WHO'S YOUR FRIEND?
Alec Sharp interviews Ray Jardine

As a visitor to Yosemite my first glimpse of Ray Jardine was through the comments of other climbers concerning his routes. He practiced the moves I was told, he did the moves but rested on protection whenever he felt like it, he never did this route. Tales told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing? Not quite though, these were all good climbers, some of whom had repeated the odd Jardine route. The routes were hard, no doubt about it, and I heard stories of climbers bursting into tears at the top because the pain in their arms was so great; so why did they denigrate the man?

Jardine's style of climbing is different to that of most climbers but it does have the virtue of consistency. Others may scorn it, but it is important to remember that these climbs are some of the most difficult in Yosemite. New, bold ventures have often required novel or dubious tactics; Brown and Whillans' girdle of Dinas Cromlech brought the comment that any of the old timers could have done the route given the same proliferation of ropes and slings; Livesey practised many of the moves on Right Wall from an abseil rope before leading it; Kauk and Clevenger repeated the Gunks' Supercrack, initially pulling the rope down after every attempt but eventually leaving it in place; Erickson went back to Half Dome time after time despite his policy of leaving climbs alone once he had fallen. Maybe the tactics left something to be desired, but we're talking about vision, about new ideas of possibilities. At least the end result of Jardine's efforts is a free climb, no yoyos or rests, which is more than can be said for some of the repeats of his routes.

I was intrigued by this man, hidden from view behind a wall of rumour. Much of the condescending talk could be ignored as ego defence, the attempts of other good climbers to elevate themselves to a superior position, and there were obvious qualities that appealed to me. I'm more interested in a person's vision, his ideas and desires, than in his technical ability, and whatever his ability, Jardine obviously had vision and ideas. Guaging the importance of a climber in the microcosm of the climbing world is a matter of cause and effect; look at the effect and it will tell you about the cause.

Jardine's effect is twofold. He has firstly opened a new concept in what is possible in crack climbing. Kauk and Wunsch did that too, but with Jardine the realisation is more accessible, and he has a greater number of these "desperates" to his name. The second aspect of his effect concerns the protection he designed, the Friends. Probably the most discussed facet of rock climbing in the past year, they seem to be even more divisive than chalk. What I like about the controversy is that whereas with chalk, opponents could hide their competitive motives under the mantles of environmental preservation and the rights of others not to be forced to climb by chalk marks, with Friends the issue is totally competitive. After all they leave no trace of their passage. Naturally this leads to a slight regret sometimes, since it is now possible to protect otherwise very bold leads that were previously done unprotected, but we had this effect in the past when good nuts came onto the market, and then again when small wires were developed. Jardine professes to be totally disinterested in the entire controversy; he invented the Friends for his own use and, aside from the business aspect, he doesn't care what people think.

As I said, I was intrigued by the man, and I admired his ability to continue doing as he pleased in the face of controversy and criticism, so I wrote to him in Colorado Springs to ask if I might interview him. Within three days he had phoned and offered to drive up to Boulder for the interview, but we compromised and met in Denver two days later. Jardine is quite big and gives a distinct impression of solidity. He seems
Almost like a bear, certainly he did the one time I saw him in Yosemite with his shaggy hair and beard. As to actual figures, he is six feet tall and weighs 175 to 180 pounds.

It seems that many of the best climbers are in their late twenties and early thirties — look at Livesey and Whillians, and Jardine joins the club with his age of thirty. Youth has its fling, but by the time a man approaches thirty he knows what he wants from life, and if it is climbing, then he can approach it with greater devotion and dedication than could many a younger man.

A friendly man, Jardine laughs a lot and is easy to get on with. He exudes a sense of security, and that is one part of him that I very much admired. He is secure enough in himself that he can continue to climb in his own style despite criticism; he can go back on climbs that seem impossible, time after time until he finally achieves success. It seemed that he had no psychological need to see his name and ideas in print through an interview, and yet he had been perhaps even keener than I was for the interview to take place. I could only think he wanted publicity for the Friends, in order to sell more, and when I asked, he admitted there was some truth to this. Whether it will or not, I don’t know, but at least this interview will show some more of the man behind these controversial devices.

A.S. Where did you start climbing?
R.J. I started in the Tetons; ended up there after high school. I was working up at Yellowstone, and went down to the Tetons climbing every weekend. I had a friend who was really keen on climbing and he wanted me to go with him. He finally dragged me down there, and I remember rappelling just scared me to death. I swore I’d never do that again, but I did give up actually. I climbed for the rest of the summer in the Tetons, just mountaineering.

