

liv sansoz

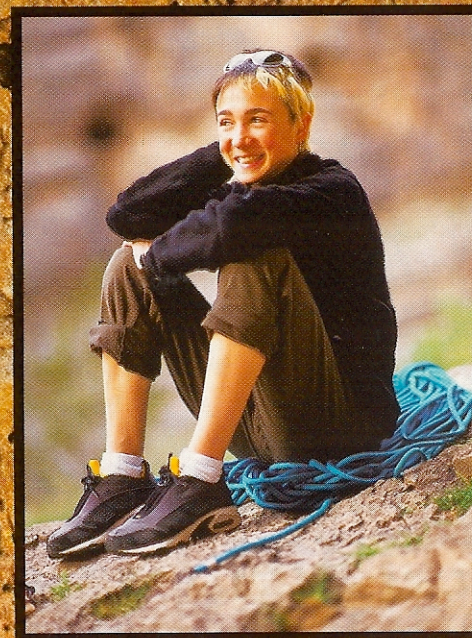
FAST and LIGHT

LOOKING BEYOND 5.14 by Stephanie Forte

"You know when you have a glass, and there is some water here..." Liv Sansoz's voice trails off as she runs her delicate finger up the side of a glass, stopping at the liquid's meniscus. "And on this side, you have no water," she continues, motioning to the empty section of the glass above. Her French accent adds a sense of mystery to this simple philosophy. "Before, I was always looking here," she sighs, tapping lightly upon the empty space.

At 24 years old, Liv Sansoz speaks with the deliberation of many people twice her age. The contemplative approach is surprising given the dramatic strides this young climber has made. Sansoz has already won four climbing World Cups and three Top Rock bouldering titles, and she's repeated a host of hard sport climbs and boulder problems across the globe. Last fall, when she ticked Mt. Charletson's Hasta la Vista (5.14b/c) in Arizona, she became only the second woman in the world, behind Basque climber Josune Bereziartu, to climb a route in the 14c range. And Sansoz is looking to up the ante even farther; at press time, Sansoz is reportedly just a move away from sending Necessary Evil (5.14c), Chris Sharma's seldom-repeated testpiece, which most agree to be one of the hardest climbs of its grade anywhere.

And yet, Sansoz seems unaffected by it all. "I don't consider myself a champion," she says dismissively. "It does not mean anything to be a champion." Instead, the young climber seems content to continue through life collecting experiences and perspectives.



the mirror of a champion

In the stands of the climbing World Cup, a young French girl's life is changed. Lynn Hill's finesse has the 14-year-old in awe. Unaware that she'll one day stand on the same winner's podium that Hill now occupies, Liv Sansoz decides to enter the world of climbing. With incredible raw talent, her long, willowy limbs move without effort over rock. She brings a rarely seen air of elegance and grace to the sport.

the tao of climbing

"Competition is a special world," explains Liv. "You learn how to control your emotions, your fears, and how to keep away pressure." In addition to talent, Sansoz's innate focus and ability to manage stress have escorted her to the top. Her secret; walk away from the gym and into the Alps for long hikes with her father around their home in the French ski town Bourg St. Maurice. Prior to winning the 1999 World Cup in Slovenia, Liv took almost two weeks off from climbing to help ease the stress. Once en route to a competition, she is calm and knows that she is ready to try her best. Longtime friend and former World Cup competitor Shelley Presson-Dunbar says, "Liv is just more relaxed than other climbers."

a gentle amble

Liv's ability to take life in stride — "If I fall it is okay, I gave it my best and went to my maximum" — has proven effective. She won World Cup titles in 1996, 1997, 2000 and 2001, and Top Rock Bouldering Challenge titles in 1996, 1997 and 1998, all while working toward her master's degree in psychology. ■ More impressive, still, was this year's performance in the 2001 Ice World Cup. Though she had never before climbed ice, when she was invited to join the Petzl/Charlet Moser team, she picked up tools for the first time and won four out of five of the events to take a second place overall. Sansoz accepts defeat as gracefully as victory — "it takes time to accept not to be first," — seemingly more concerned with the experience than with the numbers. Never mentioning her victories, she remembers the camaraderie among her team members, the speed competition, where men compete in boxer shorts and tank tops, and the parties. As she speaks, a smile brightens her face: "It's nice to compete where everyone is so happy!"

scared straight

Unfamiliar terrain for Sansoz, a runout slab was the gateway to the anchors of her most recent 5.14a redpoint at the Virgin River Gorge. Continuous highway noise challenged her concentration and focus, as Liv battled perhaps her greatest demon in climbing, the fear of falling. Practicing her project on top rope for four days, she was still unwilling to bypass a difficult clip — fear of a big fall kept her clipping, and falling. "The hardest part for me was learning to forget the bolts while I was climbing," she says. Eventually, a tiny edge provided solace, and she was able to clip — and forget. In only four redpoint attempts, Liv made the first female ascent of the Route of All Evil. In hindsight, says Sansoz, "To be scared is stupid."

power to waste

"Many climbers around me were saying that I didn't have a lot of power," Liv recalls. "But when I started bouldering, I saw that I was not too bad, and they might be wrong." And wrong they were. After a winter hiatus from the rock, Liv recently visited Hueco where she put a few notches in her lipstick case, ticking several V8s and V9s, then flashing a V10 on the Martini Roof. Discovering this hidden power has Liv ready to explore other venues of climbing. "If someone proposes to me to go for a big wall, I will certainly go," she says. Dust off those haul bags, boys!

closet philopher

Sansoz talks of trying Biographie (8c+/5.14c), in Ceüse, of traveling and of more climbing. She lusts for new experiences and has a passion for learning. "My life until today has made me," she says pensively. "If something were different, I would not be me." Liv Sansoz's glass is now full. ▲

