

A PUNTER'S PARADOX

In this Climber's Coach feature, Ian Wyatt writes about what he's learned about training. Having used the Covid lockdowns to read, listen, ponder, experiment and apply the wisdom of others he has dramatically altered his own approach to this perennially vexed topic.

There is something of a Gordian knot hiding at the heart of many of our desires to get fitter, stronger, better at whatever branch of climbing/mountain activity is your bag. It goes something like this:

Climbing is the best training for climbing, so that's all I need to do.

Or:

Doing any kind of exercise or training plan will generate improvements over doing nothing so I'll take one off the bookshelf, magazine, coach, online exercise guru and job done.

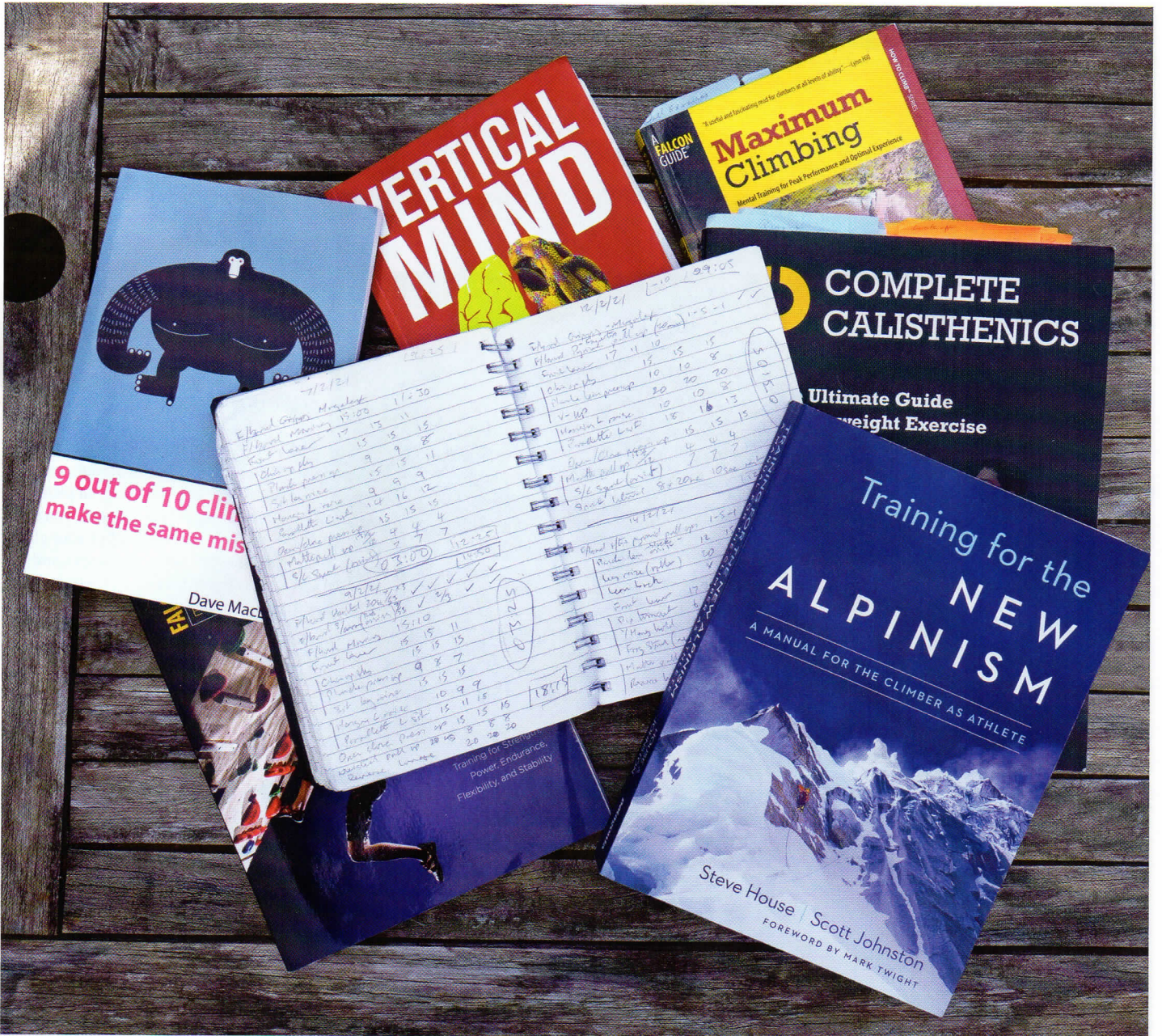
Except that it isn't. Just climbing will certainly improve skill levels and build confidence but is likely to have limited impact on a specific goal unless tailored to do so. Similarly, doing any kind of generalised training will help with maintaining and building underlying fitness but, again, not necessarily achieve a specific goal. In order to reach *your* goal any plan will have to be designed very specifically to you: your climbing history, fitness, skill level, lifestyle and final objective. And, most importantly of all, it has to be something you will actually carry out.

