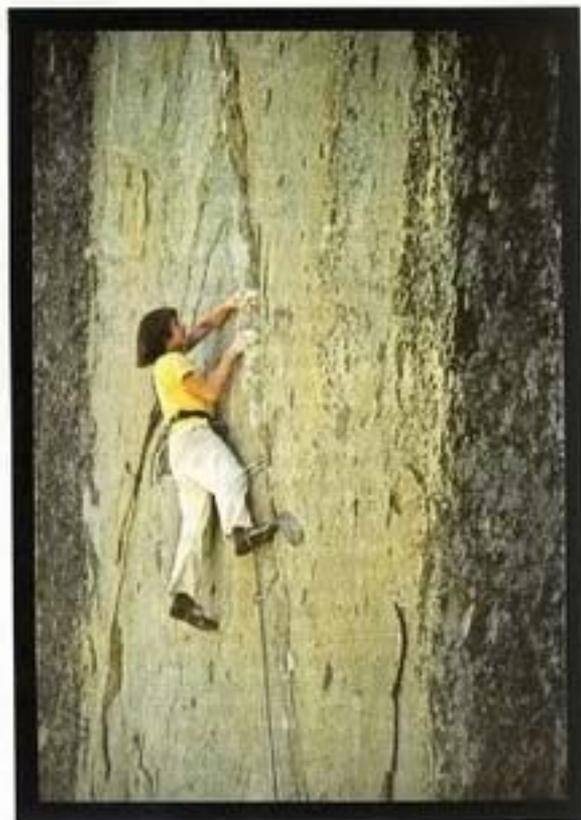


# STATES OF THE ART

by Mark Hudon  
& Max Jones

Part Two



*Trashed hands, part of the price. As well as the obvious chalk for grip and tape for protection in jams it is common to use Benzoin tincture to hasten congealing and harden the skin. The hands belong to Mark Hudon and were mangled by Phoenix.*

Climbing 5.12 is always an interesting experience. Most takes at least an entire day of concentrated effort to figure out how to climb it, and another day to do the pitch. However, three climbs – Phoenix, Super Crack and Babylon – took us a total of 10 days to climb!

