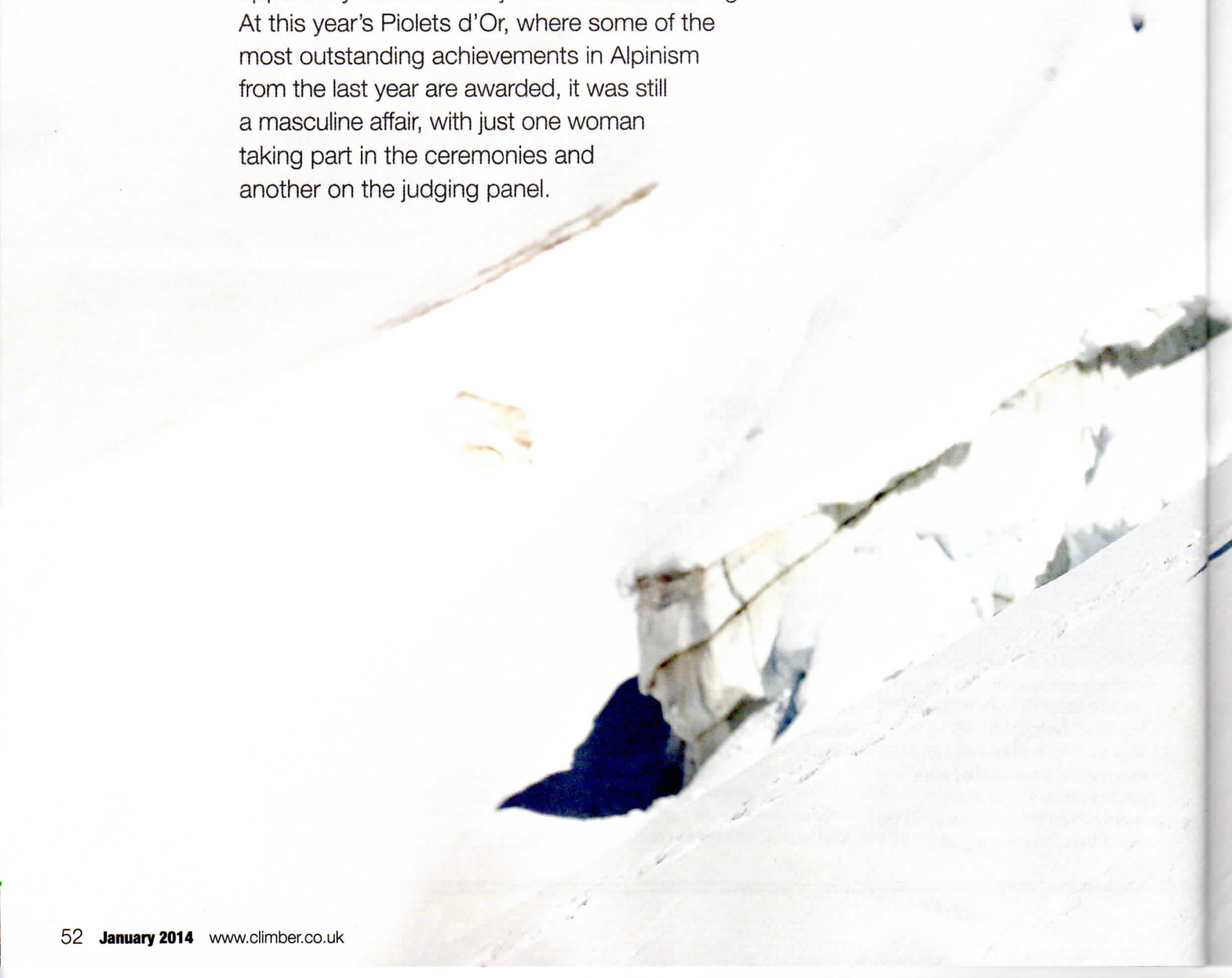
Women + Alpinism

by Katy Dartford

In most 'genres' of climbing women are well-represented, achieving grades almost on a par with the top male climbers. At the IFSC bouldering competitions, the girls are bringing back better results than the guys, so why is it an apparently different story with mountaineering? At this year's Piolets d'Or, where some of the most outstanding achievements in Alpinism from the last year are awarded, it was still a masculine affair, with just one woman taking part in the ceremonies and another on the judging panel.