R.J. I did give up actually. I climbed for the rest of the summer in the Tetons, just mountaineering stuff, then I went away to college for four years and didn’t even see a piece of rock or mountain, or anything except books, but all the time I was developing an interest in climbing somehow. It was more an athletic interest that hadn’t found a medium, so then I decided I wanted to come to Colorado for the mountaineering.

A.S. What college were you at?
R.J. It was a place in California called Northrop Institute of Technology; it’s an engineering school. I studied aerospace engineering.

A.S. Why didn’t you pursue that as a career?
R.J. R.J. I did for a while. I worked as an aerospace engineer with my climbing partner, Kris Walker, we decided we were going to quit our jobs and just go climbing every day in Eldorado; so we took the blue guidebook and checked the routes off one after the other. We did most of the classics, I think we did all but one or two in that old blue guide, at least on Redgardener Wall.

A.S. What prompted you to go out to Yosemite?
R.J. Bigger and better things I suppose. The big move from Eldorado Canyon to Yosemite. We were into direct aid, and if you want to do bigger walls you go out to Yosemite. I went out to try and do the Nose — I’d done the Diamond eight times before that and I felt fairly competent on rock, confident anyway, and I went out and took one look at El Cap and decided, Man, I’m in the wrong ‘place.’ (laughter) Well, we tried it, we did a couple of grade 5’s and then tried the Nose, got a little way up then decided to come down. I went back the next year with Bill Forrest and we did the Nose in a five day epic, although we had a good time. After that I think I just decided it would be a good place to stay, just camping out, the valley squalor. That was 1969 I think.

A.S. So Yosemite is your main area. What about the other climbing areas?
R.J. What other places are there? (laughter) I’m basically sedate.

A.S. How did you come to think of Friends?
R.J. We’re getting into it now aren’t we? It wasn’t that easy. The question reminds me of a friend of mine, Werner Braun. He told me that the night before he actually saw a Friend for the first time, he had a dream in which he saw the thing like it really is. For me it wasn’t quite that way (laughter). I wish it had been, but I had to work on that thing for quite a few years; it was pretty much just a logical engineering evolution. The Friends on the market are eighth generation. I was lucky because
Bill Forrest is a real good friend of mine and he let me use all his tools to make these things.

A.S. Were they a response to new routes, or did you start doing new routes because of the better protection you could now get?

R.J. We really wanted to do the Nose in a day, and that was a long time ago, before anyone else had really thought of doing something like that, and I wanted something that would go in really fast. The Friends initially started out for that one climb. We almost did it too — we got up to Camp 4, where it rained for three and a half hours; we made it to Camp 5 before it got dark. Then the next year Bridwell did it. Friends were used for climbing in general; at the time I wasn't thinking of doing harder routes. I was just thinking of developing some better protection.

A.S. What grade of free climbing were you doing at that time?

R.J. 5.10 I guess.

A.S. How did people accept Friends when you first started using them?

R.J. I had Friends for about six years before they came out commercially — they came out last spring. No-one saw them in those early days. My climbing partners were sworn to secrecy — I'd say, "I've got something you won't believe, I think it's going to make climbing too easy.

A.S. Climbing is traditionally about the risk factor, whereas Friends reduce or even eliminate the risk. Is that right?

R.J. There are a million things that could happen. You can't do it — if you could then it wouldn't be the hardest thing you've ever done, and that's what we're talking about. Somewhere on that pitch you're going to fall off. What are you going to do when you fall off? You've weighted the pro and in that mind that piece has got to come out, and you've got to start all over again. Usually take the easiest approach, which is to stay right there when you fall off and somehow get to the top, and I cross out that particular attempt. I call it working on a route.

R.J. You go back and repeat these hard routes don't you?

R.J. Yes, except for Phoenix. I went back to that about a week later but I couldn't even do the first moves. A lot of the ability is psychological, and when you finally break through and free a route you don't have the drive you used to have. I've had a lot of difficulty in repeating routes just because of that. I've done all those routes a whole bunch of times now — I've probably done Separate Reality thirty or forty times, just because I enjoy doing it.

A.S. How many routes do you do in a day to be able to do all that?

