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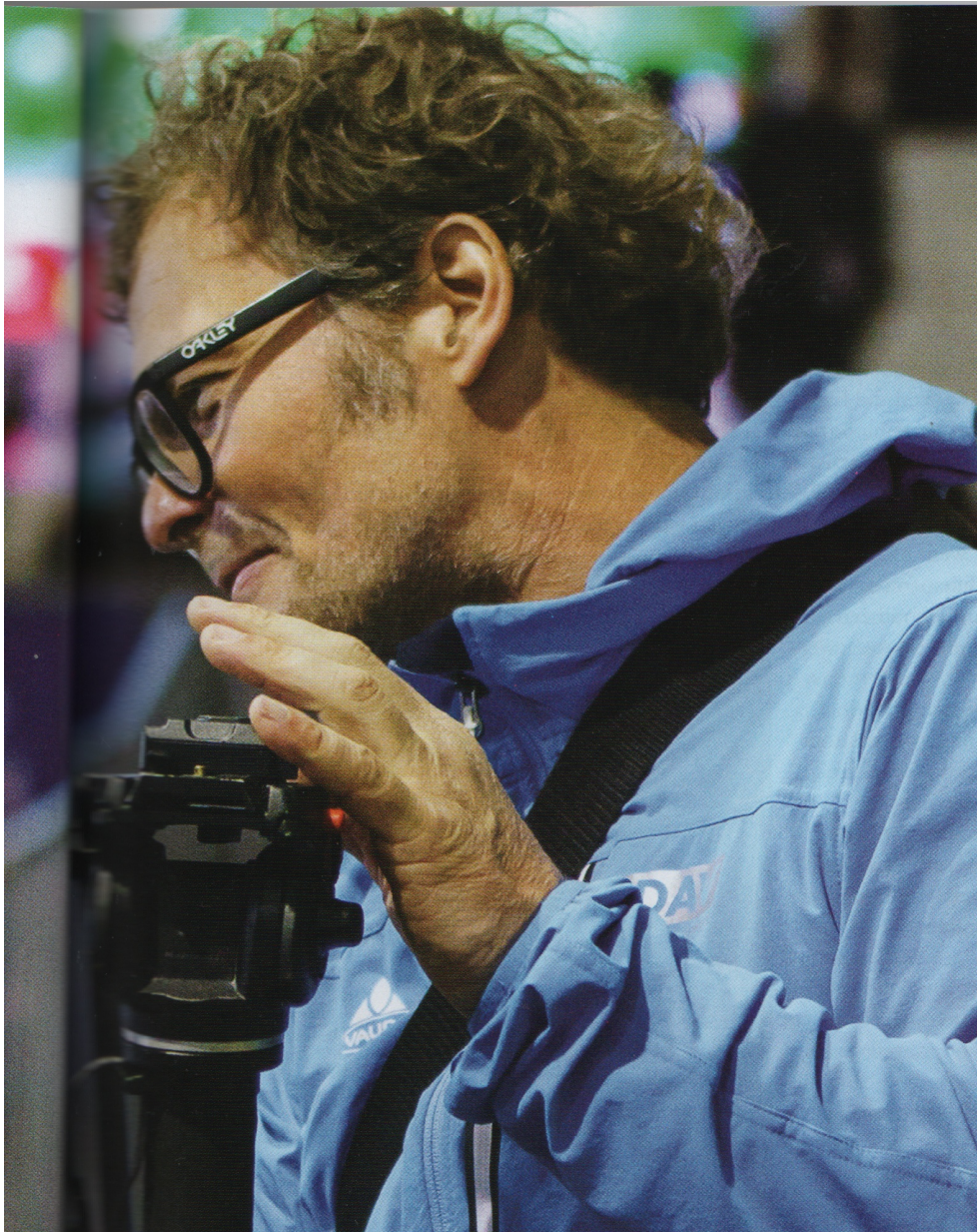
THE ART OF VIDEO

UDO NEUMANN

**"The mad scientist
of the climbing
world, fast talking
and full of ideas."**

In any sport there are figures who stand out from the crowd. They are the people who, knowingly or not, moulded the sport into what it is today. Often the most recognized of these are the athletes, the Tony Hawks, the Matt Hoffmans and Kelly Slaters of the sporting world. Innovators and shapers they are recognized for the progression they bring to their respective sports.

