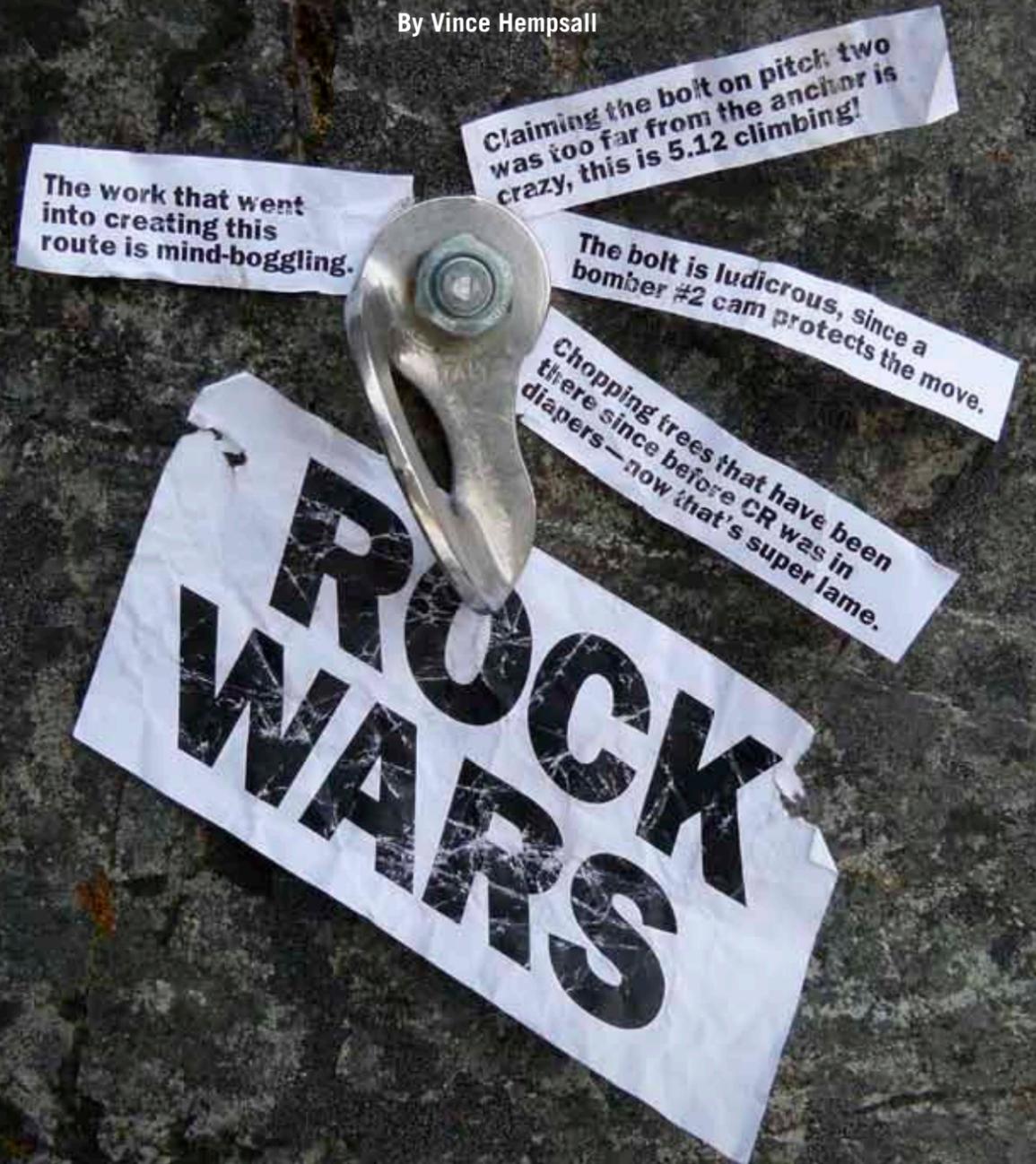




**ACE HOLES OR ARSE HOLES?**  
Jonny Sims drilling a route in May 2012 that would end up being called “Bomb Squad,” located near the Weeping Wall on the Icefields Parkway. Photo: Jon Walsh

Dizzying heights with power tools. Berating and backstabbing attacks. Access versus tact. For over a century, establishing new climbing routes, bolting and claiming first ascents have been fraught with controversy. One intrepid “new router” plumbs the dicey world of rock and toll.

