

THE INNOCENT, THE IGNORANT AND THE INSECURE

By Jim Bridwell



Jim Bridwell: The Innocent, the Ignorant, and the Insecure | Ascent

When Jim Bridwell wrote, "The Innocent, the Ignorant and the Insecure" in Yosemite for the 1973 edition of *Ascent*, he had just devised a sub-rating system to the YDS scale that at the time topped out at 5.11.

By adding the suffix letters of a, b, c and d to grades 5.10 and up, he solved the problem of having a broad range of difficulty within a single grade. Until then, some 5.10s and .11s were much easier than others of the same grade.

What Bridwell couldn't account for were climbers who either didn't understand the system, or used their egos to downrate established routes. With "The Innocent," he hoped to add further clarity to the new scale and provide guidance to get everyone more or less rating routes using the same objective criteria—a near impossibility, as we now know.

By Jim Bridwell | August 11th, 2020

Downrating the difficulty of climbs is an insidious and debilitating practice, but it is not a new game in the climbing world. Its history is long, but it has recently gained new popularity in Yosemite Valley. The reasoning behind downrating varies, but the results are the same, a breakdown of reliability in the basic climbing language.

Practitioners of downrating fall into three main types: the innocent, the ignorant and the insecure. We are not too concerned with the first because of its rarity. The second can be cured through education. The third is extremely difficult to remedy, as it is based in a fundamental emotional immaturity; its roots are in the instincts of all individuals.

The Yosemite Decimal System (YDS) is founded upon the accepted ratings of individual climbs by the founding fathers of the system. In order to have a system, it is necessary to respect the ratings that form its foundation. Units of time are not changed because some people run the mile faster than others. Chaos would result if everyone's watch had different length minutes. It is not possible to rely on a rating system unless order is maintained within it.



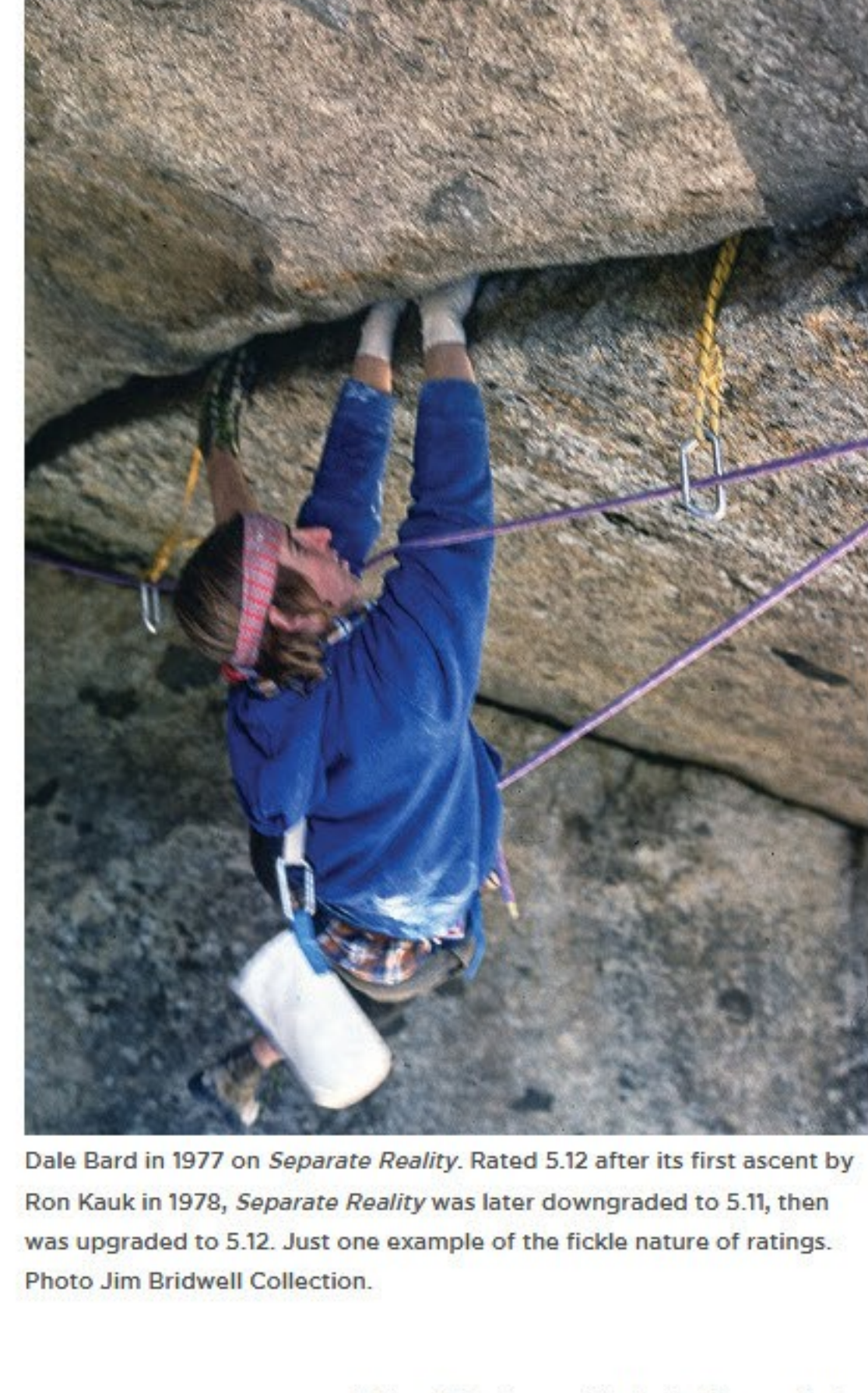
Jim Bridwell, Fred East, Jay Fiske, (back to camera), and Billy Westbay, the new kids on the rock, after the first ascent of the Pacific Ocean Wall on El Capitan, in 1975. Photo Dean Fidelman

