

## Some Thoughts on the Expedition Climbing Game

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A qualitative shift in the games analysis of climbing is becoming increasingly apparent, particularly in our approach to the big hills. During the 1978 post monsoon season in the Garhwal Himalaya alone there were four small British parties attempting objectives traditionally the preserve of much larger expeditions. The north-east face of Nanda Devi West, the south face of Changabang, the south face of Kalanka, and our attempt on the south –west face of Nanda Devi East and the Nanda Devi Traverse, are all major Himalayan objectives in their own right. What is significant is not that fact that any one of these objectives was attempted by a small group, but so many of them, at the same time in such a relatively small area. As we know, this type of activity was not confined solely to north-east India.

The historical mainstream of mountaineering is predicated on bold deeds such as Mallory's on Everest, Buhl's on Nanga Parbat and Welzenbach's and Cassin's in the Alps. More recently those of Messner and Habeler on Hidden Peak, Boardman and Tasker on Changabang, and Messner alone on Nanga Parbat. Noticeably however, in the last few years these tactics have been consciously adopted by those other than mountaineering's elite vanguard.

It is this increase of small groups on big mountains, the percolation down-wards of elite standards, which argues for a qualitative shift in the climbing games typology. It was Lito Tejada-Flores who first analyzed climbing into a hierarchy of games in his seminal paper *Games Climbers Play*. Flores sees seven discrete games, ranging from Bouldering to the Expedition game, each characterized by its own set of rules.

The higher one goes up the scale, the more inaccessible and formidable becomes the climber's goals. In consequence, they need apply fewer restrictions to conserve the full measure of challenge and satisfaction inherent in the climbing-game they are playing.

To ensure the full measure of challenge, the rules are more complex at the lower end of the scale. As Flores explains,

*For example, it would be an absurdity to use a ladder to reach the top of a boulder in Fontainbleau, but to use the same ladder to bridge a crevasse in the Khumbu Icefall would be reasonable since Everest defends itself so well that one ladder no longer tips the scales toward certain success.*

Thus, the basic principle of a handicap is applied to maintain a degree of uncertainty as to the eventual outcome, and from this very uncertainty stems the adventure and personal satisfaction of climbing.

These rules provide us with a dynamic framework in which to consider climbing: the application of rules from a lower to higher game being the way the sport develops. As the complexity of rules shifts upwards the number of climbing games will decrease, and the first to go will be the Expedition game.

Flores realizes this when he writes:

*The eventual victim, of course, will be the expedition game which will disappear completely as a super-alpine climbing takes its place. This is not only the newest but, in a sense, the most creative climbing-game, since here the nature of the obstacles encountered are so severe that it will be a long, long time before technological advances even begin to encroach upon the climber's personal satisfaction. The possibilities, on the other hand, are immense. One can even visualize the day when, equipped with ultra-modern bivouac gear, a climbing party of two sets off to do an 8,000 metre peak just as today one sets off to do a hard route on the Grand Teton or on Mont Blanc.<sup>1</sup>*

What I do not think Flores quite realized was how quickly the complex of rules would evolve. We now have examples of a significant number of climbers attempting the most difficult, serious and ambitious of routes. Messner may be the doyen but, as I have argued, there are many others not far behind.

Has this any practical significance for those of us who attempt to use super alpine techniques in the expedition arena? Reflecting on the death of my friend Ben Beattie on Nanda Devi in summer 1978, and of those many others who died in the greater ranges that year, I think it has.

Flores argues that the complex of rules will move slowly upwards as a significant mass of the climbing community adopt the style of ascent that the creative nucleus of elite climbers have been using. Good style being the application of a more complex set of rules to a higher game, such as Messner applying the rules of the alpine game to his solo ascent of Everest in 1980. When the majority accept the feasibility of the actions of the elite and do likewise, is when the rules change and the movement from one game to another is confirmed.

Is this what is happening to the Expedition game? It certainly appears as if a significant mass of the climbing community are beginning to adopt super alpine rules while playing the Expedition game, if what happened in the Garhwal in 1978 is typical. However, the other glaring fact is that too many died while doing so. Although the statistics are not yet available my guess is that expedition fatalities are on the increase.

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<sup>1</sup> And on re-reading in 2021 this what the elite are currently doing.

There could be a number of reasons for this. More people are going on expeditions are therefore proportionately more will die. It could be that with the increase in the number of expedition climbers, the quality will be diluted and the number of deaths from incompetence rather than 'bad luck' will increase. **OR** it could be that the generalized application of rules up the spectrum is premature, that the climbing community does not quite understand the implications of such a shift. Perhaps Flores is correct in his assumption that the assimilation of new rules by the climbing community is a slow business.

We are in the age of the democratization of achievements - the media encourages us to believe that everything is within our grasp. Indeed, it is true that psychological barriers all too often inhibit the fulfilment of potential and the more we realize that the better. But this implies a degree of responsibility, a more exact appreciation of what is possible and what in reality, I can do. The balancing of this equation is fundamental if our aspirations are not going to lead us to dissolution. What I am trying to say is that our aspirations must be militated by application. That to climb Everest without oxygen, to do the Nanda Devi traverse alpine style, requires preparation, conditioning and experience of a degree not previously associated with traditional expedition climbing. The margin of error is so severely reduced that even with technological innovation only the fittest will survive. The most ambitious goals and the highest mountains are essentially undemocratic, and we are naive to assume otherwise.

This may all seem unduly pessimistic, overcautious, and unadventurous – a rationalization in the face of failure, or an overreaction to the death of my friend. But it does seem to me dangerous and glib to adopt the rules of super-alpinism on expeditions, without fully realizing the responsibility implied and the preparation they require.

Walking back down the Rishi Gorge, having just buried my friend and facing the prospect of telling his wife and family of the event, I thought long about this. I began to realize that the application of alpine style techniques to major Himalayan objectives is a difficult, dangerous, and committing business. Far more so than even we had imagined. Although we were all competent, fit mountaineers, with much high standard alpine experience, we were not in the Messner class, neither by skill, temperament, or commitment. Yet playing the game by alpine rules requires his type of dedication. Perhaps we (Ben) were unlucky – whatever. Our experience, and of many others during the 1978 Himalayan season, provides a salutary warning to those of us who search for the more adventurous ways up the high hills