R.J. We did three 5.12 routes in a day one time. We did Tales of Power, which I haven't done but I've followed it, and Separate Reality, then we went down and did Crimdon Cringle — it got dark on us on the last part. I like to do these 5.12 routes, I just like to climb 5.12, so I've done most of them several times, except Phoenix and Owl Roof.
me, if you’re a gymnast – I used to be a gymnast at school and college level which is why I refer to that – then you strive to get as close to perfection as possible. It’s not a matter of getting through a routine, or getting to the top of a climb, it’s how well can you do it, how can you refine it? To me that’s what it’s all about – how well can you refine a free climb that’s really hard? You do it many, many times, trying to maximise your performance. A first ascent is just concerned with getting to the top, but when I go back I like to just be proficient at it. I’m trying to improve my free climbing skills, and there’s no better place to do it than working on those really hard climbs.

A.S. Could you say something about your other routes, such as the Rostrum Roof, Elephant’s Eliminate and Owl Roof?

R.J. When we did the Phoenix I’d been climbing 5.12 for about three and a half months, almost four, doing nothing but 5.12s. At the time I was in the best shape I’ve ever been in, so I went and started working on the Rostrum Roof, and I think I tried it five times before I got it. That thing is hard because it’s intimidating; it’s about 1500 feet up above the ground, but we rappelled down from the top. It’s the last pitch of the normal route – it sort of angles out so you’re not fifteen feet from the wall, you can touch the wall with your foot when you have your hands over the lip. You’re not tired by the time you get to the lip, that’s not the problem, but above that is ninety feet of severely overhanging one inch finger crack. You’re 1500 feet above the ground and it becomes a mind problem. John Bachar came up to me and he said “Jardine, you didn’t do that. I was down there today and I got to the lip but I didn’t do it, and there’s no way you could have done it.” I said “John, did you decide that because it was too hard?” and he said “No, wasn’t hard, it was just scary.” (laughter) And that’s exactly the problem, it’s just terrifying. There are two different cruxes on it, and one of them is just over the lip so that when you fall off you hit your shin on the lip and it hurts so badly! I did that about three times. You just don’t want to push it – it’s not that it’s hard, it’s just in such a ridiculous place. It’s the hardest thing I’ve done psychologically. I was in shape, I was in the best shape I’ve been in my whole life.

Elephant’s Eliminate is way over to the right of Elephant Rock. It’s a big roof that sticks out, not quite as big as Separate Reality, and it has a flared crack in it, really flared. I think the thing had never been done before because you can’t get nuts in it. There was a bong out about as far as you can reach, which we took out. Friends barely hang in there, it’s so flared. I fell off a bunch of times but the Friends held. You can get out to the lip and you invert, there’s a bomber hand jam right at the lip, and a bucket, but you’re really tired by the time you get out there, so you invert, put your legs in the crack above you and get heel hooks, and lock your legs. It’s very flared but you can get very good heel and toe locks so you hang upside down on those to rest your arms. I attempted the route and got to this position five times before I did the route. The crux is above, it’s just a horribly flared nothing. You bring your feet down and draw them up by your hands and try to go for these really flared finger jams – there’s a finger crack in the back, with long reaches. It’s just really hard.

Owl Roof is an upside down offwidth 5.12 if you can imagine that. You fist jam out as far as you can then from the last fist jam you get out as far as possible and lock in the offwidth position, then bring your foot out and slot it straight up above you and then go offwidth around the lip. Oh Gads, that was hard. I worked on that until I was blue in the face, I worked on that more than any other route I think. I’m wide so I can’t squeeze in there. Dale Bard and Ron Kauk did it on their first day although they took a lot of falls on it. All the rest of the routes I want to go back and do again, but not the Owl Roof, that’s too much work.

A.S. How do you find out where all these new routes are?

R.J. You live there and you do a lot of scouting out, becoming familiar with the place. I spend some time with binoculars, kicking around and looking for routes. That’s half the difficulty of a new route, finding the thing.

A.S. To get back to Friends, what about the ethical aspects of climbing wide cracks with a Friend that you can keep pushing above your head?

R.J. What is the ethical problem with that?

A.S. You’re effectively top roping.

R.J. No, you’re not. Top roping is when you have somebody above you. Suppose you’re on a big mountain, and you’ve got a wide crack above you. You’re not top roping, it’s just a technique one can use which works. I don’t think that’s top roping.

A.S. It does mean you can never fall.