Granted, rating a climb is relatively abstract. Fair rating of a climb implies a moral obligation, on the part of the climber, to consciously be as accurate as possible. A climber who downrates is stating that he is better than another climber. It is a practice as old as the first war. If a climber says a climb is 5.9 that another climber says is 5.10, then the first climber must be better. This is an example of individual competitive climbing.

Group pride, or the pack instinct, exhibits itself when an entire area is downrated. The climbers here are better than the climbers there, because the climbs here are rated harder. Some climbs in certain areas are rated 5.10 or 5.10+ though they have been climbed only once or twice, after innumerable attempts by one of the area's foremost climbers. This could be a gross mistake, or it could be a gross ego trip.

The most common motivation behind downrating is protection of the downrater's self-image. Avoid the ridicule of having one's climb downrated. Downrate first, and be safe. This type of game causes its most dedicated players to fool even themselves. Move rating is an outgrowth of this syndrome. Breaking a pitch into individual moves and rating the pitch by the hardest move is nonsense. A hundred-foot lieback with no moves over 5.9, but none under 5.8, and with no place to rest, is not a 5.9 pitch!

At present, 5.10 and 5.11 are the most abused ratings. This is because these are the most prestigious free- climbing categories, and also, because they are the most vulnerable to anatomical idiosyncrasies. Since climbers tend to prefer one type of climbing to another, a crack climber, for instance, will be prone to think cracks are less difficult than they, in fact, might be. Practice makes perfect, and easier.



Dale Bard in 1977 on *Separate Reality*. Rated 5.12 after its first ascent by Ron Kauk in 1978, *Separate Reality* was later downgraded to 5.11, then was upgraded to 5.12. Just one example of the fickle nature of ratings. Photo Jim Bridwell Collection.

The only fair solution to this problem is a rating based on a comparison of the climbs. Climbs, unlike climbers, don't change much. As a climber progresses in physical conditioning, confidence and technical proficiency, he may tend to downrate. He should return to establish routes for a rating comparison.

Blatant abuse of the rating system (YDS) was a general practice this past season in Yosemite. It seemed almost "in vogue." Climbs that an individual couldn't do in the spring were 5.8+ by autumn. Other climbs weren't too bad, even though it took several tries, falls or even a few rests on tension. In a few cases, the climb wasn't "too bad" even though the climber couldn't and didn't do it.

Some people have downrated a climb after their fourth or fifth ascent of it, even though they fell the first time. Once again, practice makes perfect. Personally, I do not feel that holders of this attitude are being honest with the climbing community, or with themselves.

Some routes have, in fact, been made easier because of pin scars, broken flakes and fixed pins. The first two situations are permanent and may necessitate a legitimate rating change. Fixed pins on routes of a continuous nature obviously make the route easier. There is a great difference between hanging in a strenuous position to place a pin, and just clipping into a fixed one.

Certain formidable climbs have a history of classic, bold ascents. Fixed pins and the use of new technical gadgetry necessarily reduce the impact of such routes, as compared to more pure and aesthetic ascents. Climbers should feel a moral obligation to maintain the tradition of the first ascent of the route they are

doing. This is particularly true of classic routes such as *Twilight Zone*. The rating of such a climb depends on the style in which it is done, which in turn, determines the mental factor. Doing a climb with a selection of 15 nuts and no hammer is an entirely different affair than doing the same route with 30 pitons and a hammer.