By Vince Hemsall



IT'S A SCENE out of a fantasy novel: snow-capped peaks spread out toward the horizon and every valley shrouded in fog, as if cotton swabs had been stuffed into giant fissures in the landscape. The sun reflects off the grey and white gneiss of the surrounding cliffs and the blue sky is so vibrant to stare at it is almost painful. Even though it's late October, it must be 15C up here, yet we haven't seen another living creature all day.

My climbing buddy Dave Lussier and I are 100 metres up a wall on Gimli Peak in the Valhalla Mountain Range attempting a new climb that, when completed, will be one of the hardest in the area.

We've attempted this route four times in the last couple of years but have yet to do the third pitch without falling. Today is our last chance to finally complete it, and my friend is looking confident. Lussier, an ACMG-certified mountain guide who's developed over 60 alpine and rock routes during his career, delicately steps through a sequence of moves on the upper blank face that will crack the code of the last crux. All I can think about is completing the route and celebrating with a bottle of scotch. Not just because of our success, but because a certain amount of controversy will finally be put behind us.

# DIY ROUTE BUILDING



## STEP 1

**Climb. A lot.** For years, in fact. Lead climb on all types of rock in various regions and learn from those who put up routes before you. Ideally, you'll meet a veteran route builder who will show you the ropes. Failing that, take a course.

## STEP 2

If you've chosen an area to develop, research the access issues. Is it on private land? Is there a moratorium on new routing there? If it's an existing area, learn the local ethics. Consult guidebook authors and other new routers.

## STEP 3

Scope the line. This is why years of experience are crucial. Is it an aesthetic route or are you trying to cram it between two existing climbs? Is the rock good? Does it need bolts and where will they go? There are too many variables to list here. If in doubt, leave the rock be.

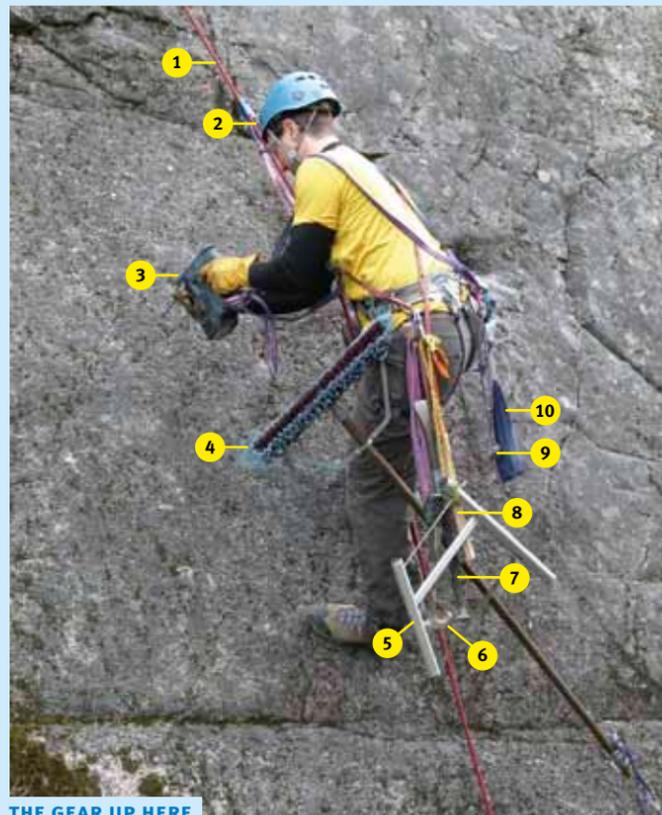
## STEP 4

Get the gear. Here's the minimum of what you'll need to put up just one sport climb: 10 stainless steel bolts (\$27), 10 hangers (\$21), one anchor (\$14), two drill bits (\$28) one battery-powered hammer drill (at least \$400), plus wrench, hammer, and all your rock-climbing equipment.

## STEP 5

Cleaning is the most dangerous step because of rock fall. If you are in the alpine, be aware of your belayer below. If at a local crag, crowbar large, loose pieces and hammer off smaller ones. Then use a nut tool and wire brush to scrub the cracks and rock face.

The most rewarding activity a rock climber or mountaineer can do is put up a new route. It's not an easy task, though. Aside from the physical perils, one must consider the money, time and skill required. There is no substitute for practical experience, but here are a few guidelines to help get you started.



