

Sandstone Renaissance: Castle Rock Bouldering

Twenty years ago no one would have thought of Castle Rock State Park as a world-class bouldering area. Sure, it was a good place for San Francisco Bay Area climbers to practice on weekends in preparation for longer routes in Yosemite Valley, Tuolumne Meadows and the High Sierra. This was how the Rock Climbing Section of the Sierra Club over in Berkeley had used it since the late 1950s. Today, though, bouldering has finally emerged as a specialized activity in its own right with some purists vowing never to tie into a rope on local stone. As a result, the last decade has witnessed a sandstone bouldering renaissance spearheaded by a new generation of rival gym-schooled climbers who have collectively raised standards here to world-class levels. John Sherman's book *Stone Crusade* (1994) put Castle on the historical map in the USA, but what impressed the world bouldering community most was Chris Sharma's brilliant March 1, 1997 first ascent of "Ecoterrorist" (V10/11), a futuristic unsend project down in the Graveyard area due west of Castle Rock Proper. Cameo appearances in three recent videos, "*Moving Over Stone IV*", "*West Coast Pimp*" and "*Rampage*", have also further enhanced Castle's growing prestige.

Incubator of Champions

Castle Rock has always enjoyed an underground reputation as an incubator of future climbing champions. Long before Chris Sharma's meteoric rise onto the European sport circuit, such climbing icons as Doug Robinson, Barry Bates, Mark Chapman, Jim Bridwell, Ed Barry, Ron Kauk, and John "Yabo" Yablonski all began bouldering here regularly before advancing into the Yosemite and world arenas. Sierra East Side pioneer and clean climbing advocate Doug Robinson, who started climbing at Castle in 1958 at the age of 13 (and who still teaches climbing classes there), can remember glancing over from the Magoo's to watch future big wall visionary, Jim Bridwell, then a 14-year-old San Jose high school student, using bongs stacked edgewise to nail the 5.4 summit route on the front of Castle Rock. Barry Bates, whose smooth, economical style would let him dominate the Parking Lot Rock, began climbing at Castle Rock in 1965 at age 15. By the time he was 20, equipped with the then

revolutionary EB rock boot, Barry was the best boulderer in Yosemite with first free ascents of such all-time classic 1¼" cracks as "Lunatic Fringe" (5.10c), "Five and Dime" (5.10d), and the Valley's first breakthrough 5.11a, "New Dimensions". During the early 1970s, while local activists were pushing themselves and each other, Mike Campana mantled his way up such early test pieces as "The Swim" (V2/V3) and "The Beak" (V6). But everyone back then knew for certain Rick Reider was the one who was cranking the hardest individual moves. The seldom-repeated "Butterfly Mantle" (V7) on the Beak formation bears mute testimony to Ric's pace setting performance before a serious accident on El Cap's Pacific Ocean Wall prematurely ended his climbing career. A proverbial "Reign of Terror" ruled the late 70s and early 80s as David Caunt, Rich Vetter, Rick Harlan, Kim Dao, Steve "Lucky" Smith and Scott Cosgrove developed the psychologically demanding circuit around Goat and Billy Goat Rocks. It was during this same uncompromising "hairball" era when the liberal application of beer and condiments contributed to the creation of such fearsome straight-up Klinghoffer problems as "Lady Di" (V0+) and Kim Dao's awesome "Tsunami Arête" (V3). However, the forceful persona and uncompromising style of the late John Yablonski (1956-1991) would forever define the late 70s and early 80s as a distinct era. Besides the elegant and powerful "Yabo Roof" (V5) on the Parking Lot Rock, John added many low, hard openings to existing problems, the so-called "Yabo sit starts". An early near on-site flash of "Ecoterrorist" attests to the high standard he set far ahead of his time.

Yabo's Narrow Escape

John Yablonski's narrow escapes from certain annihilation have become the stuff of legends, but one hair-raising story that remains untold is about that cold January afternoon he made an impulsive decision to hitch hike up to Castle to spend the winter living in the cave the now bears his name. Standing with his thumb out at the bottom of the hill in Saratoga, clutching a modest bedroll, a 15-year-old Yabo watched apprehensively as an old white Chevy with a black tinted windshield pulled over. When the back door swung open, John jumped in only to discover – much to his dismay - that his fellow travelers were five evil-looking low riders from East San Jose with glazed eyes and sheepish grins. Before he could reconsider his poor choice of rides, the old Chevy roared off and began racing up US 9 at breakneck speeds, passing cars around blind turns on the inside, swerving back and forth across the center line, playing chicken with oncoming traffic. All the while his fellow travelers (except for the out-of-

control driver) sat frozen motionless staring straight ahead as if hypnotized. Then, as if on cue, when the car turned left onto Skyline Boulevard at Saratoga Gap, his newfound friends suddenly roused from their collective torpor, opened up switchblades and began carving elegant arabesques in the air. Realizing that these few terrifying moments might very well be his last, Yabo opened the car door at forty mph and jumped head-first into eternity out over the stone guard wall toward the Pacific sunset. A few nano-seconds later, landing on his feet as usual, John picked up his bedroll and dusted himself off, none the worse for the cart wheeling cannonball fall he had just taken 50 feet straight down the steep rock strewn embankment below Skyline Boulevard. Was this the first instance of the infamous Yabo half-twist dismount? If you look closely, the smoke from the smoldering little campfire he built that soggy evening still blackens the roof at the back of the Yabo cave.