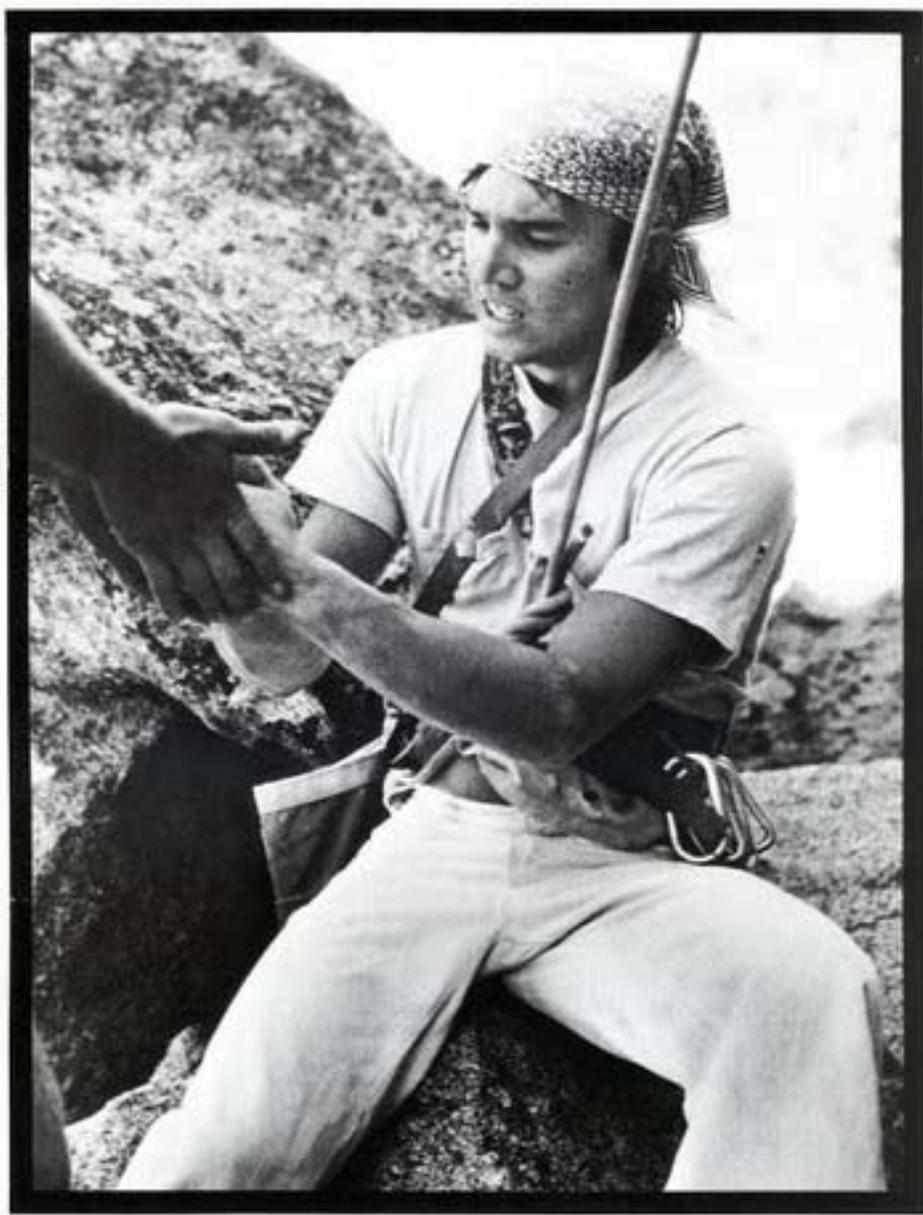
#### The Phoenix

"This thing is the hardest thing I ever hope to climb," I say to myself as I begin the 120ft free rappel to the belay. The top of the crack is all 1 1/2-inch and just too small to get my hands in to jam. Boy! Mark was close to the top yesterday when he fell off. He had finally made it through the middle section and was going for the top when his arm gave out.

There are no rests on this climb and only a couple of places to stop – sucker rests. The thin crack section is neat, just a finger crack up an overhanging wall with good locks but not much in the way of foot holds. Too bad it starts off so hard. The down-sloping horizontal lower part of the crack is desperate.

Near the end of the rappel, I pull myself into the belay underneath the small corner that starts the pitch. That corner is a hard technical start to a desperate route. The crack opens up only occasionally to allow fingertips. We figured that each section of this pitch – the Corner, the

**Babylon.** Donner Summit, California, (5.12) is an 80ft mainly thin crack which at one point involves palming a rounded edge up an overhanging wall (left). This is followed by very difficult crack climbing. Mark's hands cramped so badly that a friend had to hold them straight for five minutes (right). 1st ascent.



Horizontal to Vertical Thincrack and the 1 1/2-1 3/4-inch section to the top - would be good 5.11 to 5.11+ cruxes on any other route. Too bad there's no rest between them.

Mark glides down the rope and is soon strapped into a comfortable belay waiting for me to climb. It's my turn to go first. Was he thinking the same things I was? That it's our fourth day working on this climb and my hands, at least, could not take much more of this crack? I mention something about not wanting to come back here again and he agrees. Today will have to be the day.

I lead past the now familiar moves, up the corner and the many fixed pins to the horizontal crack. I barely manage to pass that section, and climb only a few feet higher before falling off. Boy, I don't know about this - I did better yesterday.

"Let me down. Have a good one, Mark".

Mark gets ready and is soon machining his way up to and past the horizontal section. He continues up the thin crack, but suddenly falls. He has pulled his shoulder out again. I hope he can still climb this thing - I'm unsure about leading the top part. My hands do not fit into the crack and my mind is about shot from working on this climb for so long.

Yesterday, Mark led to within 15 feet of the top before he burned out trying to place nuts. Some Friends would have been nice. I then climbed to the same point and also fell off. So close! Getting

that far was really an achievement considering that the first two days were spent trying to climb the first 60ft in one push. We finally accomplished that on the third day. It was a great psychological boost to get that far. We might climb this thing after all!

Mark has recovered, is chalking up and getting psyched. He climbs up the fingertip corner that starts the route, to the sequence of moves we've done so many times through the horizontal thin section. Then it's up the thin crack and into the 1 1/2-inch section to the first stopping place (I hesitate to call it a rest).