R.J. That’s not top roping, that’s just really good protection. Top roping is when you have somebody above you which is obviously not possible on a big mountain. A wide crack with a Friend above your head all the time is possible.

A.S. Do you climb slabs much?

R.J. Only when I have to.

A.S. Do you feel satisfied by your new routes when others criticize your style?

R.J. When I’m on a climb, trying to do a free ascent of a route, I’m not thinking of what other people will think. I’m not out doing it to get the credit for it; it’s a personal thing for me. I’m out there doing it to get my body up the darned thing, and so when I finally do a free ascent of a route that somehow satisfies whatever it is in me that’s got the lust for maximum difficulty. And that’s that; I don’t care even if someone else says, “Oh, I did the first ascent of that”. Fine, go ahead. One thing did bother me...
One time, Mountain Magazine published a thing that said Ray Jardine has done the Phoenix and Hangdog and some other stuff, but a lot of local climbers question his ethics, saying that he used free climbing siege tactics. That bothered me for a climbers question his ethics, saying that he used something about you it doesn't matter, but when you see it printed ifs going around asking people "What is free siege climbing? What have I done? (laughter) So I was thinking that if I left the country the next day! I almost got up the thing, but it got dark and I ran out of gear and I was hanging around too much. I wasn't doing a very good ascent of it - I took a couple of falls.

A.S. Did you ever come close to death apart from that?

R.J. Oh yes, many times. I've had a couple of really close calls with rockfall, but one of the more dubious experiences was when I jumped off El Cap with my hang-glider. (laughter)

A.S. I want to ask you more about that later. What other areas have you climbed in besides Yosemite and Britain?

R.J. Nowhere seriously. Eldorado, the Diamond, stuff in Colorado, the Devil's Tower. There are challenges everywhere you go. Yosemite's not the only place to climb - everywhere you go it is fascinating, with good climbing.

A.S. How did you like Britain when you were over there?

R.J. I had a fantastic time, really good. I met a lot of climbers over there, did a lot of the climbs - nothing really hard, just a lot of the old classics. I was very impressed with the standard of climbing there, and the standards of the climbs. People were really hospitable, showed me around, and a lot of people spent a lot of time showing me the routes.

A.S. Hoping you'd fail!

R.J. Yes. (laughter) Oh boy, let me tell you. I was sandbagged more than once over there.

A.S. Tell be about London Wall.

R.J. (laughter) Here we go, I knew this was coming! I tried London Wall once and failed - I left the country the next day! I almost got up the thing, but it got dark and I ran out of gear and I was hanging around too much. I wasn't doing a very good ascent of it - I took a couple of falls.

A.S. Did you ever do a new route on grit didn't you?

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“I’m a Christian... I believe the Bible is for real: it’s an incredible book.”

and nearly got wiped off the face of the Earth by an avalanche. I decided I’d better get on rock again! I’ve specialised, I don’t desire to do every aspect of climbing. I’m interested in mountaineering, but not enough to make it my goal.

A.S. To get on to another subject completely, I’m told you are very religious.

R.J. Yes, I’m a Christian and my faith in the Lord is the most important thing in my life. I believe the Bible is for real; it’s an incredible book. My relationship with God and with Jesus Christ is absolutely responsible for everything – the Friends, the climbing. He’s given me a level head to where I don’t quit when I fall off for the twenty second time. I think a person can do anything better when his head is in a good place with the Lord.

A.S. Spirituality is normally associated with the mountains – you read it in so much of the climbing literature, but you seem more interested in short vicious problems.

R.J. Yes, but this is a very spiritual experience also. Climbing for me is not a mystical experience in which I go to Yosemite – the big gymnasium – to seek Truth. Rather, having found Truth in the Holy Bible, I go to the short hard climbs of Yosemite to have a good time. Having found Truth in the person of Jesus Christ I can focus my energies on climbing or engineering or hang-glider.

A.S. Why do climbers like Kor and Sorenson turn to religion?

R.J. I think it’s true not only of climbing, but of anything. It’s not the level you get to but it’s being out there, in it, that brings you to a point where you’ve got to face reality. When a person gets old he’s faced with the reality of, ‘Okay, I can’t put it off? I think that if the religious urge is in somebody, when they’re faced with it, it’ll come out. I think climbing does that, and I think racing automobiles does it too.

A.S. You think the risk factor is involved; that the reason people turn to religion is that they’re going to die?

R.J. That’s not the only reason by any means, but I think it’s a real good one, I really do.

