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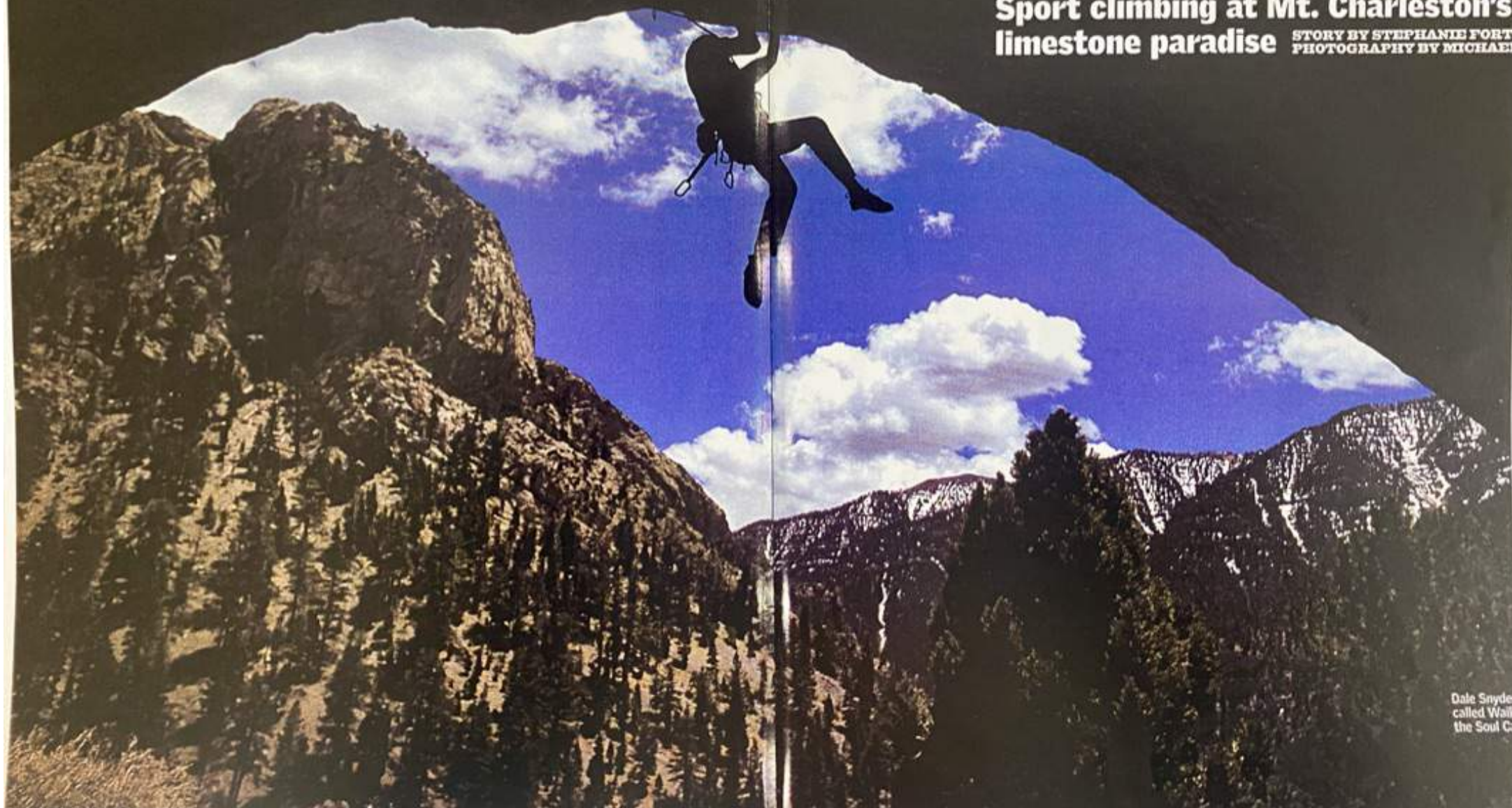
- ▶ Horsepacking Nevada's Humboldt Range
- ▶ World-class climbing, right in The 'Hood
- ▶ Canyoneering Utah's Zion National Park



# ASSAULT ON THE 'HOOD

Sport climbing at Mt. Charleston's limestone paradise

STORY BY STEPHANIE FORT  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL



Dale Snyder  
called Wall  
the Soul Ca



## ASSAULT ON THE HOOD



Jason Campbell  
chalking up.

