

# The Sharp End

Alec Sharp was headpointing back in the 1970s *by Gregory Crouch*



SOMETIMES ALEC SHARP DIDN'T GET THERE FIRST. HERE HE GRABS THE SECOND ASCENT OF DAYS OF HEAVEN (5.10+) IN ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATIONAL PARK.

**T**he first pitch had led across Castle Rock's steep granite on fingernail edges. The second pitch, an obvious, left-leaning crack, was proving even harder. Alec Sharp had pulled off necky first ascents in Colorado's Front Range before, but he was badly pumped on this one. The crack was steep and sustained; Sharp's forearms blazed from the strain of hanging on to place protection. At least the gear was solid. Just above, the crack pinched down to a rounded seam. Without hope for more pro, Sharp clamped down on his fear, liebacked the seam and reached up for a small alcove. But his balance was wrong and off he swung, plummeting 30 feet. When he came to a stop, he was dangling beside his belayer — Boulder's own Dan Hare. The year was 1979.



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Sharp pulled his ropes, took a good rest and had another go. He re-climbed the initial crack, clipping his now combat-proven gear, and began liebacking back up the seam. At the top he reached, barndoored, pitched, plummeted and ended up beside Hare — it was an exact repeat of his first performance. Out of strength, ideas and ambition, the pair retreated to Boulder.

Sharp was consumed with the fear that someone else would bag his project — a climb that starts 40 feet from a parking spot can't be kept secret for long. But two weeks of steady rain held everyone's ambitions in check.

As soon as the skies cleared, Sharp returned to Castle Rock. This time fellow itinerant Brit Andy Parkin would hold the ropes. The cracks oozed water, but being English, the pair ignored the damp conditions and climbed anyway. Perhaps it was the days he had spent brooding on the route that made the difference, or perhaps it was the certain knowledge that Parkin would send the crack if given the chance. Whatever the motivation, Sharp teetered to the top of the lieback seam and latched a bucket deep inside the alcove. The moves out the alcove were wet, greasy and desperate, but Sharp hung on to complete the lead. He added another pitch of tenuous face climbing above the crack pitch, coined the route Never a Dull Moment, and gave it a grade of 5.12-. Today it's a Boulder Canyon classic.

From the steep, multicolored sandstone of Eldorado Canyon to the knobby boulders of Flagstaff to the technical granite of Boulder Canyon, Boulder is stacked with great rock, even by Colorado's standards. The number of climbs found within 30 minutes of downtown boggles the mind — there are thousands.

Amid this impressive array of climbs, it's a testament to Sharp that the Boulder cognoscenti still consider it a big deal to tick one of his routes. But only those who take the lead can savor the true taste of Sharp's creations; full credit isn't given for top roping. And make sure not to forget your brass nuts.

**A**lec Sharp grew up in London and learned to climb at Harrison Rocks, a small sandstone crag south of town. He soon graduated to the necky crags of North Wales. Sharp attended the University of Bangor, close to his beloved crags of Snowdonia and Anglesey. Gogarth and Clogwyn du'r Arddu ("Cloggy") were his main crags, and they gave Sharp an appreciation for climbing history and tradition. "Cloggy is just so historic," says Sharp. "It seems that every route there was first climbed by someone like Joe Brown or Don Whillans, and you're



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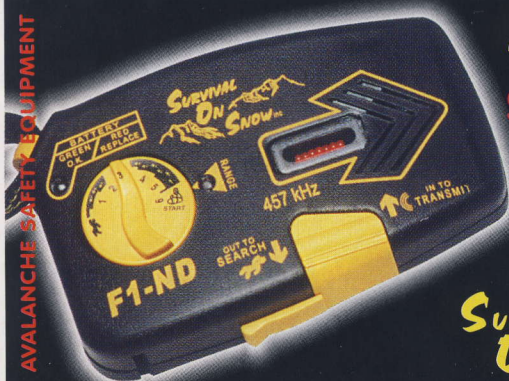
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**In the late '70s and early '80s, the last years before sport climbing caught on, routes were becoming scarier without getting technically harder.**

always aware of that history. There's much less of a historical perspective over here. Over here the approach is more like, 'Well, here's a route. Let's go and do it.'