A.S. What is the importance of climbing in your life?

R.J. Lust for maximum difficulty, like I said. That’s just what it is really. It’s a personal thing for me; I want to push the limits, I want to push as hard as I possibly can somewhere, and crack climbing just happens to be it. It’s not competition; it’s just that if I find a crack that’s hard, I want to get up it. I feel that if I can get up a climb the first time I try then it’s not hard enough. I feel satisfied if I’ve tangled with a thing for weeks and I finally get it; I feel good about it.

A.S. Tell be about your hang-gliding off El Cap.

R.J. Make sure the names are changed! It’s really funny, it’s illegal to do that, but I had always had it in my mind that someday I’d like to try hang-gliding, and someday I’d like to jump off El Cap, just because I’ve climbed it a lot of times and I wanted to see it right up close. One night I put the hang-glider over my shoulder, took a flashlight in one hand, and hiked up from Tamarack Flat by myself (laughing). I had about eighty pounds over my shoulder I guess. I spent all night dragging that thing through the trees; it’s a thick forest and it’s not funny when the path makes a turn and your hang-glider is twenty foot long. You’re all by yourself in the middle of the night and the trail’s not that easy to follow anyway. An hour before I got to the top my flashlight went out (laughing); it was intense. I got to the top an hour before the sun came up, so I pulled the hang-glider apart and rolled up in it – made a sleeping bag out of it (laughing). It was pretty cold up there.

I made the mistake of putting my glider up fairly near the top because it was steep downhill and I thought I could take off there. About the time I got everything ready the wind started blowing down the slope which meant the wind was coming from behind. First thing in the morning the cool air flows down into the Valley, much the same as water flowing over an edge. I knew it was going to be there but it was really severe that day, about ten miles an hour – your take off speed is about eighteen, so in that wind you’d have to run twenty eight miles an hour. You can’t do it, so I looked all over the place; I went down to the edge, but the top of El Cap is very steep and it’s a long way down, I couldn’t have jumped off. I spent an hour and a half up there looking for a place and finally found a spot. It turned out to be the top of the Dawn Wall and I could get right to the edge, except there was this big boulder right behind me and I couldn’t quite squeeze the kites in behind it. The wind was blowing from behind and if it had picked up the kite and I’d been strapped in, I’d have gone over the edge and that would have been the end. A three thousand foot drop to my death. So I couldn’t clip in to the kite because the wind was trying to rip it over the edge. Anyway, I finally got the glider to the edge but I couldn’t pick it up because the minute I picked it up it was going to blow right over the edge. If I had caught a wing tip on take off, that would have been it – the glider would have inverted and I’d have lost control.

A.S. Why didn’t you wait for another day?

R.J. I thought I could do it, although it’s the most dangerous thing I’ve ever done in my whole life. I can’t really make a big issue of it because it’s illegal and it’s dangerous, but for me it was something I wanted to do. Two hours later the sun warms the valley air and stops the dangerous sink, but by then the Rangers are all out and about.

The glider was right on the edge and my toes were hanging over, but I couldn’t get the glider round because of the boulder behind me. I took a deep breath and clipped in and just dived off really quickly. I found a nonslide straight down; I had to pull the nose of the glider in to build up airspeed. It was incredible; I’ll never do it again! I dropped about a hundred feet before I pulled out of the dive, and my stomach went to my throat.

I had a nice ride after that, flying back and forth across El Cap – I couldn’t believe how big it was. I got down to the level of El Cap Tower where there were some guys bivouacking, and I made a close pass – “Hey, you turkeys!” (laughing), then I was getting pretty low so I headed out to the meadow, where there were three people down there to help. I had them all trained beforehand how to tear it apart as fast as possible. One of the Rangers drove past when we were carrying it through the fields but he left, so we got the kite on top of the car and were just driving off when a Ranger came up flashing lights – “All right, we saw you do it. “Do what?” They hadn’t seen me land, but they knew I flew. I was caught but they couldn’t quite prove it so I wasn’t nailed for it; it would have been a fairly serious offence I think. I certainly wouldn’t advise anyone to jump of El Cap with a hang-glider.

A.S. What other similar exploits have you done?

R.J. I’ve done all kinds of outrageous flights – I’m known in hang-gliding circles as being a renegade pilot. When it comes to hang-gliding I’ll pretty much go for it. The thing that I’ve wanted to do most of all is fly of Pikes Peak (in Colorado), but I was caught by the police up there setting up my kite and they threw me out of the area. It’s a fairly dangerous flight so it’s illegal.

