

Queen of the hill

One of the most influential rock climbers, male or female, Lynn Hill continues to lead the way into midlife. We take a look at her extraordinary contribution to a growing sport, learn why she's never gone 'Hollywood' and find out what challenges lie ahead.

By Stephanie Forte

Photos by Simon Carter / Onsite Photography



To tell the story of Lynn Hill you have to go back 30 years when the young gymnast from Orange County, Calif., headed into the California desert with her sisters and some friends to learn to climb.

She turned heads at the crags instantly. Not only because a woman climbing in 1975 was a rare sight, or because she had a natural bohemian beauty and crystal blue eyes, but because of what happened when she stepped onto the rock.

"Almost from the first day when 'Little Linnie' tied into a rope, the common refrain was, 'Who the hell is that girl?'" renowned climber John Long writes in the forward of Hill's book, *Climbing Free, My Life in the Vertical World*.

At 44 Hill's finely sculpted body appears even smaller than the 5 foot 1½ it measures, but people have learned not to mistake her for being fragile.

"Lynn helped me realize anything is possible," says pro climber Lisa Rands, the first American woman to boulder V12 and the first woman in the world to climb the British grade of E8. "When I started climbing I thought I couldn't do something that men couldn't do. Having her do things that haven't been repeated by men has helped open my eyes."

As Long also wrote, "Lynn shattered the gender barrier so thoroughly that no one could put the pieces back together again."

Hill began to reshape climbing in 1980 as the first woman to climb 5.12d, onsighting (climbing on lead without falling on the first attempt and with no prior information on the route) Ophir Broke in Colorado, one of the hardest routes of the day. A decade later she left a French climber with his foot entrenched deeply in his mouth. After he made the first ascent of Masse Critique, 5.14a, in France, Jibe Tribout declared that a woman could not climb the route.

Looking back, Lynn chalks his comment up to ignorance. "I felt [5.14] was definitely attainable, maybe not right then, but I had this vision it could be done," she says. In the spring of 1991 she became the first female in the world to redpoint (after several attempts, climbing a route on lead without falling) a route of the 5.14 grade, a level that still very few women have reached. The route was Masse Critique.

"She was like the Lone Ranger," says Jeff Achey, editor of *Climbing* magazine, of Hill's entry into international competition, which she dominated from 1986 to 1992, winning most every competition she entered, including several World Cup titles. "She was the only [American] to go over there. It was completely out of step with what was going on in her country."

Even a 72-foot fall from the anchors of a route in 1989 couldn't break her stride. A tree broke her fall and she suffered relatively mild injuries: a broken foot, dislocated elbow, and cuts to her nose, shoulder and chin, all requiring stitches. Within three months she was back climbing.

In 1993 came one of the most significant moments of her career: in four days, she made the first free ascent (advancing upward with only her hands and feet, but with ropes and anchoring devices employed for protection) of The Nose, a 3,000-foot route up Yosemite's El Capitan. "She was working on it but so were a lot of people," recalls Achey. "Lynn was just in the mix. ... No one thought she had a prayer."

Her sequel to what's been referred to as the greatest moment in American climbing history only got better. In 1994 she made a one-day free ascent of The Nose, climbing the entire route in 23 hours. "That just blew everything else [in climbing] out of the water," Achey says. Over a decade later, despite tremendous effort, her feats have not been repeated.

Hill scales Mount Arapiles
in Australia.

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THE MIND OF A WARRIOR

Growing up as one of seven kids, Hill learned to figure a lot of things out by herself. “Lesson after lesson I learned that you have to take responsibility for yourself.”

Once after gymnastics practice, Hill decided she'd string together a round-off, backhandspring and backflip sans spotter. Midway through, her inner voice began shouting doubts about her ability to stick the routine. She landed flat on her back. From that point forward she proclaimed that once she'd made a commitment to an action, second-guessing herself wasn't an option.