Chamonix-based Mountain Guide, Isabelle Santoire, leads female clients up the ridge of Petit Flambeau in the Mont Blanc region. **Photo: David Simmonite**



Cathy O'Dowd (front) midway along the Mazeno Ridge, with Sandy Allan and Rick Allen behind her.
Photo: Lhakpa Rangdu Sherpa.

"I'm afraid, sadly, there are not many female mountaineers," says Alpine Club president, Mick Fowler, who received a Piolet for his ascent of The Prow of Shiva in India. "It's a sad fact that mountaineering isn't something that attracts a lot of females." Cathy O'Dowd was on a team with Sandy Allan and Rick Allen, who received a Piolet for their ascent of the Mazeno Ridge on Nanga Parbat. She accompanied them for much of the way, crossing all eight Mazeno summits, before making an unsuccessful attempt on the unclimbed continuation of the ridge direct to the top. She is best known as the first woman in the world to climb Everest from both south and north sides, via the South Col and the North Ridge. "In all the sports I take part in (climbing in various forms, ski-touring, mountain running) there are and always have been more men than women participating," says Cathy.

"The percentage of women has certainly increased in the 25 years I've been active but it's nothing like 50-50. Even when the elite women perform really well – so there are three women in the top 10 finishers in an ultra-race – the women's field never has the same depth as the men. So part of the answer about no women in this year's Piolets field is that there are fewer of them active."

But why is this still the case? "Going on expeditions, not to mention the training and preparation that goes with it, is very demanding on time and takes participants away from families and other commitments for a long period," says Cathy, "that's true for both sexes, of course, but there's often less acceptance of women who do it. I'm sure that women who undertake extreme activities and expeditions are asked far more media questions about leaving their families behind." There were plenty of the men at the Piolets this year who have children – but they also had wives to leave them at home with. But then on the other hand, for many women (although not all) having had kids, they don't want to be away from them for extended periods.

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Lynn Hill is well-known for her exploits in the rock-climbing arena and early on decided mountaineering wasn't for her. "My first expedition was to Kyrgyzstan with Conrad Anker and Dan Osman and we climbed a route Alpine style. But snow isn't really my element – I love climbing on rock much more and I'm interested in 'performing' there, rather than at altitude." After climbing in the Sierra Nevada range she decided icy climbs were not for her. Lynn argues that it's down to lower risk levels: "I think that women tend to be more 'reasonable' and less likely to take risks by nature. I don't deal with cold weather as well as most men, so dangerous, icy climbs don't really appeal to me anyway." But it's also down to opportunity, she says: "Gender roles and expectations on women are even more demanding in today's society than ever before. We are not only expected to have a job or career, but we are also expected to take more than our share of responsibilities when it comes to raising children, managing the household, etc... Unless a woman is able to redefine those expectations more often than not, she will be expected to fulfil the role of 'domestic servitude'. Climbing has not proven to be any more egalitarian than any other business in that way either."

Director of Smart Climbing, Rebecca Williams, is a clinical psychologist and climbing instructor and has had much success in helping people make better use of their minds and bodies to enhance their climbing and agrees with Lynn that 'institutionalised' sexism (women still have lower paid jobs and are more likely to live in poverty, subject to abuse and violence, have to combine work and caring roles (children and older