He stops to chalk up and shake out each arm, and then continues to move up and clip into nuts left from the previous day's desperate attempt. Passing these he places more nuts, and makes the last moves in the crack to where he has to reach left and around the corner. He hesitates, shoots for the corner, misses once and then gets it, and is soon around the top outside corner. All right! He's done it!

Now I have to get ready. I tighten my boots and swami belt, add a little benzoin to the cuts on my hands to help stifle the bleeding. That hurts! Sorry about this, hands!

I'm getting the bottom part more and more memorised, and work my way up to and then past the crux. I'm climbing better now and didn't mess up any moves. The thin section is not a problem

and actually feels easy compared to the crux below (even though it would be like climbing an overhanging Butterballs). It fits my finger size well and I can even get my toes in the crack. Then I arrive at the 1 1/2-inch section. A tricky size to jam, but finger stacks work well and it's not too bad. I'm climbing smooth and think my arms might last.

The last 1 1/2-inch section, however, is what I've been fearing. My hands *don't* fit, and every move is very strenuous. Why couldn't my hands be just a little more thinner? Shoving them into the crack, trying to get them to fit, hurts. Suddenly I'm nearing the top and I'm almost too tired to unclip from the nuts. I hope that's a hand jam up there. Oops, both feet cut loose and only my left hand is jammed; somehow I manage to hang on. Back on the rock I lunge to the hand jam, and lunge to the left to palm the outside corner above the crack. Another dynamo to the crack around the corner, and I have the top. Finally.

I roll off the climb totally helpless and look up to Mark, who is grinning like a clown. It's over! We never have to come back! My hands hang uselessly by my sides, all torn up, and I can barely climb the short easy section up to the belay. "Good work, Mark." We shake hands and they rebel with pain. Sorry about that, hands.

Max Jones



**The Prow, Cathedral Ledge, New Hampshire (5.11).** Max Jones leading the 3rd ascent, Mark Hudon belaying. Photo: Ed Webster.

### Super Crack

We arrived in the Gunks excited to climb and full of rumours about this magical climbing arena. The first few days were spent getting used to the rock, and we even managed to pull off Kansas City one morning. Then we had to check out Super Crack – the world's hardest crack (or so every Gunkie told us). We were sure it couldn't be that hard, but you never know, and we wanted to find out first hand if the rumours were true. After all, it had been climbed only twice in four years, and that wasn't due to lack of trying.

Upon first inspection, it doesn't look too hard. I remember telling Mark that I thought we might get it that day. Don't be fooled! After five attempts to complete the first 15ft I take another look at this thing. It's hard! It's a real bad size and it's very hard to find jams that work. Every time I try something new, and finally I make it to the roof, put in a nut and keep going. The middle section is not too bad, but I can't rest. When I move up into the thin

crack, I find my ridiculously taped fingers no longer fit in the crack. Damn! A 20-footer back down to the roof for my mistake. At least now I know it's a safe if gruesome-looking fall.

After that fall, not being in the mood to take another one, I climb from the ground, with less tape, to my high point – this time putting in a nut before my fingers melt out of the crack. I still wonder, will these fingers fit? I grab a nut (watching for lightning) and pull up enough to check. They don't fit. I'm going to have to think of something for tomorrow. All of a sudden this innocent-looking 55ft of crack has become a very formidable testpiece.

The next day we arrive late in the afternoon so the climb will be in the shade and much cooler. Armed with a new tape job, I climb over the first moves. I'm starting to get those moves memorised and they are finally getting easier – not easy, but easier than desperate. Moving to the top, I struggle to get into the thin section but blow it