### THE GEAR UP HERE

1. Rock climbing rope: \$200
2. Helmet: \$70
3. Cordless hammer drill: \$400
4. Push broom for dirt & moss: \$20
5. Bow saw for removing bushes: \$30
6. Hammer for driving anchor bolts: \$30
7. Crowbar for cleaning loose rock: \$20
8. Wire brush for cleaning cracks & moss: \$10
9. Wrench for tightening bolts: \$10
10. Bolts & hangers (in bag): \$3 each

## STEP 6

To bolt or not to bolt? This is one of the most contentious issues in climbing. Can the route be done safely without bolts, meaning are there natural cracks and holes in the rock that will fit traditional protection like nuts and cams? If bolts are needed, where will you put them? Consider that you're about to deface rock that is millions of years old — be economical but safe with their placement. Volumes have been written about bolt placement. Again, experience and knowledge are key.

## STEP 7

Place the anchors. Other than in the alpine, modern ethics lean towards using bolted anchors on the rock rather than slinging trees. However, some areas encourage walk-offs. If you're drilling an anchor, consider the best position, as you would with bolts.

## STEP 8

Climb the route and get to the top. Congratulations! You're halfway there: descend safely. In some areas this will involve walking off. In some you can abseil. If you want to put in a rappel route in the alpine, consider the ethics.

## STEP 9

Name the route and rate it. The naming is subjective and many people have fun with it. Consider such Kootenay classics as "Army in your Panties" and "Moose Drool." The rating is objective, however, in accordance with the Yosemite Decimal System.

## STEP 10

Prepare for those who will criticize all your hard work.  
—Vince Hemsall

Every sport has its celebrated leaders, its trailblazers. In the climbing community, there's no better reason to make merry than when a new route comes to fruition. After all, the ascensionists dedicate a lot of time, money and effort into summiting, and in so doing, put themselves in harm's way. In fact, all of the people interviewed for this story have had a close encounter with rock fall, severed ropes, an avalanche or, in one instance, a nasty bout of flesh-eating disease caused by hands smearing through rat feces. To walk away relatively unscathed and offer up a new route to your peers is reason to rejoice. Unless, of course, said peers are unimpressed.

"Building a new route is like leaving your signature on the wall for everybody else to judge," my climbing partner Lussier says

from his home in Nelson, British Columbia. "And some people are really good at judging." Of course with opinion comes controversy, something the Canadian climbing community is quite familiar with. The most famous is the questionable first summit of Mount Robson, the highest peak in the Canadian Rockies. Many credit Conrad Kain for being the first person to stand on Robson's peak in 1913, but a century later debate continues as to whether or not it was George Kinney and Curly Phillips in 1909. Some reports go so far as to say the Alpine Club of Canada, who sponsored Kain's expedition, pressured Kinney and Phillips to claim they had not reached the summit.

Today Kootenay climbers have a lot fewer flare-ups than areas like Squamish, but some controversies still exist, especially around

issues like who did what route first and the ethical practices of bolting. For example, in the late 1980s Castlegar resident Gord Lindsay did the first ascent of a route called "Abbey Road" at Kinnaird Bluffs just outside of Castlegar and, because he was hand drilling — not using a power drill — he put fewer bolts in than some would deem safe. "I got criticized by a few people who claim it's too strung out, and I'm like, 'Fuck, then just don't do it,'" he says. "Someone then took it upon themselves to put in two new bolts on the lower section and I took a chisel in there and took them out. Stuff like that is disgusting... I don't like the thought that every new route has to be safe. You need a good headspace, especially when going into the mountains."

Golden resident and alpine legend David Jones concurs, saying that some of the 235 routes he's put up in his lifetime have "potential death falls," but he's not about to change any of them. "There are those who complain a route like Dancing in the Light is too run out. Well, until you've got the balls, then maybe you shouldn't be there." The question is, why was he there in the first place? Why do any of us do this, especially if we're setting ourselves up for judgment? Are we, as new routers, in it for the adventure, the betterment of the climbing community, or just the fame?

**TO WALK AWAY RELATIVELY UNSCATHED AND OFFER UP A NEW ROUTE TO YOUR PEERS IS REASON TO REJOICE. UNLESS, OF COURSE, SAID PEERS ARE UNIMPRESSED.**

"People will give you a whole lot of reasons why, but it just boils down to ego," says Aaron Kristiansen, who co-authored the *West Kootenay Rock Guide* and is responsible for the development of over 100 routes in the region. "And if they tell you otherwise, they're a liar." He and I have developed a few climbs together, and I ask him whether there's more to it than that. "Of course there's a lot of personal satisfaction involved," he replies. "Essentially you're putting up a piece of art for the world to enjoy. But you have to have a thick skin, both physically and metaphorically." He admits to being targeted by those unhappy with some of his new routes. In one instance, he was left an anonymous note that read, "So I clean the line and tell you about it and you decide to bolt it? WTF. Get some ethics!" [Note: "cleaning a line" refers to the act of scrubbing moss, debris and lichen from a route.]

