

FAIL(SAFE)

By Ian Wyatt

A while ago I set myself a very ambitious (for me at least) goal which I failed to achieve, but that is not to say that it has been an abject failure or a waste of time. By not achieving my ultimate goal I failed to put in a tick in a very specific and particular self-defined box. So what went wrong? Did I not try hard enough? Was it beyond my skill level? Have I reached the limits of my genetics? Has Anno Domini caught up with me? Was I simply unlucky? After all I'd had trips where I got rained, blown, frozen and fried off the rock, sometimes all on the same trip. I am getting on a bit; maybe I'm not good enough. Well, some element of all these things may be true but I don't really think the heart of the answer lies in any of them.

Back in December 2021 I wrote in the pages of this fine journal ('A Punter's Paradox' in The Climber's Coach section of *Climber*, Nov/Dec 2021 issue) about training plans for achieving long term goals in which I said that I, or you, couldn't fail 'because so much is learnt along the

way'. And that is true, I'm a very different climber now to the one I was then, so much about my climbing and outlook has changed, maybe even improved. So what happened? I trained hard, I saw a couple of coaches to review my training plan and advise me, I thought about and

acted on new guidance, I moderated what I ate and drank, climbed as much as I could. I continued consuming information about training, goal setting and trusting the process but with all the pieces in the right place I still didn't quite manage to break through.

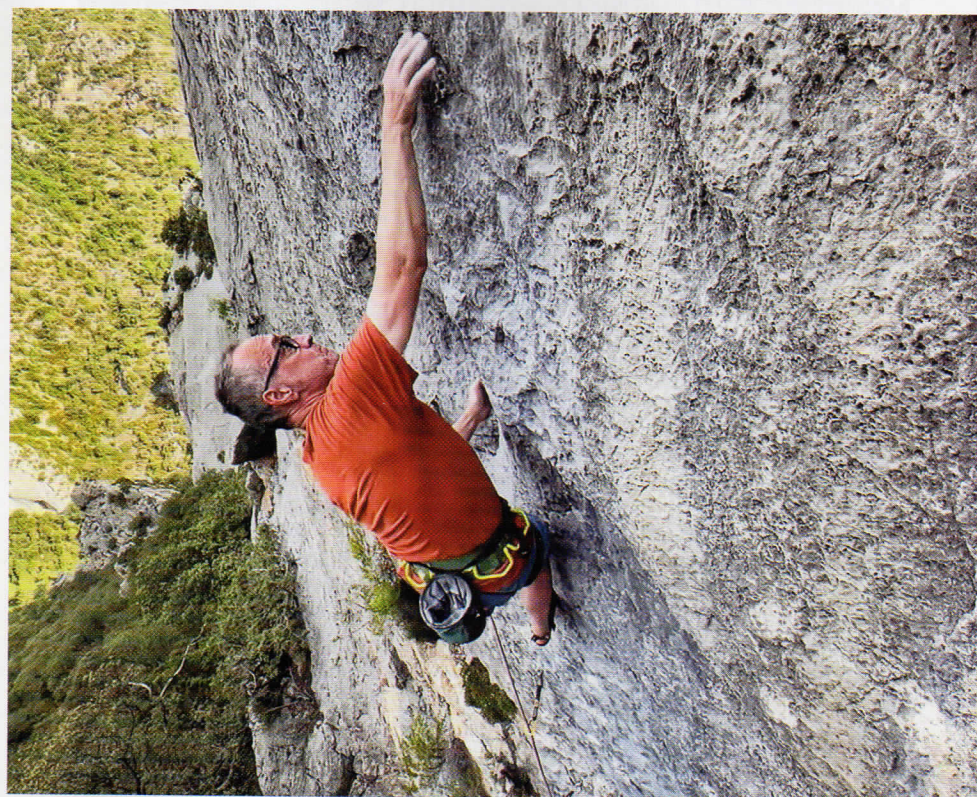
Ian Wyatt on *Mutantes* (F7b) at Plafo de Nyus in Andorra. Photo: Patxi Usobiaga



These days almost everything that is written and said about training (including my own *Punter's Paradox*) emphasises the importance of focusing on the process and not the goal. I know that, you know that, next door's cat knows that and yet when I reflect on the past 18 months or so I realise that I failed to do this. Don't get me wrong, I thought that this was exactly what I was doing, but it transpires that I was not being completely straight with myself. The thing is, this separation of process and goal, or to put it another way 'trusting the process', is really hard to do. I thought I was taking an objective overview of the plan, reviewing my training log and focusing on working weaknesses at the gym, the wall and the crag and, to a large extent, I was, hence some progress, but unbeknown to me somewhere at the back of my mind my ego was stacking the deck against me.