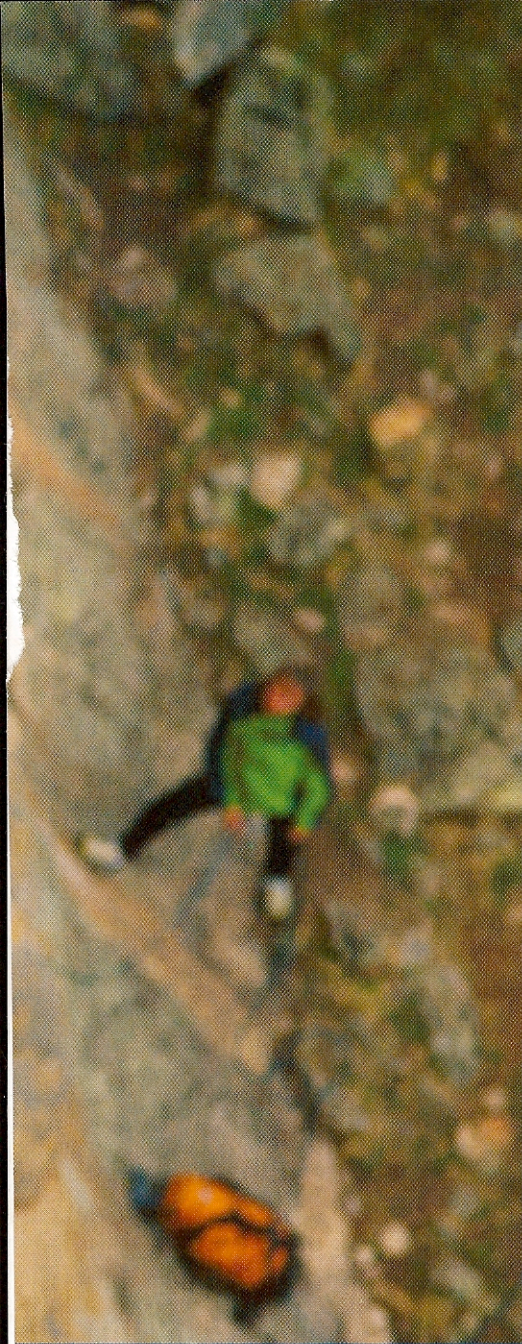
Case in point: In 1979 Hill and two partners, all inexperienced aid climbers (those who climb surfaces with few holds, relying on gear placement to ascend the route), found themselves 2,000 feet off the deck on The Nose, in total darkness—a full pitch below a ledge where they'd set up camp for the night.

Without a headlamp, Hill grabbed her partner's cigarette lighter and led the way. With just a flicker of light, she felt for holds as she free climbed the 5.11 pitch, which at the time was the top end of her ability.

“It was definitely a hardship to get to a more comfortable place,” she says, recalling how she focused on the rewards of food, water and rest. “So, I just went slow and got us up there.”

Feats like this, as well as her free ascent of The Nose, may have never happened if Hill hadn't learned an important lesson early on: that her intentions must be true in order to succeed.

“The lesson that became imprinted on my memory was don't let the desire to win interfere with your performance,” Hill writes in her book. At seven years old, Hill was set on winning her swim meet, hoping to impress her coach. As the competitor in the next lane started gaining, she focused on



certain distaste to that sort of style for me." In a sport where big risks are rewarded with a modest paycheck, she sees no shame in trying to make a few extra bucks, and tried it herself years ago by doing casting calls, but realized, "Hollywood has a stereotypical view of what a girl is and what a girl should do that I didn't like. It wasn't me."

The birth of her son, Owen, two years ago brought new meaning to Hill's life, teaching her to relax and to balance her work with family life (she's engaged to fellow climber Brad Lynch, father of Owen). "I waited a long time to have a kid, and the most important thing is to do it right," she says.


Which means her climbing days are now precious, so she makes the most of them.

Hill trains in the climbing gym or outdoors at least three days a week. Roughly 15 months after giving birth, she redpointed a 5.14a in France, and back in the States she nabbed the first female ascent of Sprayathon, a burly 5.13c in Rifle, Colo.

GIVING BACK

In college Hill studied to be a physical therapist, which seemed like a good way to help people, but she had an idea she couldn't shake: to form a center where people could learn about climbing, break through their own barriers and reap the mental rewards of being outdoors.

In her new climbing camp venture—Lynn Hill Climbing Camps, a series of five-day intensive courses for beginner to advanced climbers—she and her staff of certified mountain guides teach climbing technique, gear placement and rescue skills. Lynch, a chef, prepares gourmet meals for participants, who are video-taped as they climb so Hill can analyze their performance.

With motherhood, a new business and an impending wedding, her wanderlust spirit remains strong. Owen has already been to 10 countries. In between changing diapers and taking care of business, there are still routes to be climbed and first ascents to be claimed—she's far from done. "The story's not over," she says. 

Las Vegas-based writer Stephanie Forte is a contributing editor to Climbing magazine who also writes for Glamour and Las Vegas Magazine. During her 12-year climbing addiction she's climbed up to 5.13d and has made several first female ascents on the rocks around Las Vegas.

getting to the end of the pool first and claiming victory. Barely touching the wall, she emerged to find she'd been disqualified. She writes, "If I hadn't been so concerned with winning, I might have followed my own natural rhythm and won anyway."

A QUIET DIGNITY

She's been photographed by Annie Leibovitz, invited to the White House to meet First Lady Barbara Bush, has been featured in an IMAX movie and in countless international magazines. But fame means little to Hill.

Today climbers are hiring agents and publicists and Hill says, "There's a



What's in a Number?

To better grasp the significance of Lynn Hill's accomplishments, consider the Yosemite Decimal System's (YDS) 5.0 to 5.15 scale, used to grade the difficulty of rock climbs (Class 5 is technical rock climbing). Beginning at 5.10, routes are assigned a letter to signify an increase in difficulty. For example, a 5.10a route is easier than a 5.10d. A route's grade is decided by a consensus among climbers who have climbed the route.

So where does Hill fit in the mix? Roughly 14 women in the world have climbed routes of the 5.14 grade, Hill having been the first. To date only one woman, Josune Bereziartu of Spain, has climbed 5.14d, and Beth Rodden is the only American woman to have climbed 5.14b.