Those who follow sport (like anyone reading this Magazine) will know that behind the scenes there are also figures who stand out from the crowd, their legacies decided not by their own victories or accomplishments but by those of the sports people they work with. In running there was the legendary coach Arthur Lydiard whose philosophy on middle distance running revolutionized training for the sport. In Formula 1 it was the designer John Cooper whose mid-engined car designs, using the engine as a structural element, who changed the sport forever and signaled the end for the front engined roadsters of the 50's and early 60's.



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Climbing has its own visionaries who have pushed the sport over the years, from Wolfgang Güllich and Jerry Moffat in sport climbing to Lynn Hill with her visionary free ascent of the Nose in Yosemite. But behind the scenes there have been visionaries as well. One of the true visionaries of climbing for over 20 years now is the German Udo Neumann. Now the German team manager Udo has been climbing since the early 80's and has always been a passionate advocate of the sports progression. 20 years ago this year Udo and Dale Goddard published *Performance Rock Climbing*, considered the bible of climbing training manuals. Copies of it will be found on the shelves of the vast majority of today's top climbers.

Sitting down to discuss the evolution of competition climbing with Udo the first thing you notice is his enthusiasm and energy. Under a shaggy mop of greying hair his eyes dart to and fro, following the antics of the German Bouldering team who are in the playground behind us, traversing trees and pulling stunts off the swings. He is very much the mad scientist of the climbing world, fast talking and full of ideas and opinions. It is clear that he is an observational genius,

taking in what is happening around him and analysing the performance of his athletes even on a playground swing. Indeed at one point he interrupts the flow of the interview to point out to me the difference between the swinging skills of the German athletes versus that of the support staff. Truly a unique talent.

Udo, your master's thesis was sports science, did that lead to you working with Dale Goddard on writing *Performance Rock Climbing*?

Well now it's called Sports Science. But at the time it was like an educational thing, just the terminology has changed a little bit but basically its sports science and my master's thesis is in movement and training science.

So what we might call kinaesthetics?

Yes but also the physiology, because it was basically what you need to have for competition climbing and for understanding movement. At this time this science was really new and I already had a SVHS camera and I was counting all the holding times on holds and stuff like this...

So with that, climbing in competition was new. Performance Rock Climbing was published in 1993 and competitions really only became big about 1987, 1988. Did you think of bouldering much as a form of training back then?

Yes, for me it's a part of my personal story in climbing. I'm from Cologne and there's no climbing in Cologne. So for the first 3 years at least 70% of my climbing was building. I traversed lots of bridges and buildings. The other thing is I already went to Fontainebleau in 1982 so bouldering was always a big part of my climbing but it wasn't the only part, I did big walls to. In those days if you were a climber there was more risk and less help. You know, if you mentioned at a party that you are a climber you were a total daredevil... Those were the days for this. We went to Fontainebleau often but it was before crash pads you know. I think over the last 30 years I went to Fontainebleau at least once a year, but for a while of course sport climbing pretty much took over. We went to southern France instead...

If you look at Performance Rock Climbing the competition was all lead. In the book you talk about the different physiques and you have the cartoon guys, the butch guy and the skinny guy... Yes that was born out of necessity that if you have three examples and establish those characters and examples early on you don't have to always explain. "Imagine for example a 50kg girl." So it's much more fun and easier to relate if you have a character and put all these issues on those characters. Depending on what you are trying to educate.

So you had the strong guy, you had the François Legrand style character, the Beefy muscle man and the girl who was super technique. If you were to write it again with bouldering being what it is now would it be a different book? Has the sport evolved that much?

Actually I did a different book about bouldering in 2010, just recently. Only in German though. But right now I'm working on an interactive PDF that we'll sell as an eBook which should be really interesting because that has all the new stuff also from my coaching work in it.

One chapter is about momentum and dealing with momentum. Jonas and I (because Jonas is really good at maths and physics) look at the different ways of dealing with momentum. For example at the World Cups most of the time it's not so difficult to reach the holds but challenge is to hold the holds and control the swing. There are different strategies, you could flag, you could spread your legs, like Akiyo does for example and this takes the momentum out. If you time it right one leg swings in and now keeps the centre of gravity in and stuff like this. In a final for instance you can see how Anna deals with momentum and how Akiyo deals with momentum and it's very different. We have lots of equations and some became really difficult because body dynamics can be really difficult to calculate. But at least there's one big chapter in this bouldering book that deals with momentum.

I saw on your website (udini.com) you posted a German training camp video. In one part you were all leap frogging, so that's to teach how to generate momentum?