Thus, where to start? But first, a confession and a couple of caveats. I am a self-confessed gym bunny (exercise gym not American climbing wall) and I am not, repeat not, a PTI (Physical Training Instructor), climbing coach, ML, CWI or any other collection of certified acronyms. I am an average working punter who used lockdowns 1 to 3 to re-think and apply an approach to training and my climbing goal.

Now, put your hand up if you want to get fitter and improve in some way; leave your hand up if you have bought a book, video, Googled a training programme,



Ian Wyatt trying to work out *String Theory* (Font 7A), Rowsley Woods, Derbyshire. Photo: Brian Rodgers



seen a coach or something similar. Keep your hand up if you applied and maintained that programme for more than a few weeks and have seen real progress; keep that hand up if you achieved your goal. If your hand is still up you've probably got what I have to say covered.

So, living on the edge of a major Midlands conurbation (take a wild guess) with zero access to real rock and only a fingerboard in the storeroom, how do I train for climbing? I had a couple of lightly read training for climbing books on the shelf, so during the good weather of lockdown 1 I used the garden for basic training routines and got back into running. All this helped to build my fitness but was not very focused.

I then decided on a rock-climbing goal for when we are allowed to go back

out to play. I thought about where I felt I was weak and how I could address it without access to rock, a wall or a gym. For me, that was using body tension more effectively. So, reasoning that learning to do a front lever would help with controlled use of body tension I bought a Calisthenics book and saw a PTI to learn how to build up to do one, along with a bunch of other things which required core strength and body tension. I then doubled my home training set up by buying a pair of gymnast's rings.

Don't worry I'm just providing a bit of context I'm not going to give you a blow-by-blow account of my training. Firstly, that would bore you beyond belief but secondly, and more importantly, it is **my** training programme for **my** goal and

even if you have a similar background and target you have to work out what will work for you. Which I discovered is not as daunting as it may sound but does require time to think about, experiment with, and plan. Here's what I've learnt over the past 18 months.

THERE ARE NO SHORT-CUTS

Sorry about that. Whichever way you look at this you will have to give yourself time to develop your ideas and any programme will, of course, take time. Along the way, you will get it wrong, have deviations and dead ends. But none of this is wasted because you are learning about yourself and what you want to achieve; you are constantly refining your thinking. This is all part of the process. ▶

The authors note pad and some of the books he delved into for ideas to develop a plan that worked for him. Photo: David Simmonite

KNOW THYSELF

Reflect and really quiz yourself about what you want, jot down notes and go back to them over time. Don't settle for a vague target like 'I want to be a better climber' or 'I want to be stronger' or 'fitter for the Alps'. Be specific, give it a name: a route, a mountain, a grade, a time, whatever it is you want to achieve. Set a real target. Then think about what

you need to change to get from here to there, and it may help to spend time with a climbing coach or a PTI to help figure this out (or indeed to help you work out your target). If you have been playing the outdoor game for some years, this will be a relatively small investment compared to the amount of money spent on kit and trips.



Front lever using rings for Ian Wyatt in a typical cramped garage. Photo: David Simmonite

THE PLAN

To paraphrase Steve House from his book – *Training for the New Alpinism: A Manual for the Climber as Athlete* – the difference between exercise and training is that training works to a plan with results logged and incremental increases targeted and recorded. Everything is written down and reviewed, following the plan is a process. Exercise may do the same physical activities but records nothing. There are lots of training manuals available and they are pretty cheap, so buy or borrow (or take down off the to-be-read shelf) a couple and get a feel for one that chimes with you; that is the one that will be your key text but not an infallible holy book.

Having found an approach that works for you, you will have dipped into some of the routines and tried them out, in doing so you will also be refining your picture of your needs and ultimate targets. You have, by now, started sketching out your plan, it will probably take a few weeks and iterations to get it to a point where you think 'yes, this will work and I can stick to it'. Or you can book a session with a coach to build a plan with you, having someone else look at you and what you want to achieve can be very useful.