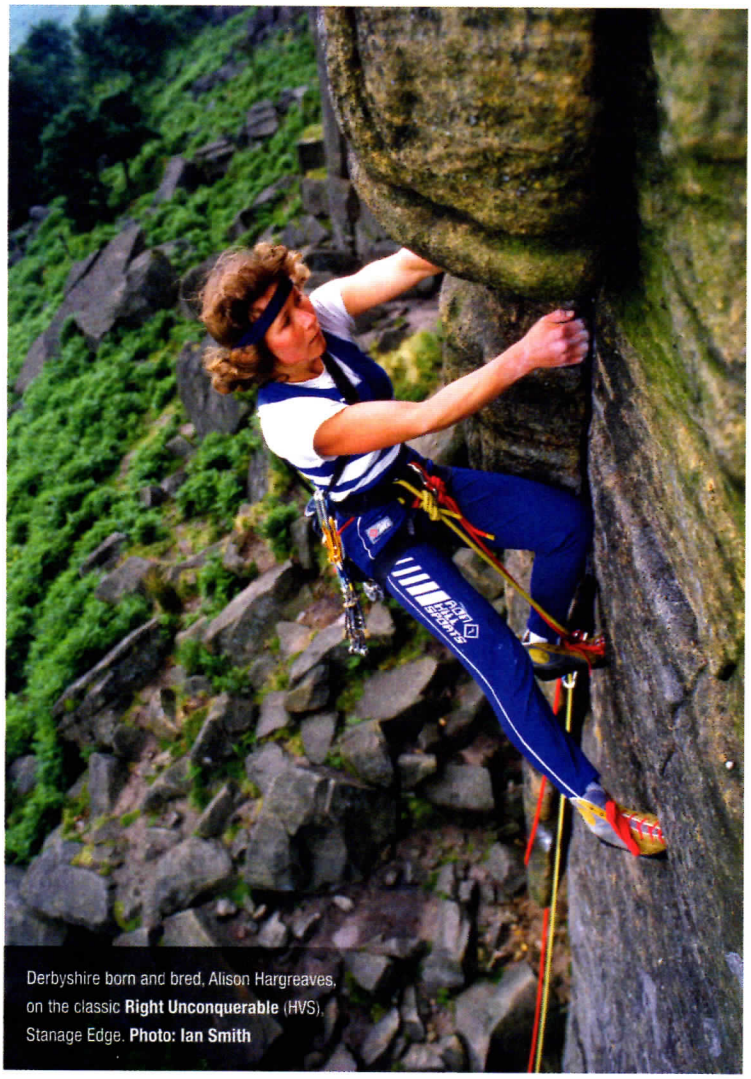
parents/family members than men) is at play here. "Boys and girls are brought up differently and perceived differently by society, there is no way to escape the influence of socialization on gender roles and therefore gendered behavior. Mothers discipline risk-taking behaviour differently in boys and girls, showing more concern for girls' safety than for boys thus embedding social roles. Altruism is also more highly rewarded and, therefore, developed more in girls than boys – you could argue that to excel in Alpinism, a degree of single mindedness is needed, if not the ability to behave 'selfishly' to achieve the goal, something that perhaps women find harder." She also suggests that "girls tend to ascribe success to good luck and failure to their own lack of ability; boys ascribe success to their own ability and failure to bad luck – so arguably its more motivating for boys to keep trying something difficult than girls?" Williams does suggest that: "Gender gaps tend to grow smaller over time, but women may then be derailed by their biology (or having children)." So this then comes down to similar arguments used in terms of women in high powered employment – it's about lack of opportunity.

Cathy O'Dowd agrees: "I have no scientific evidence to back up my hunch, but then a lot of hormones kick in with pregnancy and childbirth and they do change how a woman feels about things. But then women are also often socialised to believe that dangerous, physically demanding activities are better left to men. And women do, as a sweeping generalisation, seem to question their own ability in a way that many men don't. Alpinism at this level does take a supreme inner self-confidence. In my experience women are often much better at these activities than they expect to be, but they may not have the confidence to try them in the first place."

Rebecca Williams also suggests that: "Boys are typically more impulsive than girls (this is evident early on; boys more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD than girls, although again socialization may play a role here) and impulsivity accounts for most of the differences in risk-taking between boys and girls." But there are arguments that physically women are better equipped to deal with altitude than men. Jennifer Jordan in her book, *Savage Summit* a study of five women who died climbing K2, argues that, 'Although there has been almost no scientific research on the effects of high altitude on the female body, what little data there are (sic) actually indicate that women are better suited to the rigors of the Death Zone than their male colleagues. Recent studies suggest that as men and women climb higher, men's initial advantage of muscle mass and brute strength equalizes out against women's better endurance and ability to adapt to the thin air. Not only do women suffer high-altitude pulmonary oedema less often, but they acclimatize better, they retain their base body weight better, and their more efficient circulatory systems lead them to suffer less frostbite. There is also early evidence that the female sex hormone helps to guard women against the deadly effects of high altitude, but further research needs to be done to make that theory conclusive'.