Yes, and lots of movement is about awareness, how to activate the necessary part of the nervous system and the muscular

system, they're so intertwined. We had these girls that really had a hard time jumping in climbs with dynos, so I said let's see if you are really so weak, or slow in your legs, or is it just that you don't know how to do it. This is why we did the leap frog. This time we had one competitor and she had some finger problems and so I told her to do some leap frogs, to not care about the fingers so much. She told other people and I'm hearing "You told her to do leap frogs?" because they thought it was really ridiculous so I had to explain myself.

It makes good sense though as you generate energy through the body.

Yes, well it makes sense if you know a little bit about movement, it sounds a little bit weird if you never cared about



these things. And it's especially common with traditional climbers that climb on fairly high grades, I think those are the people who have the hardest time to accept this. I also I think the first sensation we have climbing is pumped forearms and not being able to hold on to something and it's so deeply ingrained in our profession of climbing that we think ok, regardless of what situations we are in, more power would certainly help. Instead we should ask, can momentum get us through a crux.

For me the coaching job at this level is more complex as the athletes are all very powerful anyhow. At the top level you will

see that bouldering contests are decided between the athlete's ears. It's whoever deals with the sequence of problems, it's really important to get into the right state of mind you know. That you can switch from the slab, to the dyno where you have to be more activated and then you slow down again because of another dicey move and stuff like this.

It's funny because when you say that, I see some of the mid-pack climbers who are monumentally strong but don't recognise the nuances, the differences in the problems. Sometimes they will hold on and the next move is obvious but they are looking for the trick that isn't there. So when you talk about these guys and telling what is between the ears, who will recognise what is required, and Anna Stöhr seems so good

the swing and it's amazing how the better boulderers also can do much better stunts on things that have nothing to do with climbing!"

(And with that distraction whatever gem Udo had on the male state of mind in competition is lost...)

When you look at the World cups, there's a lot of discussion about the grading going on online. What are your thoughts about that?

Yeah, yesterday I had this discussion with Angel from onbouldering.com, he was on 8a.nu and there was this discussion about the grading given at World Cups. The climbers on the forums say "if this is a strong climber how can he fall off a 7b?" But they are dreaming.

The misconception is that if one guy flashes 8b, in Ticino, in perfect conditions so how hard can 7b be? But what those competition climbers have to deal with is like a Castle hill 7a. And tell me one person in the world who really, including Adam Ondra, who really can flash any, or do any boulder 7a, V7 in the world in 4 minutes. I would say, maybe a handful of the best climbers in the best season they have in their life.

It wouldn't be a point of discussion for the world's best climbers. Everybody who has been in this business long enough totally knows and totally smiles about all these discussions. But part of it is Jens of course, stirring up this discussion because it's his claim to, I mean it generates traffic for his Website. And that's ok, but if it gets too serious and if they're really doubting that Dmitrii could climb anything on rock if he wants to, they're just dreaming.

The strongest climber in the world is Dmitry Sharafutdinov and the overall most flexible and mentally strong climber is Kilian Fischuber and this totally reflects in their results. There's no question about it.

Udo, more and more we are seeing combined results mentioned, a requirement to do bouldering, lead and speed. Is this a healthy direction for the sport?

For this year we changed the German Junior championships so that you cannot be German climbing champion if you don't do all three events (Speed/Boulder/Lead) because the way we foresee climbing is it becoming much more dynamic, much more fast, whereas kids that start with lead climbing tend to become really slow and controlled from an early age and we don't want this. Ideally it will be Olympic one day and it will be bouldering, speed and lead and then an overall ranking. That is in an ideal world.

If you are in the younger generation and you are training to do all 3 disciplines that's perfect, but what about the older guys who are climbing now?

The format has changed for the scoring in overall between Arco a couple of years ago and Paris last year for the World Championships in that now you have to be fairly quick in the speed climbing. The speed climbing counts much more. For example Shorty (Thomas Tauporn) needs below 10 seconds for the regular speed wall, then he will be about fast enough. Of course he can't compete with the real speed climbers but it puts him in a good position for the overall. You just can't afford to

when it counts. She seems to me to be the best at that. She can struggle, struggle, struggle but then in the finals she goes up a gear.

But she's not the strongest in this, I believe Kilian is still on a different level for achieving this right state of mind.

So you think he would be the prime example?

I think in general, this may be chauvinistic to say but the girls have much more ups and downs emotionally, as in real life.

(Laughs)

"Whoa! I should say for the interview if you don't remember, in the background parts of the German team do tricks on



Bram Berkien

take 20 seconds anymore and I don't think that's a bad development. I think if it ever comes out that it is Olympic it will be all three disciplines. I think we'll see that same people on the podium. All the good boulderers can climb lead if they need to. It is obvious, they will be tired a lot quicker than the real lead climbers but they can manage.

