

## TEN THINGS

COMPILED BY FEDERICA VALABREGA

### ...YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT BOLD, BRILLIANT BELAYERS

Belayers get peed on, peeled off ledges, and generally abused, but without them we'd go nowhere. Here, 10 courageous catchers who held the rope—no matter what.



ANDREW BURR

Angele Sjong keeps a close eye on her husband, Justen, FFA of *Town Crier* (5.12d), Index, WA.

**1** While climbing with Lizzy Scully on Leaning Tower's West Face, in Yosemite, "many years ago," Scully recalls, Tim Jamonville took one for the team...on his head. While he was at a hanging belay and despite his "Please don't," Scully sprinkled upon him from 100 feet above—she had to pee so badly she'd gone through her pants.

**2** Peilan Tang belayed Ryan Hoskin at the Orange Oswald Wall, New River Gorge, in 2008, when a beehive suddenly dislodged near her. With thousands of bees swarming, the highly allergic Tang kept Hoskin on. On the ground, Hoskin knocked the hive into Summersville Lake.

**3** In 2007, Ryan Hauer and Elliot Nierman climbed at Endless Wall, the New. Hauer led *Euro Nation* (5.10b) and was about to clip his third bolt when he lost his balance. "Suck it in, suck it in!" Hauer screamed. Nierman jumped down the incline, banging himself up, but "was a bit dismayed to see me still hanging out on the 'slopers,' even as the rope went taut," recalls Hauer.

**4** In 1999, Peter Terbush, a 21-year-old Coloradan, died belaying Kerry Pyle during a Volkswagen-sized rockfall at Glacier Point Apron, Yosemite. Pyle was climbing 60 feet up when the rock dislodged from 1,300 feet above; a piece struck Terbush in the head, killing him instantly but sparing Pyle. (Terbush's brake hand still held the rope when his body was found.) Terbush's parents filed an ultimately unsuccessful \$10 million suit against the National Park Service alleging it neglected to post signage at the previously active site, which might have deterred Terbush from climbing there.

**5** Some belayers hold fast even when anchored to "a lone angle piton only halfway in," recalls Pat Ament, who caught Layton Kor on P2 of the *Bastille Crack* (5.8), in Eldorado

Canyon, Colorado, on June 11, 1963—Kor's 25th birthday. Ament was only 16 when Kor pitched while laybacking a flake that disintegrated. "Instantly, I realized if I stayed in that position, we both would have all our weight on the piton, so I [bent] my legs and turned sideways, to the right, so that my weight was on the stance," says Ament, who used a hip belay. Kor immediately batmanned up and led out, with Ament following using his "elbows, sides of hands, chin," he says, because the rope had so badly burned his hands.

**6** Then there's Pote "The Belay" Schoening's catch during the 1953 K2 expedition led by Charles Houston. On August 1, 1,000 feet short of the 28,251-foot summit, the team began its descent when Art Gilkey, 26, developed a blood clot. The team prepped to swing Gilkey across a 45-degree ice slope using an anchor point above. Schoening, roped into two other climbers who were subsequently hooked to three more, had Gilkey on a "hip-axe belay." Then George Bell Sr. lost his footing, dragging all toward the void. As George Bell Jr., Bell's son, tells it, "[My father] was certain...there was no way anything was going to stop him. He was therefore surprised when he did stop, dangling off a cliff. He figured the rope must be momentarily stuck, so he threw off his glasses and mittens, and climbed hand by hand up the rope to [unweight] it."

**7** In fall 2006, Jay Knower belayed Jay Conway from their "porta-board" on the multi-pitch *Liquid Sky* (5.13b), at Cathedral Ledge, NH. Conway had just finished the thin crux crack, protected by a tied-off Lost Arrow, and was about to clip a bolt when the rope pinched between the board and the wall. "All my wriggling around on the 'porta-board' had dislodged a coil..." says Knower, who freed the cord by swinging the squirrely board away from the wall. "That was the end of the 'porta-board.'"

**8** In 1997, while filming a Budweiser commercial near Moab, UT, Dean Potter served as a "human tripod/belay seat" for Eric Perlman. "I needed someone strong to help me support my camera while shooting Ron Kauk climbing," says Perlman. The system worked thusly: Potter and Perlman descended from above, and then tied into each other 350 feet off the ground. While Perlman filmed, Potter cradled Perlman, plus Perlman's 85-pound camera, for stretches of six to eight minutes (totaling about one hour).

**9** Belayers sometimes shiver for four hours 2,500 feet up El Cap at what Beth Rodden recalls as a "hanging belay in a concave corner, meaning I wouldn't see the light of day until sunset, or any warmth, having lost most feeling from my hips down, and [waging] a constant battle to keep my lower extremities awake." Rodden endured this heroic belay in May 2008 while Tommy Caldwell attempted to free the final crux pitch on Yosemite's *Magic Mushroom* (VI 5.14a), gunning for the route in one day. Although Caldwell didn't send that go, Rodden returned with him 10 days later, when he succeeded. "One of the hardest things about my job as a belayer has been consoling [Tommy]," says Rodden.

**10** The belay knot was tied at the altar also for Angele and Justen Sjong, the latter an obsessed El Cap free climber. "We certainly do not vacation during El Cap season...you don't make firm plans because you have to watch the weather," says Angele. She recalls them "bonding" once when she bobbed a haulbag from *Muir Wall*'s P5, nearly creaming a party below on *Moby Dick*. Angele elicited a terse, "Yeah, no worries," from her husband, who knew losing his cool might jeopardize future matrimonial belays. ☞