

On the ROCKS with Todd Skinner

By N. Brooks Clark

As long as he can remember, Todd Skinner has been attracted to the stretches of rock he couldn't climb. "When you find something you can't do, it exposes a weakness," says Skinner. "The rock isn't going to change. To improve, you have to. And you can see yourself getting better all the time."

Skinner grew up on a ranch in Wyoming, near the Wind River Range of the Rocky Mountains. When Skinner was seven, his father, Bob, started teaching him and his older brother, Orion, to climb the sheer rock faces. As they got older, Skinner and Orion often rode

their horses into the mountains, camping and climbing for days at a time. Since then, Skinner, 34, has put up some of the world's most difficult routes in more than 25 countries, including Egypt, China, Finland, and South Africa. "Skill, you know, is little more than the perfection of fundamentals," says Skinner. "Right now, I'm training at Hueco Tanks outside of El Paso, Texas on some of the hardest climbs in the U.S. What we work on most are things we learned as kids and forgot."

Here they are, Skinner's keys to climbing.



Skinner climbing the 5.11 Mr. Clean route on Devil's Tower in Wyoming

THE TRICK TO GOOD CLIMBING IS PRESERVING POWER. Think about it. You start on the ground with a fixed amount of strength, and you aren't going to get anymore. Conserve that by moving quickly on sections that use a lot of energy and resting where you can on the less strenuous parts of the route.

Remember, too, that your fingers and arms will tire quickly and fail you first. Make the strongest muscles in your body—the legs—do most of the work. Simply concentrate your weight in the feet. The best way to accomplish this depends on the type of wall you are climbing.

SLOPING, RAMP-TYPE SLAB

Keep your body as far away from the wall as is comfortable and consciously stand on your feet. Test by letting go with your hands. On these walls, you typically don't find nice, bucket-sized holds that you can pull yourself up with—most are the width of wooden matchsticks. Rely on friction and dance your way up the rock.

VERTICAL ROCK

Here you want your body to stay in silhouette to the wall. Pancake yourself to the surface, keeping your body as close to the wall as possible. And the more

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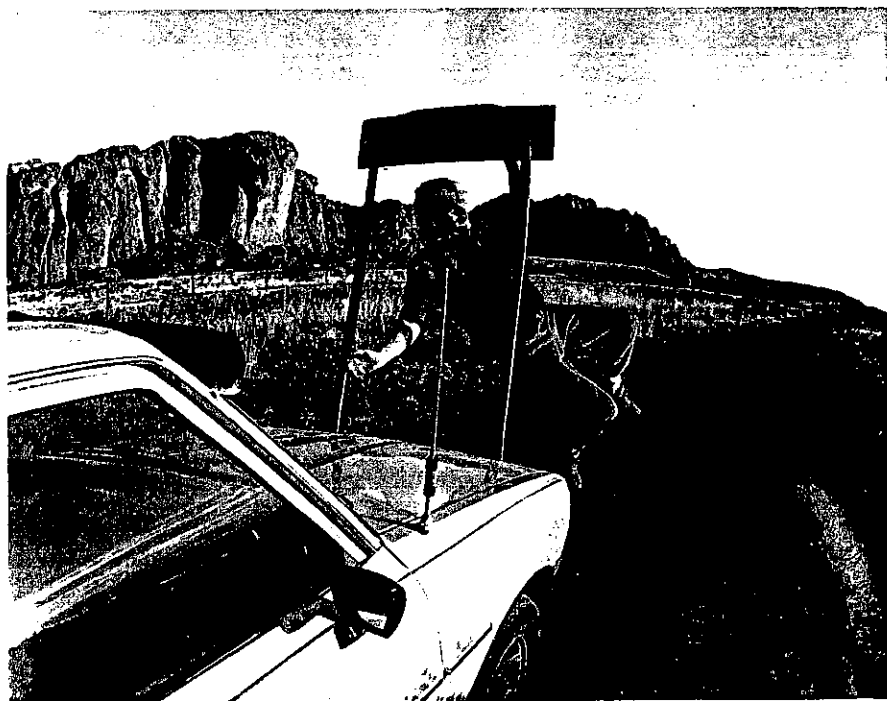
vertical the wall, the closer you'll want to pull your body in. We're not suggesting, however, that you give the wall some death-grip bear hug. Stay relaxed. The weight of your body will still be in your feet. You should feel yourself come into balance, which makes it easier to step from one foothold to the next, and not scratch and claw your way up the route.

OVERHANGS

These are so difficult because they require serious arm strength. On any section that overhangs more than 45 degrees, the clock in your mind isn't just ticking down the seconds before your strength gives out; it's spinning.

The trick is to study the route and have a good idea of precisely what moves you are going to use before you start. Then move quickly.

Hang away from the rock. That way your elbows are straight, which uses less strength than supporting your body weight with arms bent. You'll use your feet more like hands, hooking into the holds to push and pull your body up the wall. Unfortunately, you can't do much to spare the arms and fingers on these sections. They'll tire. Another muscle group that works hard is the abdominals. You'll feel those, too.



Skinner with his car: Pumping iron not gas

HOW TO GET IN SHAPE:

The best way to learn about your body and how to move it," says Skinner, "is to get in miles and miles of climbing."

But if you aren't lucky enough to live in the shadow of the Wind Rivers, or if you can't coax a parent into taking you to a climbing wall every day, here are a few things to do.

Get creative and try "buildering." Find a building with uneven masonry and work on your balance and moves. As you can't hammer in protection (serious detention time), move around the structure in a traverse, no more than a few feet off the ground.

Good climbers are always working on arm and finger strength. Skinner rigged a fingerboard to the hood of his car (see picture) and hangs from each digit for 15 seconds. Pull-ups are good, too. Use a chin-up bar at a school playground or even the doorjamb at home.

Beginners should wear helmets and all climbers should observe basic safety rules, using a rope and experienced belayer. After all, you can't log those miles of climbing with your arm in a sling.

Rock Talk (A Glossary):

DYNO: A fast, or dynamic, hand movement. As in "I didn't know what to do so I dynoed it."

RADS: The hard routes. As in "I was climbing the rads."

WHIPPER OR SCREAMER: When you fall off the rock and are caught by your belay rope. "Whippers and screamers aren't dangerous," says Skinner, "but always exciting."

FLASH: If you climb a face on the first try without falling, that's a flash. As in "It looked hard, but I flashed it."

BETA: To advise someone on how to climb a stretch of rock. As in "I gave him some beta." (Like those old Betamax VCRs)

BUMBLY: A dumb act. Like stepping on your rope—ground-in dirt weakens the rope.

BUMBLY MANNERS: In rock climbing, it's bad form to make fun of a beginner. Everyone has a first day on the rock, and it's a sport in which you improve by probing your limits.