You already see the likes of Mina and Jacob crossing over, Sean crosses over...

And Sean was overall world champion when Shorty competed. The first year Adam Ondra won was when speed climbing was not so important. Last year Sean won and speed climbing was important. Sean also needs to go below 10 seconds, he's very quick as you can tell by his other climbing.

These guys climb fast in all disciplines! I came from a lead climbing generation and when I see the speed these guys move once they unlock a sequence it's just Boom, boom, boom top! Whereas back in the day it was hold, orientation, adjust body position, move. I don't think that would work in modern bouldering competitions especially.

You can be as strong as you want but the whole thing is about preserving momentum. Some of these moves are not possible if you just take them from a dead hang and start from there. You have to maintain the momentum.

Do you think that helps the littler climbers, for instance Jonas compared to Jan? Jan Hojer is a tank whereas Jonas is a lot slimmer, slighter of build.

That's another interesting question. Let's take much simpler activities like swimming or 100 metres for instance. You would think by now, after doing it for so many hundreds of years there would be one body type that was just the best body type. Right now it's Usain Bolt for the 100 metres who is long and lean. But on the other hand we don't know. If you have someone whose nervous system allows him to run in a much higher cadence, maybe in 10 years we see the sub 9 seconds run by a short person if he's just incredibly fast.

In running circles they always said that someone Usain Bolt's size was too tall to sprint because it takes them too long to get up and moving off the blocks.

Yes and this is really fascinating in sport, the evolution is still really open!

So there's hope for 90 kg guys then, we just need slabs?

Yes we should have weight classes. If climbing was a truly developed sport we will have weight classes and the highest weight class will have the most prestige, like in boxing. So all the 60kg guys will compete in the morning when nobody cares and then in the evening we will go out wearing our satin robes and there will be lots of criminals and prostitutes around the climbing wall and we would be the stars!

But really I know these guys very well and if Jonas would be 90kg like myself, he would still be the better climber. And the main reason is nowadays, especially in bouldering, flexibility is so important, and Jonas mind just goes into any position and this is important for all. This is a fairly new development that we didn't see coming 10 years ago. For example it is not discussed at all in Performance Rock Climbing as flexibility

is only in the legs, as it used to be. The frog position, Patrick Edlinger and so on. And now days, especially since the advent of volumes, you know you have to be able to apply force to the wall in basically weird positions. So you've got these compression moves and so on but those guys really they can bring their body in positions that I can't, and I can't apply force...

You think it's not just the strength then, it's the flexibility that allows them to apply the strength.

Yeah absolutely, absolutely. I mean it's obvious if you see a climber pull over a roof so we always knew this, but if you see how their spine makes an S and so on that we couldn't go into those positions to save our lives!

So you manage the German team, when you are looking at young climbers, do you look for the same things that you did 10 years ago?

No, no no no! We still, even in the alpine club that pays my bills, we still have a controversy on how to look for talent. And it is still as we are talking, an ongoing process because I was very unhappy how the youth, you know, we have separate youth coaches, and they really know a lot about climbers and climbing, so how they did the selection for the team I was pretty unhappy with. You know we really have to do a different way because they really cared a lot about force and physical factors and I would place much more emphasis the coordination and also flexibility... And also of injuries, a history of injuries is very important to. In the future want to deal much more with recognising talent for climbing and what is a talent you know? What should be there with 8 years, what should be there with 10 years you know?

So like what they are looking for in Gymnasts from a young age?

I would've thought that gymnasts would do much better in climbing but nowadays I think they are missing a certain... You see that they're too rigid and that is their understanding of body tension... If you look at the very good climbers you don't see the body tension because the body tension just switches on very briefly and only for the muscles that are absolutely needed. For example look at a gymnast playing basketball you know, they'd look so ridiculous. Just the way they bounce the ball...

It's always there, body tension is their second nature and I think you cannot afford this in climbing, so I'm very interested how well it really goes for them. At the beginning we all had this idea, he's a ballet dancer, or she's a ballet dancer, look at what positions she can go she must be such a good climber. But then she also has this thing of beauty and looking weightless so deeply ingrained in all her moves that she cannot do moves that are ugly, you know and things like this (mimics compression move).

This is what makes performance sport such an interesting field, the transfer is not the way you would expect it. It's much more subtle.

And there's still coaches that are still touting the power, the force and things like that?