Plans are not written in stone. If something is not working change it or drop it. If you feel you are no longer making progress, change something in the plan. If work or other life events have changed your training pattern, roll with it and re-structure. Do not bust a gut trying to force something that is simply not working.

IF YOU FEEL YOU ARE NO LONGER MAKING PROGRESS, CHANGE SOMETHING IN THE PLAN

Your plan will be written in phases or stages so you should be periodically changing anyway. Managing changes can be tricky and, like everything else, will take a couple of iterations. For example, now that we are back out in the real world I'm struggling with climbing getting in the way of my training. So, I've reworked my plan and what I want to get out of training, whilst focusing on getting out climbing on real rock.

ACTION

Back to the opening paradox, doing anything will see greater improvements that doing nothing. But your specific goals will require following your plan. Remember that this is a process not an immovable commandment from on high



Ian Wyatt putting theory in to practise on his home fingerboard. Photo: David Simmonite

and rest is also part of the plan. So, if you find you are not recovering from sessions, change the plan to give you more rest. However, this is not to say that if you miss a session you have to make it up, you can't, so move on to whatever is next at that stage. Don't be afraid to experiment and get things wrong. *Do it, log it, review progress, revise the plan – repeat.*

As you work through the plan you are building towards your goal mentally as well as physically, achieving interim targets along the way. Just in case you are wondering, yes I think my plan is working. I achieved my interim front lever target (albeit not very pretty). As for the ultimate goal, I feel stronger and am

climbing with more precision and economy, have more confidence in my strength and am getting much closer to my big target. Finally, if you are thinking all this sounds fine and dandy but I'm past it, too out of condition, too slow, too blah, blah, sit down, shut up and face the front.

Over the decades my climbing life has waxed and waned, I was 60 recently but am following my lockdown plan and making real progress towards my target. If I achieve it there'll be pints, smiles and hugs all round but if I fail... Well actually I can't, neither can you, because so much is learnt along the way whatever the outcome. A structured approach does work, so long as it's the one for you. ■

PERIODISATION TRAINING STRATEGIES

Vary your workouts every few days or weeks, a scheduling strategy known as periodisation, to maximise the training response and stave off injuries and burnout. This extract, from *The Rock Climber's Exercise Guide*, was one of the strategies that Ian used during his training.

The 4-3-2-1 Training Cycle

This is the training cycle that I [Hörst] advocate for the 'average climber', and it's best used during off-season training.

Phase 1: The four week climbing skill and stamina phase involves lots of climbing! This climbing can be done indoors, outdoors or in a combination of both. You must however, faithfully obey an important distinction of this phase – that is, minimize time spent maximal climbing and 'projecting', and instead log lots of mileage on a wide variety of routes that are one to three number grades [Yosemite Decimal grading] below your maximum ability... Climbing four days a week is ideal as long as you are not climbing at your limit or to extreme levels of fatigue. You can also engage in general fitness exercises...

Phase 2: Three weeks of maximal strength training and power training is the next step in the cycle, and therefore hard bouldering, weighted exercises (e.g. fingerboard hangs and pull ups), and reactive training are ideal choices since powerful movements and short, near maximal effort are hallmarks of this phase. Given the high intensity and physical stress of such training it's important to take plenty of rest between boulder problems, exercises and workout days.

Phase 3: The two-week-long strength/power-endurance phase is the most fatiguing and gruelling portion of the cycle. Training at moderately high intensity and with reduced rests between exercises and climbing sets will produce the tell-tale muscular pump and 'burn'. Interval training is the cornerstone method of triggering adaptations of the aerobic lactic energy system... I [Hörst] recommend two or three hard anaerobic endurance workouts per week with a fourth aerobic recovery climbing session.

Phase 4: The final [one week] phase of the ten-week cycle is a training taper that allows for a peak in strength, power and endurance to be revealed upon completion of the taper. Climbing and specific training must be limited to just two or three days with a significant reduction in volume (reduce volume to about one-third of your normal). A small amount of high-intensity exercise is okay (to keep your nervous system primed) through the first five days of the week, but it's essential to keep any bouldering or power-training exercises very brief (just a few sets). The sixth and seventh days must allow for complete rest from climbing – only modest mobility work is advised.

(Extract from: Eric Hörst, 2017. *The Rock Climber's Exercise Guide*, Falcon, pp. 199–200)