Sharp also learned the art of the bold lead in North Wales. "Scary routes with bad gear are the staples up there," he explains. Sharp brought a bit of that British style to the US when he came over the pond in 1977 to settle in Boulder. He maintained strong English connections and notes, "To a certain extent, I was still playing to an English audience."

Take a tour of the climbs Sharp established in Boulder and you'll catch the flavor of the best and boldest that the old country has to offer. And you better be able to keep a cool head. In the late '70s and early '80s, the last years before sport climbing caught on, routes were becoming scarier without getting technically harder than what had been done before. Sharp's routes epitomized of that trend.

Immersing himself in Boulder climbing, Sharp discovered that he was most powerfully attracted to unclimbed stone. "I'd see an interesting feature and then start looking at it and wonder if I could connect it up to other things." But Sharp didn't just look: He went out and climbed the lines that other climbers hadn't seen — or hadn't wanted to see.

An Eldorado dihedral that doesn't quite reach the ground became Climb of the Century (5.11b R). Also in Eldo, a thin flake under the Redgarden Wall's famous roof gives the centerpiece feature of Dangerous Acquaintances (5.11d X). A series of steep, staggered cracks and corners at Castle Rock turned into Englishman's Home (5.11c/d), just a few feet right of the start for Never a Dull Moment. Sharp turned cracks, grooves, flakes and nebulous face holds at Boulder Canyon's Bell Buttress into Grand Inquisitor (5.12a R),



Epiphany (5.11d R) and Arms Bazaar (5.12a R).

Casey Newman, a Boulder local who was Sharp's partner for the classic Climb of the Century and a slew of other projects, puts it like this: "Sharp could really pick 'em. He had a great eye for the less obvious lines. After Sharp had climbed one, you would look at it and say, 'Yeah, I can see that.' But before, no way."

Matt Lavender, another of Sharp's main partners in those days, tries explaining the Alec Sharp phenomenon by comparing him to the other talented Englishman in town. "Alec had a lot of go for it, but it wasn't like he wasn't struggling up there. Andy Parkin would be cruising some 5.12 desperate, holding a casual conversation. It wasn't like that with Sharp. Everybody always burned him off when we were out bouldering. But Alec was the one who got things done."

Sharp agrees, "I was never as strong as the other guys, but I was good at shutting down the fear."

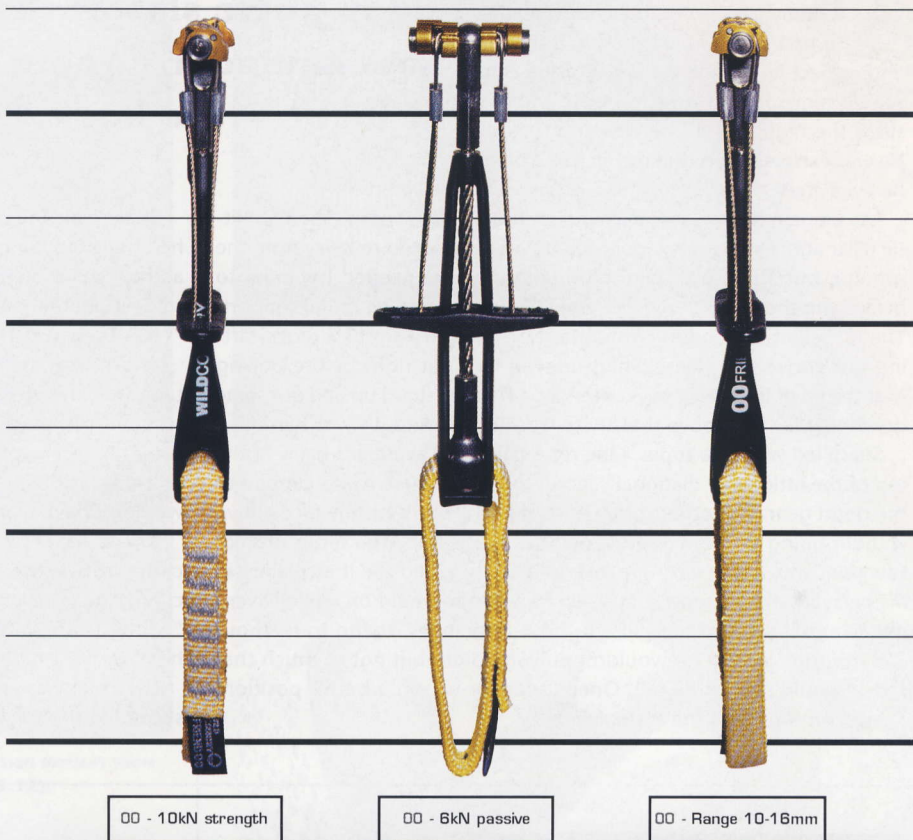
**S**harp is quiet and unflappable, with the Brit's typical dry, wry sense of humor. He hardly ever raises his voice. Lavender fondly remembers Sharp's bluntness. Once Sharp told him, "Yeah, I'll take you up to that climb because you're not good enough to snag it from me."