Forty-five minutes north of Las Vegas, a fortress of limestone protects the Mt. Charleston wilderness. White cliffs swirled with orange, gold, and brown hues, and others streaked in grayish blue, line State Route 157, where the desert gives way to a high alpine haven. Caves millions of years in the making flaunt nature's artistry, tufas and systems of calcified rock running like veins over smooth porcelain limestone.

But some of the visitors don't just look — they touch this scenery, and touch it with love. When one cliff, dubbed The 'Hood, was publicized in an American climbing magazine in the mid 1990s, Mt. Charleston became an international sport-climbing destination.

The mountain's climbing potential was recognized as early as 1998 when Las Vegas climber Danny Meyers stirred up excitement over an area called Robber's Roost, off Highway 158. In 1991 local climber Dan McQuade joined Californians Rob Mulligan above Trail Canyon.

Many climbers prefer limestone to other rock, for reasons varying from the aesthetic (the opportunity to climb among stalactites formed by dripping, mineral-laden water) to the practical (limestone handholds are less apt to crumble in the hand than those of other rock). So limestone climbs are always in demand, but The 'Hood's 8,000-foot altitude and



Jared McMillen's hand was bleeding after climbing Screaming Target.

the smooth surface with few holds make The 'Hood's routes especially challenging. In climber thinking, "challenging" translates into "especially good climbing." The rock-climbing paths are rated from 5.0 to 5.15. There are only a few 5.15s in the world, but The 'Hood has several rated 5.14. Yet it also has several climbs appropriate for beginners.

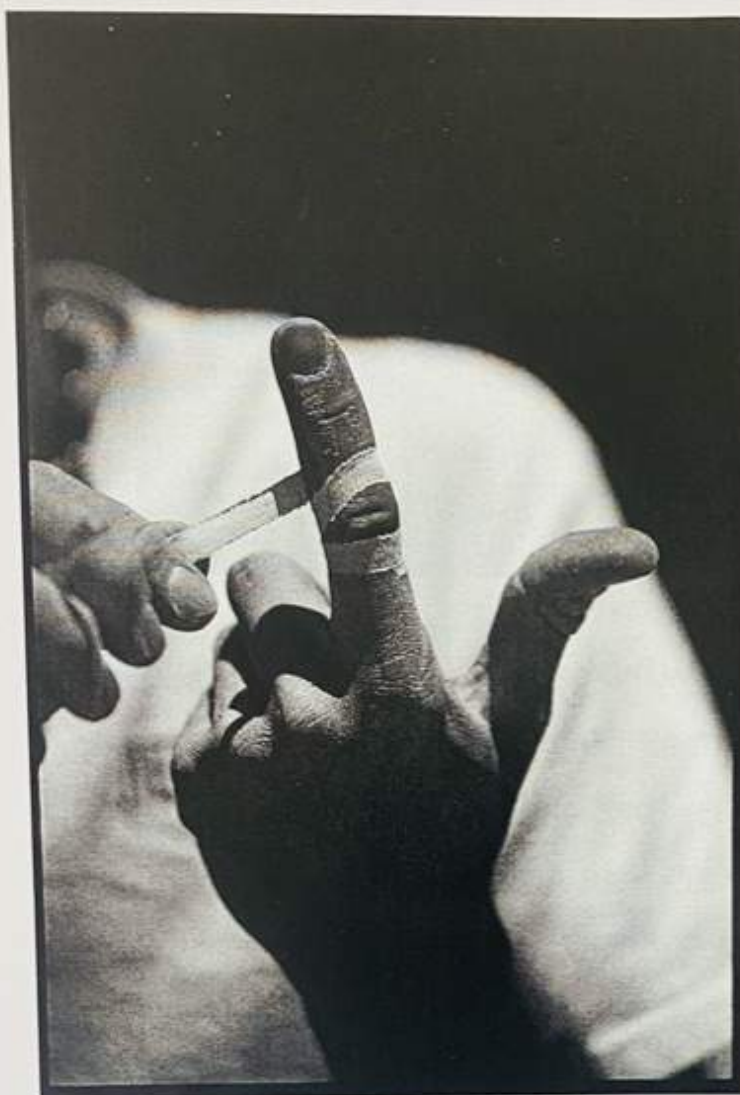
Furthermore, the dry mountain air savors winter's chill long after the calendar announces spring, creating perfect climbing weather all summer long.