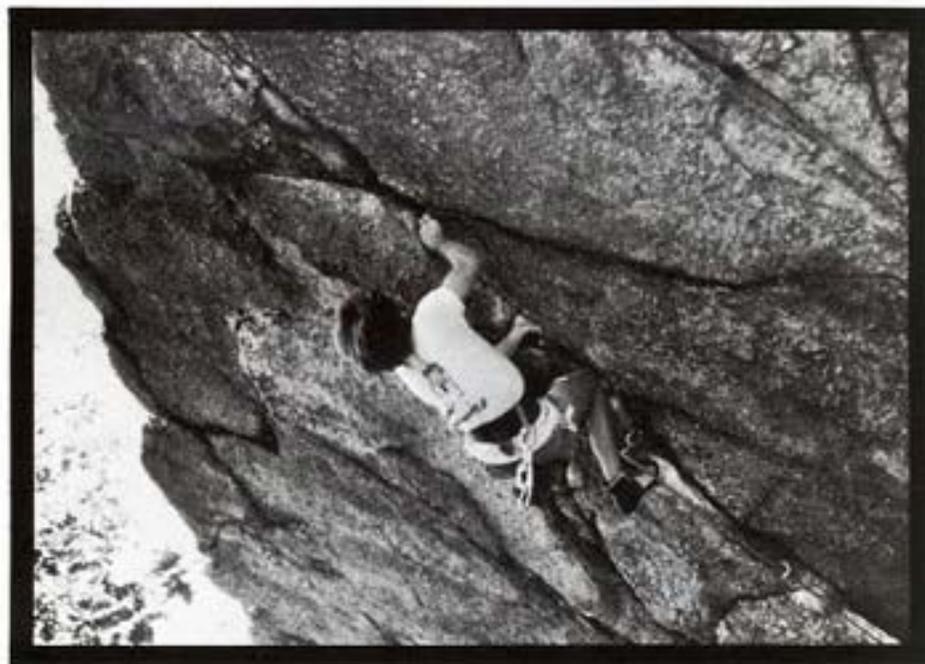
and come down. I need to climb the bottom quickly so I have strength for the last part.

The next try gets me a little farther before falling off and I just sit there on the rope looking at the remaining five feet of crack below the top buckets wondering if I'll ever get this thing. So close, but so hard. Then down to the ground again, to wait an hour before my next try.

This time the bottom section goes by quickly, I can't believe it, almost effortlessly. I stop to chalk up but have to keep moving to the last section, where I struggle to hang on and get a nut in. I move up to the good holds where I am looking, looking at the top huge incut jug. My foot is sliding on the lichen as I try desperately to find a foothold. There's got to be one. I wait too long and decide to shoot for the hold, but miss. I can't believe it; I fell from the top move and there it is covered by the binner and rope – a foot hold. SHIT!

"Going insane...yes, I'm laughing in the frozen rain." That Steely Dan song won't stop running

Two classic roof problems. **Separate Reality**, Yosemite (5.12) is a 20ft jam crack with the crux, hooking a foot over the lip, at the end. **Kansas City**, Shawangunks, New York, (5.12) is also 20ft but is climbed by face climbing techniques, ie small holds.



through my head, while we walk back to the car in the dark. Maybe tomorrow, I hope I can do the top moves again.

The next day Mark leads Open Cockpit and I have a fun time top roping it. It's a good route to do for a warm-up. Then the fun is over and it's back to Super Crack. Some friends who witnessed my adventures the day before volunteer to clip the rope into the high point. Who am I to refuse? It takes me half an hour to tape my fingers (I'm getting this down to a science). One more time up this thing.

The bottom goes by effortlessly again and is almost fun. I chalk up and move into the top half. It doesn't give me near the trouble it did the day before and the missed foothold (which I'll never forget) is used as soon as possible. I grab the top jug, mantle, place another nut and climb through easy but still overhanging rock to the no-hands rest on top.

It sure feels good to untie the rope on top of this

pillar. That's a lot of work to put into 55ft of rock. This is a neat place to view a beautiful autumn day. All the trees are changing colours and it's perfect shorts and no-shirt day. An excellent day. The hardest crack in the US? No, but still damn hard.

Max Jones

#### Babylon

The line is a finger crack that overhangs for 70ft. While aiding it to clean off loose lichen and rock, we convinced ourselves that it would be barely free-climbable.

