

**NEW
SERIES**

Libby Peter's

ROCK ESSENTIALS CLINIC

All photographs: Mike Robertson

HOW TO BE A MORE CONSIDERATE LEADER

In the first of a new series **Libby Peter** reveals some top tips to avoid blazing rows with your climbing partner and ensure you have willing seconds queuing up to hold your ropes

Climbing can be a selfish pursuit, especially when you're on the sharp end, gripped in the purple haze of terror on a scary lead and yanking angrily at the rope for some slack. You're probably not thinking about how your partner must be feeling waiting patiently at the bottom or how they're going to manage when they follow you up. That's cool; you're entitled to be a little selfish now and again.

But you can make yourself more popular with your partner by paying attention to their needs as both a belayer and second. Here are some emotional considerations and practical tips to make you a more considerate leader and ensure the harmony and longevity of your climbing partnership.

Emotional rescue

Emotions often run high in climbing and sometimes at unexpected moments, so anything you can do to keep a calm atmosphere will be positive.

Remember your first climbs, watching the rope snake away slowly up the rock and out of sight while worrying about whether you were going to be able to follow and just praying your leader wasn't going to fall off because you'd never held a leader fall before? Hold these memories when you're next on the sharp end and try and put your belayer's mind at ease by:

While you're leading

- ▶ Tell them you've got a good first runner in and then continue to let them know which are the good or poor pieces of gear.
- ▶ Ask for 'slack' when you clip rather than yank without warning.
- ▶ Shout out which rope you've clipped and if you're on a hard move make sure they know which rope the top runner is on.
- ▶ Talk through hard moves as you do them (well just after probably).
- ▶ Explain how to take out potentially troublesome runners.
- ▶ As you climb around a corner and out of sight describe what you can see, how far to the belay, how hard it looks etc.

Once you're at the belay

- ▶ Think carefully about how much advice to give while they're climbing. Some folk prefer to work it out by themselves and you don't need to say a thing. Others will welcome enthusiastic encouragement and well-timed beta about hidden holds or particular moves.

Practical help

On occasion (when you're pushing your grade or on a big lead) it's just about acceptable to take the view that the second's job is to watch you patiently like a hawk and then second the pitch removing, without complaint, the nuts and cams you've welded and stuffed in panic. The rest of the time try and take a more second-orientated approach.

- ▶ **Runners** You'll place some runners to protect you as the leader, some to protect both of you (like the first runner when leaving the stance on a multi-pitch climb) and others to protect your second in particular. These strategic second's comfort runners have both a practical and emotional role to play.

On a direct, slabby pitch the runners aren't crucial to protect the second, although a few runners may give them confidence, but there are times when the fewer the better so they don't have to stop mid-flow to retrieve them. Overhanging pitches will need runners to stop your second swinging out of contact with the rock if they let go, but again place too many and they'll expend more energy on their removal than the climbing.

Meandering routes need runners to show where the route goes, and prevent swings. It's far more reassuring to feel the rope snugly above you than tugging you off-balance from one side. After making awkward sideways moves always try and place a high runner straight away.

- ▶ **Hard moves** If you suspect your second will struggle on a particular move, place a strategic runner just above with a sling for pulling on if needs be.
- ▶ **Traverses** On longer traverses place as many runners as you can, multi-directional ones are best



Libby is thinking about how to best protect her second on the final pitch of *A Dream of White Horses* (HVS 5a), Wen Slab, Gogarth. Closely spaced runners extended with slings so that aren't going to lift out are crucial.