The 'Hood got its name partly because of McQuade's passing fascination with rap music and partly because it was just, "a kind of neighborhood cliff," he said. He remembers when he and a small handful of friends were the area's only visitors.

Mulligan christened the cliff with first ascents of Bloodline (5.12b) and Borderline (5.13a), and McQuade stuck to the theme when he established and named area classics — Straight Outta' Compton (5.12d), Infectious Groove (5.13b), and Ghetto Boyz (5.13c). As the cliff became known for more difficult routes, sport climbers from the U.S., South Africa, France, Japan, and Australia headed to Las Vegas to test their skill.

Sport climbing gained popularity in the late 1980s, partly because it involves fewer risks than traditional climbing. In the traditional style, the lead climber must engineer his own





Steve Townshend tapes his finger before trying the route called Closing Down.

**RIGHT:** Chris Lindner on Screaming Target.



safety, deciding on each climb where to place removable pieces of protective gear in the rock's cracks and crevices; the leader then clips his or her rope to the protective gear, and the last climber removes the gear.

Sport-climbing routes, by contrast, are equipped with permanent steel bolts, used to attach protection called quick-draws (two carabiners connected by webbing).

In both disciplines the idea is often to "redpoint" the route, meaning to climb

it entirely by hand and footholds, without actually relying on those points of attachment. Their legitimate use is making a fall only a matter of failure, and not fatality; while redpointing, safety gear must not be used to support the climber's weight.

Sport climbing opened a new world of rock faces and caves which offered too few cracks and crevices for positioning traditional climbing gear. A climber's focus shifted to executing movements suggestive of monkey-bar

gymnastics.

It's a new sort of challenge; The Hood's steep routes demand the power of an uneven-parallel bar routine, while graceful footwork, like a balance-beam competitor's, is a must for climbing on vertical walls and less-than-vertical slabs.

And both styles have to be learned, even by otherwise-experienced climbers.

"You want me to put my foot where?"

Searching the glassy rock for the so-called foothold, I was sure my climbing partner was delusional, suffering The