Following is a list of controversial 5.10 and 5.11 Yosemite climbs. The ratings are in accord with a consensus of those climbers most familiar with the routes. In addition, because of a wide range in the 5.10 category, I have added a sub-letter (a through d) to further classify comparative difficulties (a meaning easiest in the class, b more difficult, etc.).

Climbs of more than one 5.10 or 5.11 pitch have been broken down into separate pitches. Pitches are categorized according to the predominant climbing technique used on them. In some cases, two types of technique deserve mention, and the pitch is placed in both categories.

Many problems are inherent in any rating system. Rating, itself, is a problem. The different physiology of climbers presents the main difficulty. A smaller or larger, shorter, longer hand-finger-foot-knee-chest-arm-leg-body will make a huge difference in the comparative difficulty of certain moves or pitches.

Pitches are listed according to general different sizes, but accurate information about absolute sizes of cracks and other pertinent facts can only be had through word of mouth. Climbing is above all else a human endeavor, and precise communication about it can only pass through those who practice it.

Few things are absolute, and rating systems are no exception; but, hopefully, the information given here will help facilitate communication in the climbing community.



Mike Graham and Bridwell give ratings the thumbs up in 1976 after the first ascent of *Gold Ribbon* (VI 5.10 A4) Yosemite. Photo Jim Bridwell Collection.

Grade	Face Climbs	Chimneys	Liebacks
5.10 "a"	- Fallen Arches - Maxine's Wall - Angel's Approach North Buttress, Middle Cathedral - Lichen Nightmare - Pulpit Rock, from the notch East Buttress, Lower Cathedral Rixon's West Face, P. 2	- Hot Line, P. 5	- Twilight Zone, P. 3 - La Esquela, P. 3 - Rixon's East, P. 1
5.10 "b"	- Pulpit, Orey-Jones - Perhaps - Limbo Ledge, P. 1 - Punch Bowl - East Buttress, M.C. - Henley Quits, P. 2 - Peanut - Central Pillar Direct, M.C.R., P. 8	- Lost Arrow Chimney	- Wheat Thin - Basket Case, P. 4 - Koko Ledge, left side
5.10 "c"	- Mother's Lament - Slab Happy Dihardral - Chain Reaction - Paradise Lost, M.C. - Cheek - D.N.B., M.C. - Elusion		- Waverly Wafer - Powell-Reed, M.C.
5.10 "d"	- Swan Slab, P. 1	- Hot Line, P. 6	- Split Pinnacle - High Pressure
5.11	- Calf - Void		- La Esquela, P. 1, 2 - Hour Glass, left-side undercling
	Thin Cracks	Hand-and-Fist	Off-Widths 4" and Bigger
5.10 "a"	- Stone Groove - Swan Slab, P. 2 - New Dimensions, P. 2,3 - Vendetta - Sacherer Cracker - Siberian S.S. - East Corner of Higher Spire - Ramp of Deception - Central Pillar Direct, M.C. P. 2, 6	- Henley Quits - Midterm - Ahab - Hump - Absolutely Free, right side - Secret Storm	- Penny Nickle Arete - Reed Pinnacle, left side - Girl Next Door - Crack of Despair - Crack of Doom - The Cookie, left side - Peter Pan, right side, P. 1 - Chingando
5.10 "b"	- Outer Limits, P. 1 - Gripper - Anathema - Easy Streaks - Rixon's East, variation on P. 1 - Bare Necessities - New Dimensions, P. 1	- Peter Pan, right side, P. 2 - Book of Job - Independence Pinnacle, Independent Route, P. 2 - Quickie Quizzes - Rixon's West Face, P. 5 - This and That, P. 2	- Henley Quits, left side - Vendetta, P. 2 - Leverage - Hourglass, right side - Edge of Night - Slack, left side - Pulpit Pooper - Narrow Escape - Tower of Geek - Kat Pinnacle - Independence Pinnacle, Independent Route, P. 3
5.10 "c"	- Outer Limits, P.2 - Lunatic Fringe - Hardly Pinnacle - High Quality - Slack Center - English Breakfast - Sacherer-Fredericks, M.C. Limbo Ledge, P. 2 - Hot Line, P. 1, 2 - Mental Block, P. 1	- Meat Grinder - Bridalveil East, the Midget - Chimney - Straight Error, P. 2	- This and That, P. 1 - Forbidden Pinnacle - Hourglass, left side - Chopper Flake - Jam Session
5.10 "d"	- Catchy - Vanishing Point - Serenity Crack - Olga's Trick - Five and Dime - Independence Pinnacle, Center Route, P. 3 - Leaning Meanie	-1096 - Final Exam	- Mental Block, P. 2, 3 - Twilight Zone - Steppin' Out - Fall Out
5.11	- New Directions - Butterfingers - Abstract Corner	- Short Cake - Gold Rush	- Cream Basket - Case