Castle Rock Proper

Most development centers on and around forty-foot Castle Rock (el. 3,214'), an easy .2-mile walk up a wide trail from the CRSP Parking Lot. Here exotic blobs like The Beak, The Spoon, Magoo's, Hueco Wall, Triangle and Parking Lot Rocks provide frustrating introductions to the typical Castle Rock "sloper", arête and mantle. At first sight, these dozen or so popular rocks may seem uninspiring – most less than twelve feet tall, with never more than four or five hard moves in a row. But if you expand your imagination, these fine little crags can supply a unique bouldering experience demanding intricate combinations of wide-open pinch grips, arêtes, slopers, and mantle shelves. Thanks to a subtle geo-chemical process known as "Tafoni", the area around the main rock also features a fascinating repertoire of powerful pocket-pulls and roof problems leading out through giant stone honeycombs. The "Yabo Roof" (V5) on the Parking Lot Rock and the "Kauk Roof" (V7) behind the Magoo's immediately come to mind. Nearly all the micros and crimpers broke off years ago, but a few important exceptions still exist like the "Collins' Problem" (V10) on Parking Lot Rock and the "Bates' Eliminate" (V7/8 or V10+ sds) on the Magoo's. The Graveyard, which has some of the hardest new problems, is only a short walk downhill to the southwest. This area also contains three pumping endurance traverses: "Domino Theory" (V4), "Egg Head" (V3), and the "Insecurian Arête" (V4).

Because so many problems near the Parking Lot are short, there is a common misperception that Castle is too "dinky" and contrived. Yet a short

mile hike out to the Goat Rock Circuit or Klinghoffer Boulders quickly brings you face-to-face with such intimidating problems as “Superman Was Out of Town” (V2) “Coz Solo” (V3) and “Death Wish” (V4) that almost always remain chalk-free.

Recommended Castle Rock Boulder Problems

Although anonymous gems abound near the main Castle Rock, the following named problems are all highly recommended ()::

CR Circuit:

“Garage Door” (V0+), “The Spoon” (V1), “The Block” (V3 arête), “Bates’ Arête” (V4), “Duct Tape” (V6) “Beak Mantle” (V6), “360⁰ Traverse” (V8).

Magoo’s:

“Mr. Magoo” (V0-), “The Nose” (V0+ mantle), “Mrs. Magoo” (V2), “The Swim” (V2 left or V3 right), “Kauk Roof” (V7), “Bates’ Eliminate” (V7/8 or V10+ sds).

Hueco Wall:

“Hueco Slap” (V5), “Hueco Wall” (V6 sds)

Graveyard

“Egg Head” (V3 traverse), “Domino Theory” (V4 traverse), “Insecurian Arête” (V4 traverse to roof), “Ecoterrorist” (V10/V11).

Parking Lot Rock

“Tree Route” (V4), “Yabo Roof” (V5), “Coz Mama Roof” (V6), “PLR Traverse” (V7), “Deforestation” (V8).

Back to the Future

This recent furry of bouldering activity does not mean Castle is entirely played out as a new problem goldmine. Even popular areas near the main Castle Rock show they have plenty of room for further micro-development. After all, it was only five years ago that Tom Scales walked a few paces downhill from the venerable Magoo’s to discover the now fashionable

Hueco Wall (V6 sds). Climbers used to dismiss Indian Rock as a San Jose local's party haven; however, the wooded area around Indian in Sanborn-Skyline County Park is where some of the most interesting new problems have been going up lately. Jeremy Meigs' Lost Keys Boulder offers great mid-range difficulty problems. And around the backside of Indian Rock, the "Sharma Arete" (V9/10?), despite its nasty three-crash pad landing, is among the most aesthetic lines to go up in recent seasons.

Though certainly not as extensive as Fontainebleau in France, Castle does contain enough clean sandstone to last for several centuries. Just behind the Waterfall Cliff are some undone pocket pulls up overhanging stone waves that look harder than anything else done in the Park to date. But the true bouldering future probably lurks in the fractured rubble piles behind Indian Rock and out along the Saratoga Gap Trail west of the Observation Platform above the Falls.