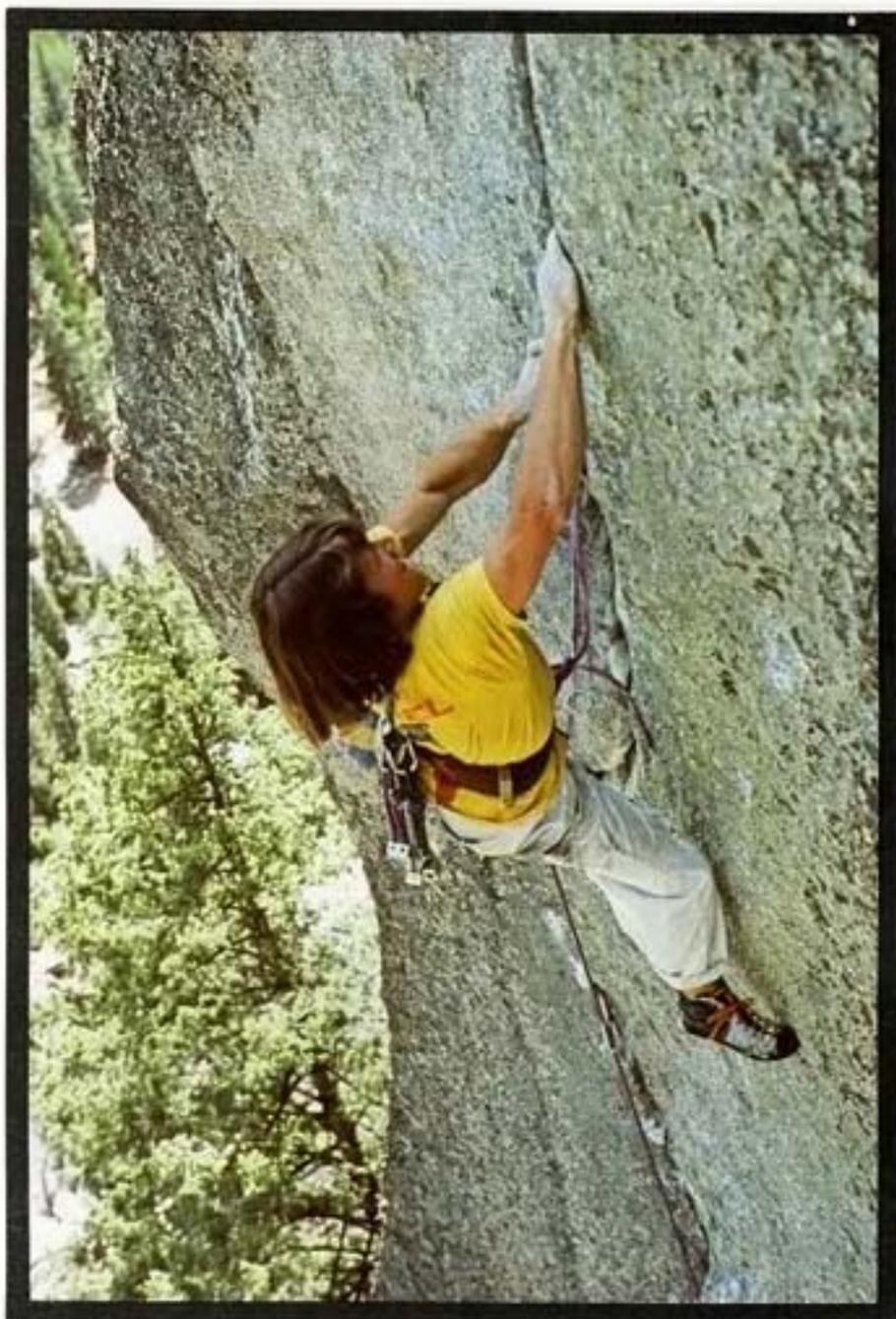
"Look at this!" one of us would exclaim. "We'll have to reach from here to here on these holds. God! I don't know if we can do it."

Our first day working on the route turned out to be a farce. We were constantly amazed and intimidated by the moves the climb required. One move could not be done with both feet on the rock. One foot would always slip off just as we moved

up, turning the move into a small lunge for a finger lock. At another section the crack disappears and all that is left is a rounded edge. Max's attempts to lieback this section proved to be spectacular as well as useless. His feet, usually as high as his hands, would slide off the wall and he would become airborne (providing some of the most interesting screamers I've seen).

Cowardice forced me to find an alternate way to climb this problem. I noticed that there were finger locks at either end of this 5ft-long blank section, and that if I could pull one down low enough I might be able to stabilise on a palm hold and reach the next lock. This doesn't sound too bad — except that I would have to hold myself into the rock using a finger lock that would be well below my waist!

Since these moves were to be performed with the last piece of protection at my feet, I gave special thought to the sequence I had invented. After a few 10ft falls, I finally got the top finger lock and



**The Phoenix, Yosemite, (5.12)** is a 120ft crack, overhanging. It starts as a finger tip crack, has a technical horizontal jam section, a thin section (shown) and widens to a 1 1/2" crack for the last fifty feet. Mark Hudson on the 2nd ascent.

pulled over this section.