Off the cliffs, Sharp was a constant proponent of dangerous games. During a Fourth of July party, Sharp instigated a jump from one roof top to another. Sharp made the leap, but crashed into the neighbor's roof at chest level. Fingertips clawing at the shingles, feet paddling in space, Sharp scrambled for purchase and executed a difficult mantel to avoid taking the two-story plunge into the shrubbery.

Party tricks make cute stories, but Sharp's real contributions were made on Front Range rock. The Veil and the Physical Crag are a pair of remarkable crags above Eldorado Canyon. They're two of the most beautiful crags in the whole Boulder area — but also two of the least visited. The approaches are somewhat long by Boulder standards, but what really keeps people away is that the routes are predominantly Alec Sharp fear-fests.

Despite all the serious leads and some long falls, longtime partner Matt Lavender never remembers Sharp taking an out-of-control whipper. "No crazy pinwheels, and he never decked," says Lavender. One of Sharp's falls landed him right in Lavender's lap. On another route, Matt was the one who fell. He was stopped by a hand-placed piton, but the piton broke the rock around it. Sharp teased Matt for ruining the best gear on the route.

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**A**nd then there's Ministry of Fear, a Sharp route at Eldorado that easily lives up to its macabre name.

Sharp had rapped over the pitch to clean and inspect it, but the very idea of the climb scared him so much that he wasn't able to sleep the night before he went up to try it. He was exhausted on that day in 1982 before he even started the hike up to Eldo's West Ridge.

Once again it was Lavender who partnered with Sharp. There's a little pillar at the start, easy, about 5.6. Lavender wanted to belay from the ground, but Sharp overruled him; Sharp said he needed Lavender to belay from the top of the pillar, where he could provide moral support. The real climbing begins with a traverse along the lip of a roof, starting just above the pillar. "Sharp moved way out right before pulling over the lip of that roof," says Lavender. "Then he stood up and got some good gear in. But above that there wasn't jack. And it's way hard."

Sharp led with two ropes. One rope ran from Lavender's belay at the top of the little pillar diagonally along the roof, where it was clipped to the good gear. The other rope ran straight to Sharp on the face above without going through a single piece of protection. The setup sucked. Lavender was in the wrong place, and Sharp could see it as plainly as his belayer. Sharp found some decent holds and held on while Lavender scrambled down the pillar in his tennis shoes, trying to feed out enough rope so that he wouldn't pull Sharp off, but not so much that Sharp would deck if he fell. Once Lavender was in a better position, Sharp continued up the blank face.

**The crux — a series of extremely strenuous, thin moves — came above the taped-on hook. Sharp crimped down and kept climbing. "There's a low-angle slab at the bottom below the roof," says Lavender, "where Sharp would have gooshed if he blew the hook."**

Sharp's plan for protecting the crackless face was sketchy at best. He had some foot-long strips of duct tape loosely stuck to his pants and shirt and a skyhook on his rack. Hard lieback moves led to a sloping shelf, then some more thin moves. "I was shutting off the fear," remembers Sharp. "Then there was this little edge. I was like 'Oh, here's something.'"