A.S. Have you flown off the Diamond?

R.J. I’d never fly off there. When you get into hang-gliding you find out about air currents, and around Long’s Peak there’s some bad air. Besides, can you imagine carrying the glider to the top? Outside of hang-gliding I can’t think of anything special; I’m real mellow. When I get clipped into a hang-glider I just go nuts, but the rest of the time I’m very docile. (laughing)

A.S. What do you think the future of rock climbing holds?

R.J. I think it’s very bright; I think it’s becoming more exciting all the time. I don’t think we’re peaking by any means; I think we’re just starting as far as free climbing potential goes. Free climbing or aid climbing. We’ve just begun to push some of the big routes free – there’s a lot of things we can’t even touch now, but five or ten years down the line they’ll be standard course. How many routes on the Diamond are free now? Quite a few. The same thing is going to happen on the big walls in Yosemite, and then later on everywhere else. I think we’re just scratching the surface of free climbing potential. I think technology is going to bring us into this more and more.

A.S. You can have technology like Friends in cracks, but what about on slabs and crackless walls?

R.J. Friends are not the only thing possible. There are all kinds of possibilities; in my mind they’re all clear.

A.S. You would like to say something about them?

R.J. No! (laughing) I’ll get myself out on a limb. That’s lots of potential for developing new climbing gear which will enhance rock climbing. I’m working on several new things. The next project I’m working on is a grappling hook – it’ll be really lightweight and strong, and the arms will sprout out automatically (Joke). I’ve got all kinds of stuff in the works.

A.S. What ideas do you have for your future?

R.J. Someday I’d like to get real good at free
climbing. I'm serious! I'd like to get as good at free climbing as a really good gymnast is at gymnastics, or a really good ballet dancer is at ballet, and we're a long way from that right now.

A.S. You'll have to do more than a hundred pull-ups a day.

R.J. Not necessarily. Look at the free climbing that was done in England fifteen or twenty years ago. Those guys didn't have nearly the technology we have, and I'm not talking about Friends, but they were doing hard routes, they were strong. I don't think climbers are getting that much stronger; they're getting way better than they ever used to be but I don't think it's a matter of strength. Look at gymnastics fifteen years ago; the gymnasts now aren't that much stronger than they were then, but they're way better now. Why? Who knows, it's hard to figure out why, but it's not a matter of strength. I think you need strength, but I don't think having more of it is going to be the critical factor of advancement.

A.S. What other ideas do you have outside climbing?

R.J. I don't know. I've never really thought about it. I want to go to the Valley this spring, but that's about as far ahead as I've figured.

A.S. What sort of work do you do to support yourself while you're climbing seven months a year?

R.J. I do odds and ends, just like anybody else who climbs seven months a year. You don't spend much money in the Valley.

A.S. When will they be out?

R.J. I've got half sizes, and I've got a number one - I've made them smaller but I wasn't really small and really big. The smallest size is a quarter of an inch, that's not very much; it's not going to cam. We're handling that by other means though.

A.S. What sizes of Friends do you have personally?

R.J. Friends really caught on quickly. We're selling quite a few but we're not making any profit. They're expensive to make - in one Friend there are over twenty five parts and over one hundred machining and assembly operations; they're extremely expensive to make. The first eight months they were on the market I subsidised the whole thing by selling them cheap; I didn't make anything off them. I've raised the prices just recently just so I can have a business, but we're not making money on them. Look at a jumar; a pair of jumars sells for fifty or sixty dollars. Compare the difference in how hard it is to make a Friend over how hard it is to make a jumar. Right now the Friends are a really good deal.

A.S. What about climbing without your Friends?