I have never climbed a route with moves more delicate than these, with such hard moves before and after them.

We spent the entire second day working on the remaining 40ft of crack. Max would go up, climb a section, burn out, fall off, and come down. I would follow with a similar routine and we would repeat this waltz all day long, slowly getting a bit higher. Often we would fall off moves we had succeeded in climbing before, or become too pumped even to climb to the highest nut.

At the end of the day we had climbed all the moves on the route but had used the rope to rest a few times. The last 15ft turned out to be a very technical and very thin crack, a mighty obstacle to contend with after the previous sections!

While working on the route we decided that the person who leads the route for the first ascent must also lead the crux on that attempt. Usually, when the crux of a 5.12 is low on a climb, the rope

is clipped in on the lead to above the crux so the leader has a top-rope for the first half.

It was on our drive up to the cliff on the last day that we gave the route its name.

"How about Tower of Babel?"

"Sounds too much like Tales of Power."

"We'll be babbling idiots after the crux so how about Babble On?"

"Too much like a punk rock song. How about Babylon - more class, I'd say."

"Okay, and its double-meaning too, after the crux you just babble on!"

"Sounds good to me."

Arriving at the climb Max lost the coin toss, so he had to go first and put the nuts in up to the crux. The crack accepted the nuts easily. The eventual leader would have to place all the remaining protection and still climb the crack.

Max wasted no time in placing the nuts, and gave the crux a few tries before coming down for a rest. He had been having a hard time on these

moves all along, and we theorised that because I was shorter my centre of gravity would be closer to the rock, allowing me to reach further. Max went up again and still could not solve the problem, so he came down and gave the rope to me.

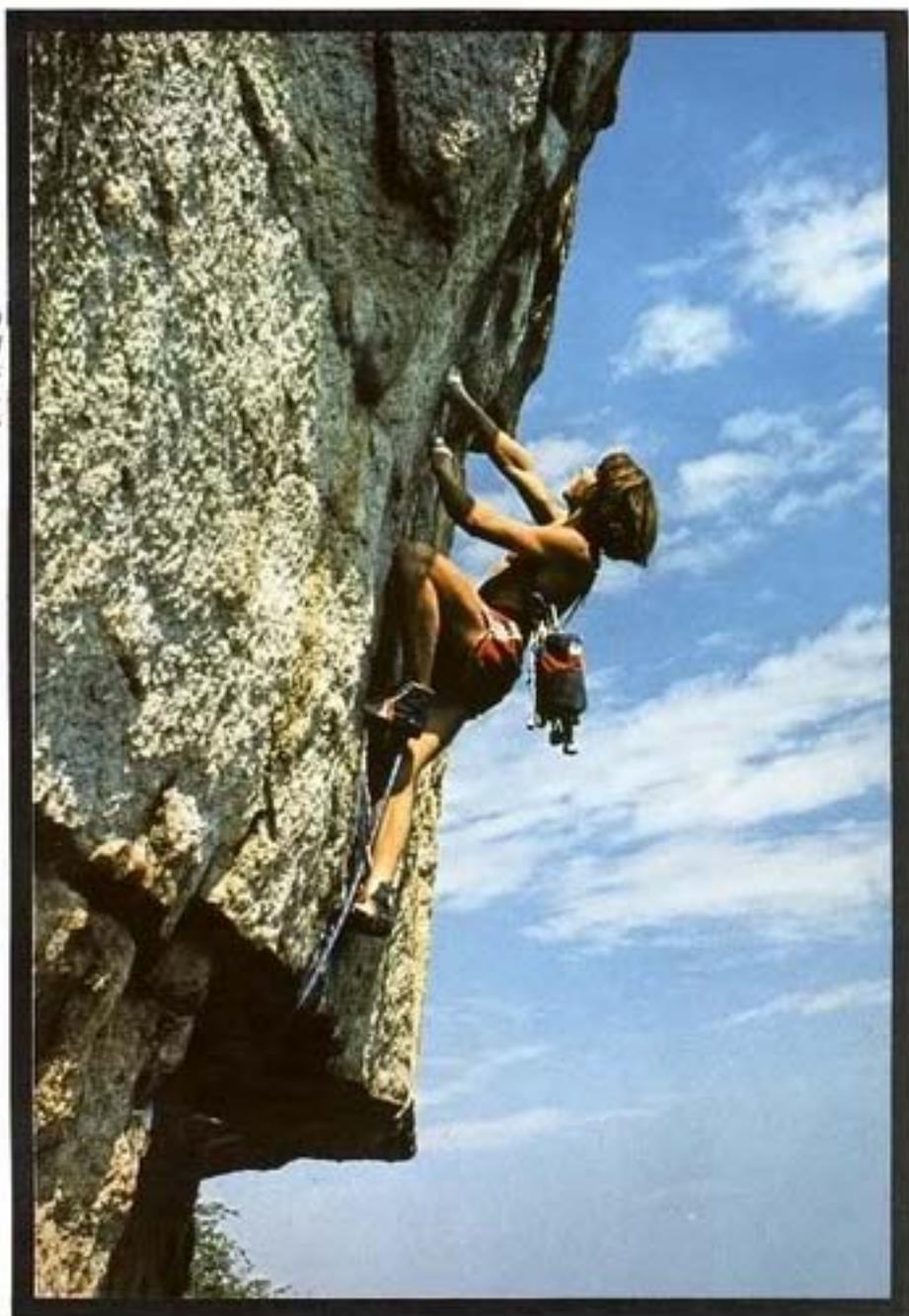
I stuffed another block of chalk into my chalk bag, tightened my boots, and tied into the rope.