Sharp draped the skyhook over the edge, tore a strip of duct tape from his shirt and pasted the tape across the back of the hook to hold it in place. He clipped his second rope to the hook. "There were no other options. Once I put the hook on, I didn't even bother to think about it. It was better than nothing. I don't see why it wouldn't have worked."

The crux — a series of extremely strenuous, thin moves — came above the taped-on hook. Sharp crimped down and kept climbing. "There's a low-angle slab below the roof," says Lavender, "where Sharp would have gooshed if he blew the hook. Fortunately, he didn't test it."

Lavender was "numb with amazement" over the bold lead when he seconded the pitch.

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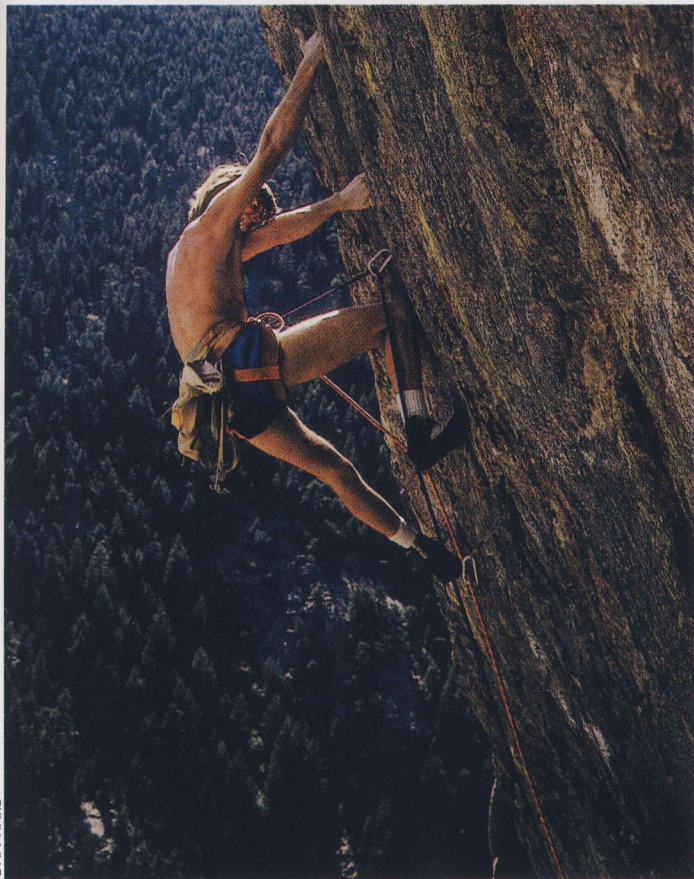
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CASEY NEWMAN SAYS ALEC HAD "STEEL FINGERS." A HIGH-TENSION MOMENT FROM THE FIRST ASCENT OF MILE HIGH COMIC CRACK (5.12).

**S**harp devised a simple system to rate his climbs: "If it was really hard, but I could still do it in one day, then I figured it was 5.11+. If I couldn't do it in one day, it was 5.12-." That explains why Never a Dull Moment catches the 12- grade, while Ministry of Fear rates 11+. The scheme has an obvious flaw: It's impossible for Sharp's scariest climbs to receive the higher grade — if he ever pitched from them, there would have been no second day.

"It was a natural thing," says Sharp, as he tries to explain why he was so good at turning off the fear on bold leads. "It seems to me that you can either do it or you can't."

"That kind of scary leading takes a lot of mental energy, a lot of passion — passion that outweighs the fear. I couldn't sustain that forever. When I was young it was easier to do it, but I couldn't sustain the necessary energy level. It just stopped making sense for me to climb. As time went by, the time I took off from climbing got longer and longer. I didn't have an answer for the question 'Why?'"

**A**lec Sharp, Matt Lavender and Casey Newman still live in the Boulder area. Alec is a mathematician by training; today he writes computer software. He's also a competitive cyclist. A few years ago, Matt quit working as a lawyer; now he's a mortgage broker, but he still finds the time to climb hard and often. Casey is married, has two kids and runs a climbing wall business. He doesn't get to climb as often as he'd like — which would be pretty much all the time.

*When Gregory Crouch first moved to Boulder, Casey Newman took him under his wing and introduced him to the local classics. One of the best was Climb of the Century. ▲*

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