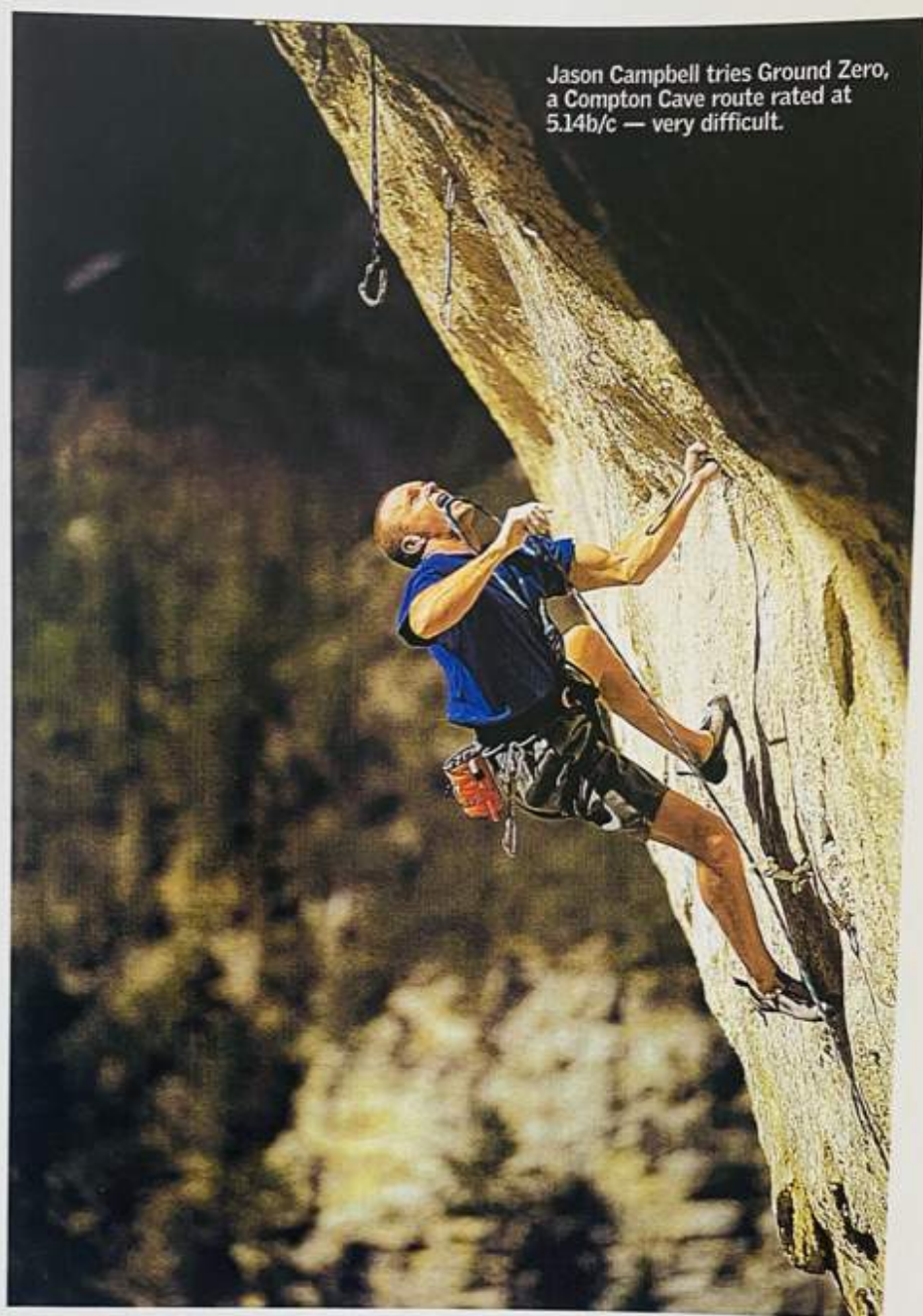
the back corner of the cave, this route proves the sport-climbing adage: If you're not falling, you're not trying. And Mt. Charleston's thin mountain air breeds tenacity.

Routes which nobody has yet "red-pointed" are called "projects," and a climber may go to great lengths — bordering obsession — to be first to succeed. Even a route that others have done, but the obsessing climber has not, may become a personal project. When undertaking either kind of project, climbers will practice moves over and over, devise intense cross-training programs, taking multiple falls, and climbing until their skin is raw and bloody. Failing a few times, days, weeks, sometimes months, when trying a project, is a part of the game. Typically lacking the intimidating height, length, and exposure of traditional climbs, projects teach perseverance; the payoff is breaking mental and physical barriers, to reach a personal best.

"F-a-l-l-ing!"

That word has left my lips and echoed down the canyon countless times while trying to see a project through to fruition. After weeks of attempting to redpoint the Soul Cave's Soul Train, the repeated rehearsals on its tiny pockets made my fingers swell until they no longer fit inside the holes. Not wanting to submit, I continued trying. For four frustrating weeks I fell at the same place, a long reach to a small edge, which was also for me, the "crux" of the climb — its most difficult move. Redpointing the Soul Train had become my obsession. Yet there is joy in pursuing such obsession, climbing with grace and control while exerting every last morsel of physical energy. The mind is clear, the sounds of other climbers vanish, and I hear only the rhythm of my own breath keeping time with hikers' footsteps on the trail below. Finally achieving that state, I reached the route's crux and in a burst of energy, latched the hold that had thrown me from the cliff so many times. Quickly thanking God, I sprinted to the finish.