Yeah they did that for this time but also we need to establish

some qualities, what do you call it? We don't need to look only at quantity. Of course the things that you can count are easily measured but there are things that you have to perceive or that you just see...

So it's very easy to have a tick list but you need to look beyond the tick list.

Exactly. And for that you need to have a really good eye for the activity and then in every country there are not so many people that can really do the job... Without sounding...

If you really look at all the people that hang out at all the World Cups they know lots about climbing, obviously enough. But if you talk to people that think they know shitloads about climbing but don't have this experience (Udo shakes his head dismissively)... You need to look at World class climbers on a daily basis basically to know what they're capable of and these people are hard to find.

This is why the Chinese hired the Slovenian guy before the World Cup in Chongqing. You'd think with all their martial arts etc. that it would be easy for the Chinese but no it's not! They have one billion people and I watched them, in 1992 I did a bicycle trip through China and we went to some gyms where they were practicing martial arts. All the little girls were jumping head high with their weapons and I was looking going "whoa, if those guys learn to climb..." But it doesn't always work like that. To be a really good climber you need to spend all this time they spend on martial arts, you need to spend it climbing. It's better to learn how they approach training, but then you need to learn other ways of training, you cannot copy from one activity to the other. You can only apply some things.

So your guys, they're a bunch of really strong athletes. Is the majority of their training just climbing?

No this becomes very different with advanced climbers. We look at deficiencies, like for instance Shorty, we know he needs to work out his other muscles in the winter to stabilise. It's very different. It could be strength training, it could be mental. For example we don't have the resources to do regular mental training unlike the Austrians.

You think that's an area where they're ahead?

Absolutely, absolutely. They have managed to establish a culture of winning in climbing competitions and when you look they are a small country compared to Germany. They pick certain activities, like skiing and climbing and then they put all of their resources in those activities. And someone like Anna and Kilian, since it was obvious they were a talent you know, they came in touch with a psychologist who told them certain things. Maybe not something spectacular but it was on the map and this is not happening in Germany. This is why the Austrian dominance really has a very clear reason.

Do you think with the Russians that they've got a similar background being established now? Maybe not historically but with what you said in The Network that the Russians have one advantage, they don't expect bouldering to be fun.

Of course this was provocation, I'm not meaning this that seriously but to an extent it's true. Last year I went on a train to Innsbruck and talked with Rustam for a couple of hours and it's a totally different culture, they have a totally different



Bram Berkien



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mindset. All my guys are studying and most of them do really well with their studies, they also like to go out and have fun ... Of course we are totally fine with this because for me climbing and doing competitions should make your life more interesting.

The climbers want to do stunts, they want to do cool stuff, go travelling etc. but we cannot give them the perspective that if they become World Champion we have a job for them...

And is that closer to the Russian philosophy?

Well I don't think the Russians have any real system because it's such a corrupt, weird country and it's a huge difference if you're from Moscow or St Petersburg or so and this is what leads to my comment "they don't expect it to be fun".

Rustam travelled one hour in each direction everyday on the underground through Moscow for training and I would have a hard time forcing my athletes to do this.

Nowadays in the Western world there are so many other activities that weren't there 30 years ago. All the old sports are struggling, Wrestling etc. all feel the competition of other activities. If you look at Parkour, if you look at YouTube it's getting millions of clicks. And all of my guys are totally attracted by Parkour, we do a lot of free running. And if you are 12 now why shouldn't you do free running? It's much easier to do, and then there's skateboarding, slacklining... There's so many things you can do.

In Russia it's different in some ways. My kids do what they like the most, with the nicest peer group... But we don't apply any pressure to keep them at climbing. And that is a big difference in cultures and leads to my comment "They don't expect climbing to be fun"

One thing with the Russians is they are superior at physiological games, superior to westerners. They're much tougher than we are and they are very smart. So we're dealing with very, very tough, smart

people. Over there it's a much tougher society, it's a much tougher life and it creates much tougher people. The Russians, they're really nice people but for example Dmitrii, he looks so... evil isn't the right word but cold, he could be an assassin. He's a very warm hearted person it's just the look he has... So intense.

Talking about nations and different philosophies this is a very cool part of the job because every nation has a different culture on how to approach basically the same thing. If you watch the Japanese stretching in isolation, according to sports scientists it's really bullshit to stretch for long periods if you want to have any kind of speed power but the Japanese do this and they do it really well.

This sort of thing I really like as it shows how open sport science still is. This sort of thing I really like as it shows how open sport science still is.



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