Decades ago, before the popularity of guidebooks and the Interweb, people put up new routes just because they wanted to be in the mountains. At least that's the opinion of both David Jones and Revelstoke local Ruedi Beglinger, who have, between the two of them, 100 years of combined climbing experience. "It used to be that a small number of enthusiasts cleaned and established new routes for their own enjoyment and well away from any publicity," says Jones. "Now I see climbers who appear to be focused on the self-promotion as much as for the sake of climbing." Beglinger goes on to explain that he hesitated even telling the world about one of his routes on the north face of Mount Moloch because the rock was so friable. "We got to the top and said, 'Hope no one repeats this,'" he laughs. "I don't know if I'm proud of it. I didn't even tell my kids about it."

It's true there are more self-promoters out there than ever before, but is it the constant quest for adventure that drives them or merely ego? Jen Olsen believes that for most men, it's ego. She's a sponsored climber and guide responsible for new routes in various Kootenay locales, including Yoho National Park and

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Climber Sonnie Trotter belayed by Jamie Finlayson making the first ascent of his new route, White Horse, a run-out, flaring 5.12c traverse near Squamish, BC. Photo: Paul Bride

the Bugaboos. “In general, women’s egos aren’t about making a name for themselves,” she says from her home in Canmore, Alberta. That could be why there’s not a lot of new female routers in British Columbia. Of the 17 people I interviewed for this story, only two were women. The rest were men with years of expertise ranging from five decades to five years. Nelson resident J.T. Croston falls into the latter category. He’s put up nearly 20 routes in the West Kootenay, including five in the alpine, but is skeptical that others with more experience question his style. “As soon as you go [new routing] in the alpine, everyone has something to say about what you’re doing,” he explains. “I do clean, ground-up ascents and have fun, but for some reason there’s always negativity around it.”

Perhaps controversy doesn’t stem from our egos. Maybe it’s just that we’re used to having our own way? In the Kootenays, we’re blessed with a lot of untapped potential and we’re free to develop wherever and whatever we want. “Climbing used to be such a rogue sport and it was up to the individual to make up the rules of a climb,” claims Olsen. “But it’s becoming so mainstream now and maybe it shouldn’t be up to that one person anymore? Maybe we should have an organization that oversees ethics and etiquette?”

**“IT USED TO BE THAT A SMALL NUMBER OF ENTHUSIASTS CLEANED AND ESTABLISHED NEW ROUTES FOR THEIR OWN ENJOYMENT AND WELL AWAY FROM ANY PUBLICITY. NOW I SEE CLIMBERS WHO APPEAR TO BE FOCUSED ON THE SELF-PROMOTION AS MUCH AS FOR THE SAKE OF CLIMBING.”**

—DAVID JONES

Ultimately, it’s just climbing, so who really cares? “It’s a totally useless activity,” says Mirek Hladik, who owned the climbing gym in Nelson for 20 years and is responsible for about 100 new routes in the Kootenays. “It’s just a bunch of rock standing there and it doesn’t make sense to climb it, let alone argue about it. Be passionate about homeless kids or something that matters, not about whose name should be on what route.”

Back on Gimli Peak, Dave Lussier is nearing the end of the pitch when suddenly he slips. I arrest his fall and we’re both silent. The day is getting late and we’ll have to return to attempt this route next year. I realize that for the past minute, rather than willing Lussier on, I’d been contemplating a minor controversy surrounding this route: a few months ago another climber said he had spotted this line first and claimed we had “scooped” it from him. A couple of emails flew back and forth fraught with disagreement about ethics and what the wall should be called. Eventually, it ended in a stalemate.

I shake my head to clear away the negative thoughts and suddenly a red-and-black butterfly drifts into view and lands on the wall in front of me. I’m amazed this fragile, paper-winged insect is floating around in such a demanding alpine environment in late October. It only settles for a few seconds before lifting off again, floating effortlessly up the wall.

*Co-author of the West Kootenay Rock Guide, Vince Hempsall has fed his ego by doing dozens of first ascents around the world. He believes, like any new route, this article may be the cause of some debate, so he invites his detractors to “shut up and climb.”*

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