The route was rated 5.14a, my long-term goal in climbing — but its grade has since been changed to 5.13d. Climbing grades are formed by a con-



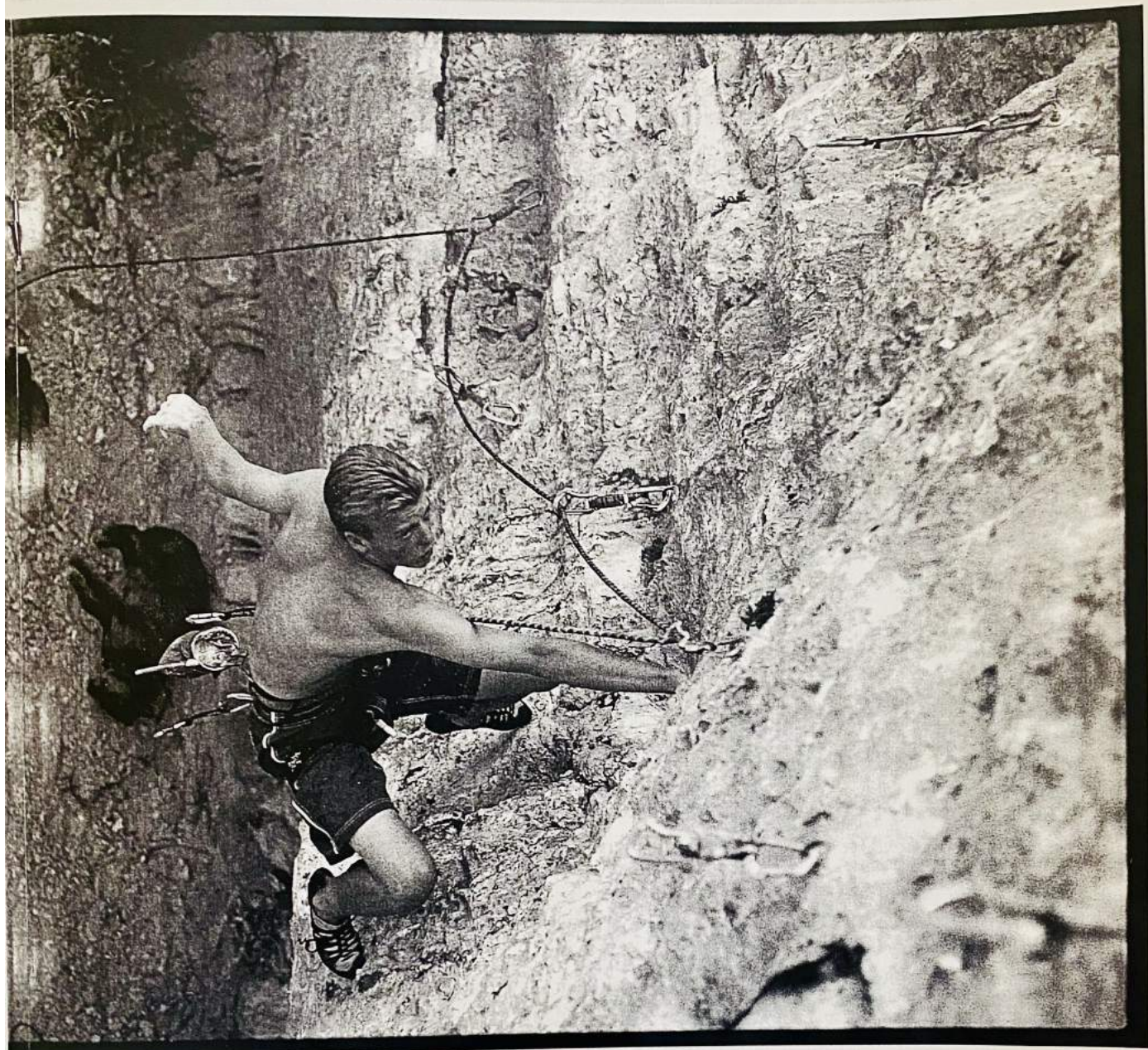
Jason Campbell tries Ground Zero, a Compton Cave route rated at 5.14b/c — very difficult.

sensus of opinion. And, like opinions, over time grades can change. However, their significance as a guide to a route's difficulty is dwarfed by the reward of success after enduring many failures. And at The Hood, these triumphs have more than once raised the standard in sport climbing.

