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Vegas Notes and Helpful Hints

by Mel Banks

First Impressions

Your reaction when you see the Red Rocks sport climbing area from the park's loop road will likely be, "That's it?" Rounded, indistinct tiers of slabby red sandstone, layer upon layer, recede into the desert. It's the junk you might have glanced at in passing if you were ever in Las Vegas to do Rock Warrior, or Levitation 29, or one of the many other classic multi-pitch routes in the canyons. Upon closer inspection, you spot white-dotted faces, tucked here and there amid the jumble of stone. It doesn't look like much, but what the hell, you're here, the sun's shining on the cliffs, it's too cold to climb in Black Velvet Canyon, and it wouldn't do to start gambling already at 10:00 in the morning.

The scale is deceiving. The routes turn out to be steep, well-featured, and long enough to sustain interest. The developed crags are spread out, interconnected by a fun house maze of slabs, boulders, corridors, ledges, dry stream beds. Fifteen to twenty minutes and a little scrambling will typically get you where you're going, once you figure out where that is. (Hint: Ask directions.)

A Little Child Shall Lead Them

The trophy is a remarkable formation: overwhelmingly steep, it sits atop an immense slab at the end of a shadowy canyon known as the Twinkie Narrows. To find it took us over an hour, led astray by wild burro trails and the footprints of lost climbers, scrambling over sandstone ridges and up dead-end gullies in a quest worthy of Coronado's search for the Seven

Cities. (Hint: the approach maps in the guide-book are not to scale.)

The easiest route at Trophy is *Dodgin' a Bullet*, 5.12a. Two Italians were on it; we settled in to wait. They climbed shirtless, gold necklaces on Riviera tans, earrings glinting. We watched, half dozing, until the leader pulled off a brick-sized hold which shattered nearby. "It's OK, you don't need that hold," a local assured us. Plenty more where that came from. (Hint: In Vegas, beware of loose rock and loose women.) Actually, the sport climbing at Red Rocks was for the most part quite solid, with beefy, well-placed bolts and anchors. What breaks off is mostly scabby stuff you shouldn't have been using anyway. Moving as far away from the Italians as we could, we watched local climber Chris Lindner, age 8 (that is not a typo), coolly work moves on the severely overhanging *Shark Walk*, 5.13a. He'd redpointed a 5.12d the week before. The Italians wanted to know if he was a midget. (Hint: do not pass puberty if you aspire to 5.13.)

When Day is Done

As you drive into town at dusk Las Vegas comes into view, spilling across the dark desert floor like glowing pirate's treasure. Above, bright points of light hang motionless in the purple sky - jetliners frozen in place by the perspective of distance, forever arriving or departing. The panorama sparkles with laser clarity in the desert air, even from 18 miles. We slow down on Highway 159 to take it all in.

I assume you will be staying in town, to be near the Soup Exchange (Hint: this is the only place you will ever need for dinner) as well as the casinos, the bunji tower, and other sundry enter-

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tainments. (The Oak Creek campground, which, to quote the guidebook, has "no facilities whatsoever," was a zoo. Your car will be blocked in by some bozo in the middle of the night.)

As for places to stay in town, if you're inclined to throw away big bucks at the tables, try to get "comped" at one of the casino hotels. Consider "Sam", chainsmoking next to me at the blackjack table in his black t-shirt and gold chains, betting \$75 a hand, losing steadily and loudly. "Where's my comp?" he demanded every 10 minutes. By the time he got his comp he'd dropped at least \$500. (Hint: find a \$25 motel in the North Vegas sleaze district. Don't worry, it's safe enough - the cops patrol Vegas on mountain bikes. You can fit in at least five climbers. Your thermarests will cover the stains on the carpet. Plus you get local color: Dan, big sweet guy that he is, offered a box of Cheerios to a guy rummaging in the motel's dumpster one morning. The man stared at it, then at Dan. "What the hell am I going to do with that?" he asked. "I don't have any milk.")

What Goes Up

On the bunji tower at night, cantilevered over the street 160 feet up in the chill air with the lights of Vegas dancing crazily all around you, there's a feeling of vertigo you can't quite achieve on a wall of solid rock. Ben acquitted himself well, holding back his scream until the zero G apogee of the first rebound. (Hint: everybody chip in for the price of one jump, then cut cards - it's Vegas, after all - to see who gets to take the dive.)

Lost Wages

Insert your plastic card into an ATM in the casino. Out drops a crisp new hundred-dollar bill. The blackjack dealer turns it back into plastic for you: one black chip, four greens, or 20 reds. It's less painful that way. Plastic to plastic, dust to dust. (Hint: Hit 11 or under; stand on 17 or over; stand on 12 - 16 if the dealer is showing 2 - 6; always split aces and eights; double down on 11 unless the dealer is showing an ace. Got it?) (Hint: after a long night in the casinos, two 20 oz. coffees from 7-11 and a few whiffs of clean desert air will get you climbing again.)

For route information see *A Climber's Guide to the Red Rocks of Nevada*, Randy Faulk. A condensed version appears in *Rock and Ice* #49, May/June 1992. See also *Winning Casino Blackjack for the Non-counter*, A. Cardoza.

Getting the Hang of Heel Hooking

by Tom "Ten Cows" Isaacson

When I learned to rock climb through various PATC trips, I was told that proper technique primarily involved using four fingers and the front/inside of your shoes. We considered using your knees to be such poor technique as to almost invalidate an otherwise clean ascent.

