

Libby Peter's Climbing Essentials

No. 4 : Trad Essentials - basic gear

Traditional climbing is what we do best in the UK. Climbers travel from far and wide to sample our pure and adventurous style. If you grow up with this idea of needing to find and place your own runners and anchors it seems the natural and proper way to climb. But if you're brought up on a diet of bolted sport climbing the transfer to 'trad' can feel precarious and frustratingly slow.

Either way, there's an awful lot of technical know-how involved, so for the next few months in Trad Essentials we'll cover all the technical skills you need. This month and next we take a close look at the staples of your rack and how to get best use from them.

Runners and anchors

Once you've cleared out the local gear shop (most well stocked climbing shops will give good advice about what you should buy) you need to get acquainted with your rack and how to place runners that will stop a fall. This can be done first at the base of the crag by fiddling pieces of gear into cracks and testing them by tugging them in the direction they would be loaded. You can even clip in a sling and gingerly apply body weight to the piece of gear to check it holds bodyweight. Once you feel happy with how the gear fits the rock it's time to try it on a route. Most climbers serve their apprenticeship as a faithful and eager second, learning along the way the intricacies of where and how to place the gear but however much you've prepared, your first trad lead will feel like a big deal. Most new leaders drop a few grades in order to focus on the gear and

ropework rather than the moves.

Whether you're placing gear for a runner mid-way up a pitch, or as an anchor at the top to make a belay, the principles are largely the same.

Simple first

Don't overlook the simple choice. Slings are the strongest item of gear you carry (typically 22KN) and nothing is easier or quicker than dropping one over a spike of rock or lassoing a tree.

Spikes and blocks

Go for ones that are big and form a solid part of the cliff or crag top. Check for signs

of weakness such as faint cracks and give the rock a thump with the heel of your hand to detect vibrations, which indicate looseness. The sling should be long enough to hang and create a V where you attach the karabiner. A taut sling creates a wide angle at the point it's loaded which puts an unnecessarily increased load on the sling and more importantly on the block itself. *Photo 1* shows how a short (4ft /60cm) sling is too small for the block but the long (8ft/120cm) sling is perfect.

You can shorten slings around narrow spikes with an overhand knot or you can use a clove hitch to help prevent it lifting off shallow spikes, as in *photo 2*.

We'll talk more about how knots etc weaken slings next month. The other trick



Beppe Villa placing gear on the classic of **Comes the Dervish** (E3 5c), Vivian Quarry, North Wales. Photo: Mike Robertson.



to improve marginal spike runners is to weight the sling with some excess gear off your rack, see *photo 3*.

Threads

These are a comforting choice, if you can find one, as they take a multi-directional load, i.e. there's no danger of them lifting off. Threads may be formed by a chockstone wedged in a crack or a point where the rock formation naturally makes a join. At the top of the crag this is typically where two boulders rest against each other. The thread in *photo 4* would make a good anchor. A common problem, especially if the anchor has been loaded, is the sling becoming stubbornly wedged into the narrowing. You can avoid this by placing a nut in the spot where it may jam to stop the sling being pulled in too deeply in the first place. This is shown in *photo 5*. When removing the sling, rather than simply yanking hard, try and reach to the back of the thread to loosen it completely before pulling it through. The nut key often helps to get here.

Trees

Multi-directional and quick to set up, trees make great runners and anchors. Place the sling as low as possible and remember that the placement can only be as good as the raw material allows. Slender saplings or rotten tree trunks will only offer limited protection. Trampling around the roots and damage to the bark may kill off the tree so treat them gently.

Nuts or chocks

These are the bread and butter of your rack, yet on the face of it they seem like an unlikely candidate for keeping you safe, but by adhering to a few simple principles you'll be able to place them with confidence and certainty.

- Look for natural constrictions where a nut will wedge.
- Always go for the biggest size that fits well.
- Look for maximum surface area contact between metal and rock.
- Check for good contact on both sides of the nut.
- A good placement is one that has good rock/metal contact and is well seated, deep in a crack such as in *photo 6*
- Nuts work well in horizontal cracks but only for a particular direction of load. The placement in *photo 7* will only be good if it's loaded from the right.
- Nuts can also be placed sideways (see *photo 8*) in gently tapering cracks and to sit

- in a crack that falls between nut sizes but they're not as secure and this should be considered a second choice.
- Be wary of knobby-sided cracks (as the nut won't seat so well) and ones that widen below the constriction you've placed them in. *Photo 9* shows both these problems.
- With a little imagination nuts can also be threaded like in *photo 10*. This makes a clever and solid multi-directional placement.

Hexcentrics

Still referred to as hexes, the newer Rockcentrics (see *photo 11*) rekindled the popularity of these clever bits of gear. The offset alignment of the sling means a twisting or camming action is applied to the hex when it's loaded which helps it bite into the sides of the crack. It's this function that makes it possible to get solid hex placements even in parallel sided and horizontal cracks. The clever shape also provides three different sizes in one piece of gear. Cheaper and lighter than cams Rockcentrics make a good alternative for wider cracks. Many climbers own both and choose whichever will suit the rock best.

Runners

Pieces of gear you place as a runner need to be able to hold a downward and possibly

sideways load if you're traversing and this is relatively easy to establish by tugging etc. But you also need to convince yourself that it's well seated enough that it won't flick out when you climb above it. To establish this with the karabiner and remaining wires still in your hand give the nut a few gentle upward flicks to replicate the movement the rope makes as you climb above. If it keeps jumping out, seat it by tugging harder or look for a better placement.

Anchors

The direction of load on your anchors will be easier to predict so place and test them accordingly. If the route is on a single pitch crag there's no need to consider an upward pull.

Next month we'll get to grips with cams more advanced weird and wonderful gear placements.

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