Women also view the rewards for taking risks differently. "I have had the risk/reward discussion with friends when skiing in avalanche terrain and generally men rate the reward side higher – without questioning it," says Cathy O'Dowd. "I once read a great avalanche awareness article whose number one piece of advice for off-piste safety was: ski in a group that includes a woman!"

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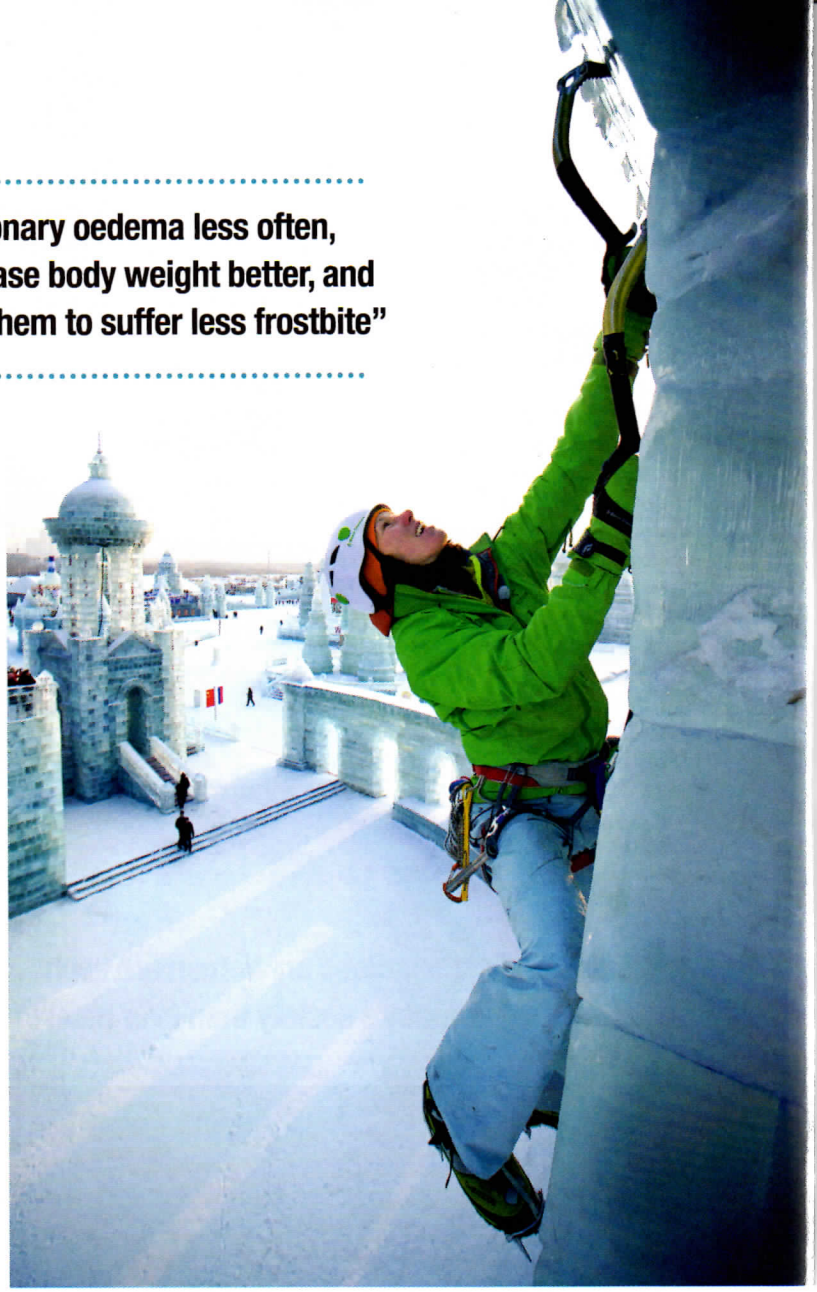