In 1997 Chris Sharma made the first ascent of Hasta La Vista (5.14b/c), which

at the time was one of America's most difficult routes. A steep line climbing onto the ceiling of The Hood's cathedral-like Compton Cave, the route's small hand and footholds demand intense finger power and abdominal strength. In 2000, Liv Sansov of France, a World Cup climbing champion, made a historic first female ascent of the route, becoming the second woman in





'Hood's first case of pulmonary edema. After five years of climbing well-featured blocky Colorado limestone, The Hood's footholds that seemed the size of dust specks, and pockets too small for my hands (even though I wear only a size-six ring), had me stumped and frustrated. But while unraveling the puzzles, I became addicted.

Routes such as The Walk By Slab's Baby Got Back (5.10a), the Pine Tree Ledge's Witness This (5.10d) and Heatin' Up the 'Hood (5.11c), effectively

teach how to use and trust the smallest features for feet, while building finger and forearm strength on the tiny edges and pockets. Rappin' Boys, a popular 5.12a on the South Central area, is a test of balance while traversing a diagonal line of pockets. Though the handholds are generous in size, smearing your feet over glassy rock gives a quick lesson in trusting rubber-soled climbing shoes. One marvels as they stick.

Finally I discovered a few welcome exceptions — routes with big hand

holds and footholds — so the Infectious Cave's Urban Decay (5.12c) became a favorite. A series of edges and pinches over a steep wall have climbers racing to clip onto the anchors before falling victim to the lactic acid building in their forearms. The Compton Cave's Straight Outta' Compton (5.12d) is one of the area's most traveled routes. It calls for exciting gymnastic moves, swinging feet free while latching handholds often referred to as "the biggest holds you'll ever fall off of." Climbing