Those basic principles served me reasonably well on slabs and "merely" vertical rock. With the advent of sport climbing I, like so many others, ventured onto overhanging, and sometimes radically overhanging, faces. By watching other climbers, it became apparent that the techniques used on steep and highly featured rock differ significantly from traditional vertical face climbing that are relied upon at Carderock and Great Falls. Suddenly the use of knees, elbows, shoulders, hips, thighs, calves, thumbs, etc. became obligatory. An essential aspect of climbing steep rock is being willing to slam, jam, lock, bar or otherwise lodge some part of your anatomy, perhaps any part of your anatomy, into the rock if it will serve to take some weight off your arms or hands.

Some of these techniques are fairly obvious, but many are devious and difficult. You could climb right by many sections of rock and not realize that a "hands down" rest could be crafted there. Some techniques for resting your arms, such as "bat hanging" upside down by your feet, are so painful and strenuous to other muscles that their utility is either highly suspect or at least dependent on your being willing to suffer a lot (at least by the standards of fun activities). Other techniques, such as sticking your feet in a horizontal with the soles of your feet facing up (people claim this really works, at least it's popular among highly talented climbers) depend on a high level of flexibility and a willingness to break an ankle or knee if you fall at the wrong time. Describing all of these techniques would take far too long and is well beyond my knowledge.

By far the most basic and useful of these techniques is heel hooking. I am not an expert in the art of heel hooking, but I know enough to help those of you who may just be getting started. I can say this with confidence, if you don't learn how to heel hook in a wide variety of situations, you will have a much tougher time getting up steep climbs.

I remember only two heel hooks commonly used on top rope climbs that PATC frequently rigged. Pine Tree Face at Annapolis Rocks has a heel hook at the crux near the top. James Eakin pointed out that beta to us years ago. Shoulder of the Road at Great Falls is made much easier with a left heel hook on the flake at half-height.

Some people can still do this move by smearing their feet, but it seems much more strenuous that way. A few climbers, like me, will heel hook their left foot to gain the ledge on One Lane Highway at Great Falls. Most climbers prefer to solve this move by mantling or by good-old cranking. Most of us weren't good enough to bother rigging Blitzkrieg at Great Falls back then but it, too, generally requires a heel hook to overcome the first crux.

Heel hooking, as you've probably guessed, is the art of placing one of your heels on the rock. There seem to be two principal uses of heel hooking. On a face climb it usually serves to allow you to gain some leverage, take weight off your arms and either reach up for a hold or clip a bolt/place protection. On arete climbs, heel hooks are commonly used to stop you from swinging to the side, and help keep you in some semblance of balance.

The first step is deciding which foot to use. In most cases you don't have any choice since the hookable holds only appear on your left or your right. Occasionally, you have a choice. The simplest rule of thumb is to heel hook on the same side as the hand hold that you'll be reaching for. If your next move involves reaching up with your right hand, you probably should heel hook with your right foot. This will rotate your hips in the direction you're reaching. The same holds true for clipping bolts. If you're clipping the bolt with your left hand, you probably want to heel hook on the left.

I've found a few instances where double heel hooking is required. This is rare. You might hook both feet simultaneously in a horizontal crack (not on a ledge) in order to reach out a roof. You also might hook one foot to clip a bolt and then switch to hooking the other foot in order to move up.

After deciding which foot to use, you need to decide where on the hold to place your foot. Often there is no choice in the matter because the hold is small. If there is a choice, the first consideration is finding a place where the ledge/edge is wide and in-cut. It helps to find a place where you can get all of your heel on the ledge and dig in. If there are no such features and the ledge is fairly uniform, you still must choose -- albeit quickly -- where to put your foot. If you are reaching up with a hand on the same side as the hooking foot, don't put that foot on the far end of the ledge. You may need some additional room to rock over that foot at the end stages of the heel hook maneuver. If you're reaching with the other hand, it's less likely that you'll be rocking over that foot. Apart from that consideration, I like to have my foot as far away from me as possible while still keeping my knee bent. I find this takes the most weight off my arms. If

your foot is so far away that your knee is not bent, you'll lose a lot of leverage and you can rip a hamstring. If your knee is bent too much because your foot is in too close to you, you'll probably have your hips thrown off. Also, that form of heel hooking requires more hamstring power than most climbers possess.

Toe positioning. Having decided what to do with your heel, you must look at toe options. On highly featured steep rock, there frequently are opportunities to hook the toes (of your hooking foot) behind a flake or against the underside of a roof, etc. The combination of heel hook-toe hook can be especially powerful.

If no toe hooks are available, you still have a couple of choices to make. Most of the time you will leave your toes pointing straight up. This works best when you're reaching up on the same side as the heel hook. If, on the other hand, you're reaching up on the other side, you may want to turn your foot/toes to the outside so that the outside of your heel rests on the ledge, and your toes point away from the rock. Turning your leg in this manner will help turn your hips in the direction you're reaching.

A few notes. First, watch the rope if you're leading. If you heel hook over the rope, you'll flip upside down when you fall. I've learned this the hard way. When you're bringing your foot up to the hooking position, catch the rope with your foot so that the rope rests on top of your ankle.

Second, heel hooking is good for static movement and resting, but is a very poor technique for dynamic movement. With a little experience and common sense, you should be able to calculate the maximum distance you can reach in a heel hook position. If the only usable hold is higher than that, you probably need to keep your feet under you and try a more dynamic movement.

Third, think about your shoes. Most work just fine since sensitivity in the heel is not critical. However, some slippers will pull off your heel when subjected to certain types of heel hooking.

Last, you shouldn't think too much about your other leg. Each heel hook maneuver requires getting into the flow/balance of that particular situation. Often the other leg will want to hang free as you crank with the hooking leg. Let it. This is especially common when you're reaching above the hooked leg and it serves to raise your hips in the desired direction. If, however, you have the misfortune of needing to reach with the other arm and you need to bring your other leg up to a higher hold to make the reach, you're staring at a hard move. (This is the crux of Apollo Reed.) Ask someone else for help.