The first moves were easy and familiar; the section up to the crux was hard but also familiar. Moving up again; shaking a little; palm the edge just right; toe a little higher; higher; oops, off balance, flying; smash. This end of the rope is sharp! OK, down please.

The fall startled me, but it also calmed me down.

After a rest, I'm back up, smoother this time. Into the crux; palm that edge; get that toe up; higher; higher; got it. Move up, a finger lock, place a nut and try to rest. Chalk up and move; another finger lock; a long reach and awkward jams; where's that foothold? Oh yeah, there, good.

**Supercrack, Shawangunks, New York, (5.12)** is only 55ft long but involves very technical jams for the entire climb. At the top of the crack it thins and the climb ends as face climbing. Max Jones is making the 3rd ascent. Mark Hudon then made the 4th.



Place a nut - which nut? Not this one, not this one. This one. Good. Try to rest; shake out; keep moving; stay there, nut. Starting to talk to myself.

Where did this move come from? Up...down; starting to burn out; up...down. Work it out. Got it. Place a nut; can't rest, keep going. Fingers are barely working now; almost there; having trouble opening biners and placing nuts. Almost there; don't blow it; the last crux; can't do it. Then I do it. Hands don't work; can't go down now. I'm looking at a 20-footer, can't feel my hands, don't know if they'll work. Almost there, one move, one more move; don't fall, don't fall - babbling out loud now, almost crying. Barely get the ropes clipped into the anchor; got it, I did it! Lower me!

A lightning-fast lower brings me to the ground, but when I get there I can hardly walk, can't untie, and I'm still babbling. Then my hands, my hands - slowly I feel pain. It gets worse and then unbearable. My hands are cramped into little balls; the pain is intense. I can't move my fingers

and a friend has to hold them straight. Five minutes later the cramps and the pain are tolerable, but I still can't untie from the rope or loosen my boots. Babylon, yep, good name - Babylon.

#### Postscript

The style used to climb these routes is obviously controversial. Should we go right to the ground after every fall and pull the ropes, or should we practise every move on the climb before we climb it?

We think a happy medium lies between these two extremes. Why, you might ask, don't we wait until we are able to lead the pitch on sight and in classic style? No, we feel, that to push the standards of climbing, climbers will have to push their technique. Sometimes this involves falling to figure out what will work.

If the climbers of years past had not pushed themselves and their technique to their limit, we

would not be at the standards we're at today.

Times will change. Surely the 5.12s will get climbed in classic style. Climbers will then be working on 5.13s and will be soloing 5.11s on sight. They will call their sport something else, but it won't be so different - only the names and the numbers will have changed.

#### SUMMARY

The second part of an account of the state of the highest standard of US free rock climbing. The available amount of rock and the climate mean that the authors' predictions that the sport will develop further still in the US are a certainty.