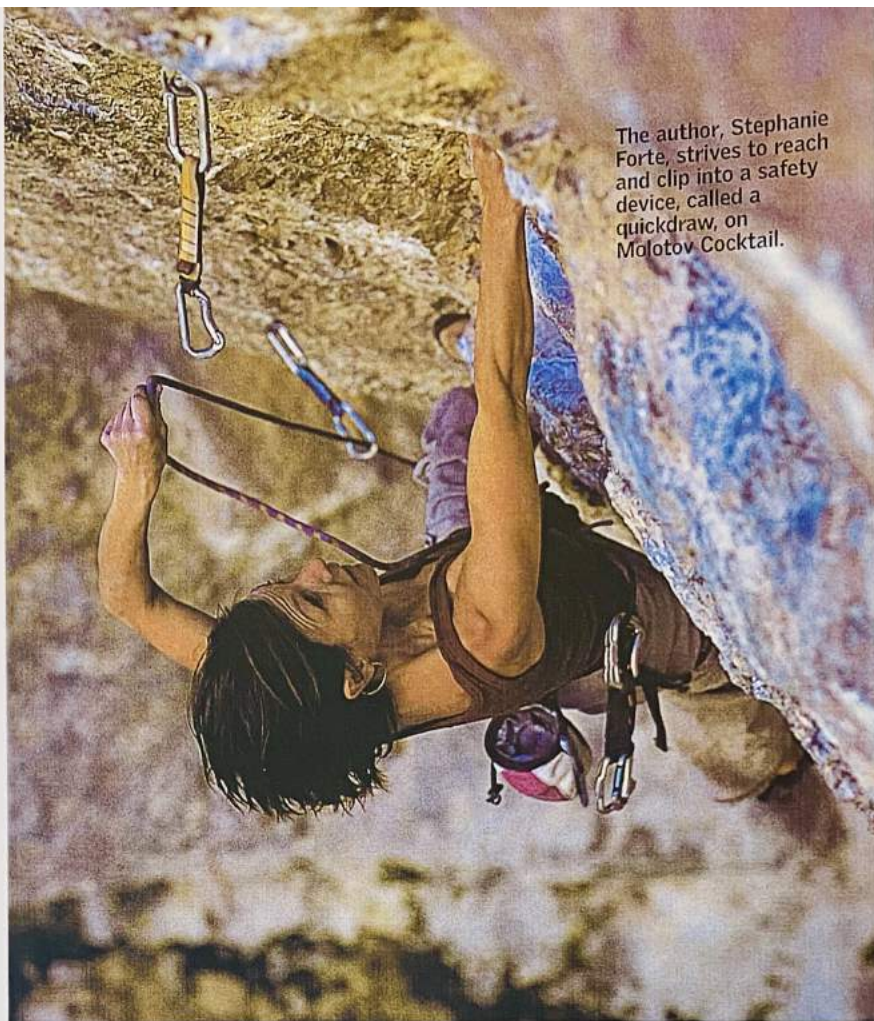


the world to climb this level. Las Vegas local Jason Campbell and former World Cup champion François LeGrand upped the ante further, with first ascents of routes up to 5.14c. But, you don't have to be a world champion to climb at The 'Hood; with routes beginning at 5.6, climbers of all levels can rope up and enjoy.

And, no worries about failing or falling while climbing at The 'Hood — you'll be with friends. With many climbers' attention diverted to bouldering for the moment, Las Vegas climbers once again enjoy the peace of a neighborhood cliff. There's a camaraderie shared among the local and visiting climbers at The 'Hood, so while everybody may not know your name, they will understand what you're trying to accomplish. ♦

*Stephanie Forte is a contributing editor to Climbing Magazine.*

*Michael Clark is a freelance photographer specializing in outdoor adventure.*



The author, Stephanie Forte, strives to reach and clip into a safety device, called a quickdraw, on Molotov Cocktail.



## Getting there

**Location:** The 'Hood, 37 miles from Las Vegas.

**Directions:** From Las Vegas, take U.S. 95 North 16 miles to Nevada Route 157. Turn left toward Mr. Charleston, drive 20.5 miles, and turn right onto Echo Road. After half a mile, make another right leading to the Trail Canyon trailhead parking area. (Alternate parking is available at the Mary Jane trailhead.) After several minutes of hiking the Trail Canyon Trail, a band of limestone, The 'Hood, will appear above the trail to your left. Approximately 15 minutes into your hike, two prominent pine trees on the left, and trail markers, denote a left turn, beginning the trail to The 'Hood. Crossing a small wash, you will hike up a series of switchbacks to reach the Corrosion Cave.

**Camping:** Kyle Canyon Campground, on Nevada Route 157, 18.3 miles from U.S. 95, and Fletcher View Campground at 18.7 miles, both on the left, cost \$13 per night. Primitive camping is free.

Take Route 157 to Echo Road, turn right and continue .4 miles to a dirt road that heads to the left. Shortly after passing Echo Well No. 3, make a left to an open parking/camping area. Please respect the area and pack out all trash.

**Lodging:** Mt. Charleston Hotel is on Highway 157, 17 miles from U.S. 95. (702) 872-5500, [www.mtcharlestonhotel.com](http://www.mtcharlestonhotel.com); Mt. Charleston Lodge, 21.4 miles from U.S. 95 at end of Nevada Route 157, (702) 872-5408, [www.mtcharlestonlodge.com](http://www.mtcharlestonlodge.com).

**Guidebooks:** For more information on routes and climbing on Mt. Charleston, please reference *Islands in the Sky* by Dan McQuade, Randy Leavitt, and Mick Ryan, or *Las Vegas Limestone* by Roxanna Brock. Guidebooks and climbing gear are available at Desert Rock Sports, 8201 W. Charleston Blvd., Las Vegas, (702) 254-1143.