

Pumping Plastic: The Modernization of Climbing into a Competitive Sport

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The recent emergence of "Competition Climbing" in the United States and Europe is a remarkable phenomenon. The otherwise unstructured leisure pursuit of mountaineering has been transformed, into a very ordered and competitive sport. The loneliness of Alpine solitude for explorers such as Edmund Hillary, or Edward Whymper, has become the loneliness of the public spectacle for contestants such as Lynn Hill and Patrick Edlinger. It is still climbing, but its modern form would be unrecognizable to Whymper and his Victorian-era cohort. The climbing arena has changed; the medium for performance is no longer ice and granite, but fiberboard and plastic.

This paper uses Allen Guttmann's sport modernization theory to examine climbing's evolution. This theoretical model of change proves valid for explaining climbing's evolution into a quantified and commodified sport. The application of this theory to climbing points out that even the most autotelic of pursuits will be effected by the modernizing process, and that even activities which start with solely intrinsic rewards will apparently fall to what Guttmann termed the "juggernaut of modernization."

The paper describes how the leisure endeavor of mountaineering evolved and modernized after its beginnings in the late nineteenth century. A sport was born with Whymper's ascent of the Matterhorn, and then was altered by the development of wall and crag climbing in Yosemite Park, California. That sport was completely transformed by the phenomenon of "sport climbing" and finally today by competitions. The social influences on climbing's transmogrification are discussed, as well as the general propensity in the modern world to take casual leisure activities and make them sports, such as tractor pulls, or even aerobics.

Studying the development of competitive climbing and "sport Climbing" offers a valuable insight into the process of how modern sports are created, and what that creation says about the surrounding society.