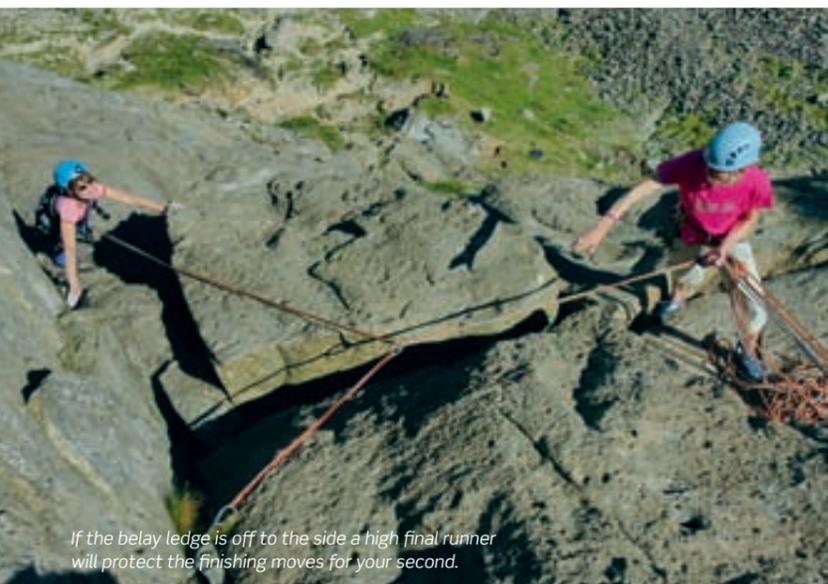
Libby finds a comfortable position to place a runner to make life easier for her second on the second pitch of *The Cracks* (HS), Dinas Mot, Llanberis Pass.



Heather taking out that runner with ease.



Always try and belay in a position so you can watch your second climb.



If the belay ledge is off to the side a high final runner will protect the finishing moves for your second.



And here's how it looks without that high runner.

(cams, threads and deep-seated nuts) so they have less chance of lifting out. Don't forget that for hard moves you'll want a runner just before the move to protect you but also one just after to protect the second.

- ▶ **Rest** Wherever possible place runners from a really comfortable resting position or hold (see photo 2) and avoid full stretch placements (especially if you've a giant reach) unless you really need them.
- ▶ **Placement care** Don't over-seat nuts unless the placement is shallow or if it's a crucial runner. Be particularly careful not to cram cams too tightly or place them too deep in the crack (see photos 7 and 8). Slings make great simple easy to place, easy to retrieve runners, use them freely but threads can be awkward to unthread. Warn your partner if you use a sling-snagging type of thread so they can loosen the sling at the back rather than try and yank it out.
- ▶ **Stuck gear** Don't let your partner struggle for too long with a stuck runner, especially if they're getting pumped or frustrated. Offer to hold them so they can use two hands or be prepared to leave it behind and go back later and don't make a big deal over it, even if it's your favourite lucky runner.
- ▶ **Tension** Don't take in too tight just as they're taking runners out - it makes it really tricky.

Belaying..... ◀

- ▶ **Position** Get in line with the possible pull and in view of your second, it means you can take-in at the appropriate pace, give advice where needed and assistance if required. Potential problems are often avoided by good choice of belay position. Keeping the pitches short and extending the belay so you can see over the cliff edge may seem time consuming but is more often than not quicker in the long run. If the belay ledge is off to the side consider a high final runner to protect the last few moves for your second (see photos 5 and 6).

- ▶ **Organisation** For ease at your second's arrival at the stance think about how to arrange the belay. If your partner is leading through nothing fancy is required, just make a space for them to step onto. If you're leading again you may want to equalise the anchors with slings to create a simple single attachment point.
- ▶ **Taking in** Think carefully about how tight to keep rope. Some seconds love tight ropes, some hate'em so be sensitive to their preference. Try and avoid them having to ask for you to take-in by watching them closely and softly tugging on the rope to feel for that gentle tension of them on the end. This technique needs to be subtle and smooth so you don't yank your partner off balance.

Stuck second..... ◀

If your second is stuck on a move be patient, talk through the moves and keep the rope snug as they try the move. This solves most falters. If a super-tight rope is needed use your legs where possible by squatting down, taking in and standing up as you pull. High anchors and a secure belay position will help enormously. If this fails dredge your memory to construct an assisted hoist but if the memory is too hazy drop a loop of the spare rope down with some overhand knots in for them to yard-up on.

If you can manage all of the above and buy the beers after, I guarantee you'll have seconds queuing to hold your ropes. In next month's Rock Essentials Clinic we'll look at how to improve your seconding skills.

- ▼ A deeply placed cam like this is easy to place but will be tricky for the second to take out.
- ▼ This is the right depth in the crack.



Libby has been climbing for over 20 years, she is a qualified Mountaineering Instructor and British Mountain Guide and is the author of *Rock Climbing – Essential Skills and Techniques* published by MLTUK and recently produced *Get Out On Rock – the definitive instructional dvd*. Her base is NorthWales from where she runs the guiding outfit Llanberis Guides (info@llanberisguides.com)