R.J. Probably the biggest problem with Friends is that their versatility and effectiveness create overconfidence. Climbers begin to believe that their versatility and effectiveness create over-confidence. The circlips were released them. Then you have an expensive, new climbing feature - a fixed Friend, eg as of this writing there are two fixed Friends in the Stoveleg Cracks on El Capitan and two in Suicide Wall, Cratcliffe, Derbyshire. Another pitfall to avoid is placing Friends in spots with wide size variations within a small area, like piton scars. When the Friend is rotated by rope drag, some of the cam teeth can pop free and invert. Inverted cams may hold a fall, or they may not. In their first year of production more than 5000 Friends went into active circulation in the USA. There was only one reported failure - a Number 2 Friend was placed in a Number 3 sized crack; the cams were fully extended. Since they weren't spring loaded, they weren't camming; no frictional gripping occurred. The leader's twenty-five foot fall simply inverted all the cams like a blown out umbrella. Early production model Friends had a problem with the spring-loaded circlips that fixed the cam to the axle shaft. Circlips were known to pop off the shaft at the wrong time, leaving the climber with a handful of spare parts, and mixed feelings of bewilderment and despair. The circlips were replaced in subsequent models by a permanently bonded jam nut. (Circlip models may be returned to the manufacturer for free replacement. In USA send to: Jardine Enterprises, 1339 N. Prospect, Colorado Springs, CO 80903, Elsewhere, send to: Wild Country, Town Head Works, Eymouth, Sheffield, England, S30 1RD.)

Generally climbers don't realise the great variations that exist in the frictional properties of rock. Friends were designed to hold even in Limestone, the slickest climbing rock there is. But Friend placements in Limestone have no margin for flare. Cracks must be almost perfectly parallel sided or the Friend will slip out. By contrast granite has a high frictional quality and Friends will hold in flakes and pinches up to thirty degrees. Probably the biggest problem with Friends is that their versatility and effectiveness create over-confidence. Climbers begin to believe that Friends are some kind of magic, mechanical glue, instant sure-fire protection that will hold anything. They're not. They demand intelligent, observant placement and removal techniques. Friends aren't magic; they're science - faster, safer and more versatile than nuts and pins.

A FRIEND IN NEED

Eric Perlman discusses the history, construction and use of Friends.

Climbing hardware is clumsy, heavy, awkward to carry, and exhausting to place and remove. Every climber knows the frustration of standing in a tentative toe jam, one hand slotted to the knuckles in a greasy crack...pumped...fading... while the other hand desperately pulls out hooks and stoppers in a doomed effort to protect a parallel sided or slightly flared crack; strength, measured in seconds, slips away. Except for the replacement of hemp rope with nylon, modern mountaineering equipment has had more in common with the stone age than the space age. For all their swagger and vaunted intelligence, climbers have been stuck in the past, having invested their precious nuts and pitons with a sacrosanct autonomy.

Then in 1973 Ray Jardine, a 5.12 climber from Colorado and former space-flight-mechanics systems analyst for Martin Marietta (a major aerospace and weapons system company), looked for new solutions to the problems of climbing protection. He wanted a device with: 1) a high strength-to-weight ratio, 2) quick, one-hand placement and removal capability, and 3) coverage for maximum variations in crack width and shape. To meet these criteria, Jardine undertook extensive scientific analyses and testing of: 1) the mechanics and principles of camming, 2) the physics of the frictional interface between metal and rock, and 3) the strengths and stresses of aerospace alloys.

Longtime friend, Bill Forrest of Forrest Mountaineering, gave Jardine full use of a well-equipped metal shop. Jardine went to work, fashioning his ideas in metal at night, then testing them on hard rock during the day. Several boxes of unsuccessful prototypes later, Jardine quit his haphazard tinkering and took a hard look at the physics and mathematics involved in placing protection. He went to the central computer facility at the University of Colorado in Boulder and, with the help of a math professor and two graduate students, he worked out the angle and curve of cams that would allow them to grip and hold, even in flares of up to thirty degrees in smooth granite. The cams are designed to contact the rock with the same intercept angle and gripping force at any point along the camming surface. Because the four cams are suspended independently, they can adjust to wide variations in the surfaces they touch.

The metal for the cams was chosen for its properties of frictional adherence and light weight. It's an exotic, aerospace aluminium alloy known as 7075-T6. The teeth in the cams are cosmetic, only. The teeth don't need to grab the rock. The holding action is designed to work on pure friction. Regardless of how smooth the granite, limestone, blue ice, or concrete, the cams will hold.

The stem is also made of 7075-T6 because the alloy resists bending, yet is resilient enough to bend substantially without breaking or shear failure. It won't shatter even under shock loading conditions. The only way the stem can bend under the impact of a fall is if it is constrained by the placement and cannot rotate.

The actual breaking strength of Friends is still unknown. Pit Schubert, chairman of the UIAA Safety Committee, extensively tested the No 2 Friend. It failed to break at 1700kg (3749 pounds), the upper limit of that testing series. Friends tested stronger than Channel hexcentrics.