How? You may ask. Well, like the devil, your sneaky subconscious works by offering to give you exactly what you really want. For example, I need to work on power delivery but I'm rubbish at campusing, so the days when the campus board is in my plan that crafty little me-ego can suggest that my 'shoulder feels a bit sore', 'I'm quite tired today' or 'hands are a bit sore'. All of these are excellent reasons for not getting on the campus board and risking injury and let's not forget training rule number 1, don't get injured. So by 'protecting' my body I'm not getting utterly spanked and so fall in the time spent not campusing by going for a positive stroke with something I'm quite good at instead, such as weighted hangs. Of course, it's a fine balance to strike between listening to one's body and being brutally honest with yourself about what's really happening, because you really don't want to get injured or overtrain.

Don't be fooled into thinking this is just about the wall or gym, sneaky ego can strike with even greater efficacy at the crag. Heading out on to the rock I know the aim should be to build a solid base of routes at grade *x* to work up from to build a grade pyramid as part of the process. But *x* is a couple of grades below where I'm aiming and I'm feeling really good today so I'll jump on something at project level and it's a better looking line anyway. Ego translation: 'I'd rather fail gloriously on something really hard than on a route that's at my current maximum flash grade'. Remember, neither I nor anyone else is consciously thinking any of this but it is an illustration of how one's subconscious can subvert focus from the process and onto the goal.



SQUEEZE IN AN UNEXPECTED WEEK AWAY. THIS'LL BE IT, SURELY I'M ALMOST THERE. NO. WRONG. BURN OUT IS WHAT FOLLOWS. COMPLETELY SHOT AND EMPTY; OUT OF ACTION FOR WEEKS

I have a training plan with scheduled rest intervals, we all know that rest is crucial to building gains and to making progress and to decrease the level of training as the amount of actual climbing increases. But 'I'm feeling strong', 'I'm feeling good', 'it's getting so close now', 'if I could just do one more...'. Did you see that? That *it's getting so close* is the goal not the process. So I have an extra day at the crag, then another, or a quick trip to the wall – just a short one – squeeze in an unexpected week away. This'll be it, surely I'm almost there. No. Wrong. Burn out is what follows. Completely shot and empty; out of action for weeks.

And, yes you've guessed it, there is a slow build up to get back on the plan but this time with a renewed focus on the

process. Two or three months to get back to my high point, but this time feeling much more relaxed about trusting the process over the goal. And what happens when I try to hit the goal now? Well, it's true, I fail again but this time within a couple of moves of completing all the moves on the target route, so getting very much closer. More importantly I've been much more relaxed and enjoyed the challenge through the process leaving the goal as a desirable incidental. No burn out, no regrets, a simple honest tried hard, had fun, got knackered but didn't quite make it. Of course, this won't be the end of the story because we never stop trying do we?

We have renewed interests, changed perspectives, new insights, refreshed outlooks with expanded horizons and new goals to reach out towards. In whatever way we engage with the rock, hills or mountains it is inspiring to see them in new ways. So it's okay to fail, in fact it can be a rewarding thing to do because we see and learn new things about the world and ourselves. Just be alert to the fact that you can follow a plan diligently but still be thwarted by sneaky little ego diverting you. Try to look out for those tempting little positive strokes where your ego is tempting you into a short-term sugar rush of success and don't be afraid of failure it can be quite liberating if you allow it to open your eyes. ■

Ian Wyatt trying hard on a F7b at an undisclosed crag that is under development in Catalunya, Spain. Photo: Patxi Usobiaga