Placement and removal of Friends is a technique in itself. Like hexes and stoppers, Friends tend to get stuck in cracks when gripped-up climbers jam them too tightly, too deeply. If the cams are closed all the way, the trigger can't release them. Then you have an expensive, new climbing feature - a fixed Friend, eg as of this writing there are two fixed Friends in the Stoveleg Cracks on El Capitan and two in Suicide Wall, Cratcliffe, Derbyshire. Another pitfall to avoid is placing Friends in spots with wide size variations within a small area, like piton scars. When the Friend is rotated by rope drag, some of the cam teeth can pop free and invert. Inverted cams may hold a fall, or they may not. Their first year of production more than 5000 Friends went active circulation in the USA. There was only one reported failure - a Number 2 Friend was placed in a Number 3 sized crack; the cams were fully extended. Since they weren't spring loaded, they weren't camming; no frictional gripping occurred. The leader's twenty-five foot fall simply inverted all the cams like a blown out umbrella. Early production model Friends had a problem with the spring-loaded circlips that fixed the cam to the axle shaft. Circlips were known to pop off the shaft at the wrong time, leaving the climber with a handful of spare parts, and mixed feelings of bewilderment and despair. The circlips were replaced in subsequent models by a permanently bonded jam nut. (Circlip models may be returned to the manufacturer for free replacement. In USA send to: Jardine Enterprises, 1339 N. Prospect, Colorado Springs, CO 80903, Elsewhere, send to: Wild Country, Town Head Works, Eymouth, Sheffield, England, S30 1RD.)

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using Friends.

Dale Bard of Yosemite is credited with the first two-cams-in-two-cams-out aid placement of a Friend. The No 2 Friend was placed in a pin scar in a shallow pocket on the Horse Chute route on El Capitan. Though this kind of marginal placement had never been tried, Bard claims he had no qualms; “Friend placements are always A1, whether there are two, three or all the cams in the crack,” said Bard.

Bard called Friends, “a true life saver,” on the Sea of Dreams route on El Capitan. Jim Bridwell lead the Laura Scudder’s Traverse, a downsloping crack on an expanding flake described as, “potato chip thin.” Bard said the flake was so fragile, “if you nailed it you’d break it but with Friends it was A1.”

Jim Bridwell’s most memorable Friend placement occurred during his day and a half ascent of the Southeast ridge of Cerro Torre in Patagonia. Throughout the climb Bridwell had placed more Friends than either nuts or pitons. At the top of the final headwall where the granite finally gave way to the summit’s ice mushroom, Bridwell found a flared granite crack filled with water ice. With his ice hammer he chopped out just enough ice for a No 2 Friend placement, sprung the protection into place and free-climbed past it. “I had no worries about the Friend holding in ice,” commented Bridwell. “It seemed secure, and was certainly as good or better than anything else I could have placed, and a lot faster.”

The author has placed and fallen on more Friends than he cares to recount. However, one experience stands out: three friends and I went out for a morning of “sport jumping” leading past protection and taking intentional leader falls. The purpose of sport jumping is three-fold, 1) To develop self-protective falling technique, 2) To diminish the fear of taking leader falls, 3) Just for the crazy fun of it. Four of us took an approximate total of 25 leader falls ranging up to twenty feet on a No 1 Friend. One of the sport jumpers inverted one of the Friend’s cams as he climbed past it. He jumped four times and the placement held perfectly.

Ray Jardine claims that his first ascent of Elephant’s Eliminate, a 5.12 flared roof on Elephant Rock in Yosemite, would have been totally unprotectable without Friends. The crack is flared on average 25 degrees; neither pitons nor nuts have a chance of holding. Though it took five days to work out the moves and sequences, Elephant’s Eliminate went free on an all-Friends ascent.

Jardine received a letter this Spring from a Dr. Joshua Tofield a plastic surgeon in Tucson, Arizona. It read:

“Dear Mr. Jardine,

Your invention saved my life this weekend and I wanted to thank you. On somewhat brittle rock I reached a crack with a flake inside. I slotted an 8 or 9 hex in, but didn’t feel good about it, so I placed a No 3 Friend in below it. Four feet higher a hand hold came off...with me in pursuit! The Friend held. What is notable, however, is that the flake expanded to the outer wall of the crack, and the friend expanded with it! The hex rattled out when the flake expanded. Without the Friend I would have gone more than 25 feet to the ground.”