Derbyshire born and bred, Alison Hargreaves, on the classic **Right Unconquerable** (HVS), Stanage Edge. **Photo: Ian Smith**



Cathy O'Dowd (left) on her second Everest summit with Pemba Sherpa (centre) and Ian Woodall, 29th May 1999, after climbing the North Ridge route. **Photo: Jangbu Sherpa**

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Ines Papert ice-climbing at the Harbin Ice & Snow Festival in China. **Photo: Franz Walter**

The role of the media has a lot to answer for here. Rebecca Williams suggests there are a lack of female role models and we know that the best way to increase participation of any sport (or indeed any activity) is to show 'people like me' doing it. A quick trawl through the magazines still shows very few pictures of female Alpinists and also few pictures of people from black or ethnic minority backgrounds, so there is a lack of diversity on a number of fronts. It will be interesting to see what happens as a younger generation of climbers who have perhaps had more positive female role models in climbing comes of age. Women's performance at a high level is (as men's is) strongly mediated by how able they feel to perform a task and this could be improved massively by increasing the coverage of women performing at a high level.

The media is also much 'tougher' on risk-taking in women than men, perhaps because its perceived that women are acting outside their gender roles, that aggressive pursuit of a goal is in some way 'anti-feminine'. There is a link here to societal views of women as caring, altruistic, and attractively groomed, which is all at odds with the image of the mountaineer. No male climber ever got the opprobrium than Alison Hargreaves got for leaving her children behind when she died in August 1995 after summiting K2. Her career as an Alpinist caused worldwide controversy in the general media, particularly in the UK and amongst certain female columnists, who felt that she shouldn't be undertaking such hazardous activities because she was a mother. Before going to K2, she had completed the first solo of almost all of the great North Faces in the Alps in a single season, (except the North Face of the Eiger, which came separately from the 'Hard Day's Summer' ascents where she actually climbed the North East Face of the Eiger, whereas the *1938 Route* on the North Face is usually regarded as one of the 'great North Faces of the alps' – either way, a first for any climber male or female). It was her intention to summit K2 unassisted as well. Climbers who knew her, including male climbers, described her as one of the strongest, most technically perfect climbers they had ever seen. But in the weeks after her death climbers, columnists, and social scientists said she was 'obsessed' with climbing K2, and was 'blinkered' by summit fever, and was 'selfish' to choose a mountain over motherhood. One of those throwing his criticism into the ring was Peter Hillary, who criticized Alison for ignoring the telltale signs of bad weather moving in. Her morals and her mental health were questioned in a way that the men – and fathers – who died with her were not.

Cathy O'Dowd says the 'social' rewards or recognition for a woman undertaking 'risky' sports are lower. "I would guess (and this is speculation based on personal experience i.e. I mainly get negative feedback from my family about my 'climbing' achievements, they're not perceived as achievements at all given the absence of kids...) However, I also think that, again as a sweeping generalisation, women are less obsessive and more sensible than men. When we look at the risk/reward and discomfort/reward balance of some of these extreme activities we decide that it's just not worth it. There are other things to do in life, and getting yourself killed on any one mountain endeavour pretty much ruins your chance of doing those other things," she says, "I think this is where my limit comes in, there's a level of risk I find personally unjustifiable and a level of discomfort where I can't be bothered any longer."

Sandy Allan agrees: "I know lots of women, especially Canadian, some French and British, who are incredible climbers. I mean okay, there are some who may not want to rough it in the Himalaya for a few weeks, but some of them do. I've no idea why they don't want to climb big peaks. I'm sure they do, but decide there's more to life than whacking your head against a brick wall."

On the other hand, whilst the public has a perception that all mountaineers are risk-takers and enjoy the 'buzz' of climbing, and research in the past perpetuated this myth by lumping climbers in with skydivers and other so called 'sensation seeking' sports, recent studies have debunked the myth that Alpinism is all about sensation-seeking and taking risks. Rebecca Williams suggests that: "What has been identified is that mountaineers tend to have higher expectations of being able to regulate their emotions and having personal agency (being the captain of your own

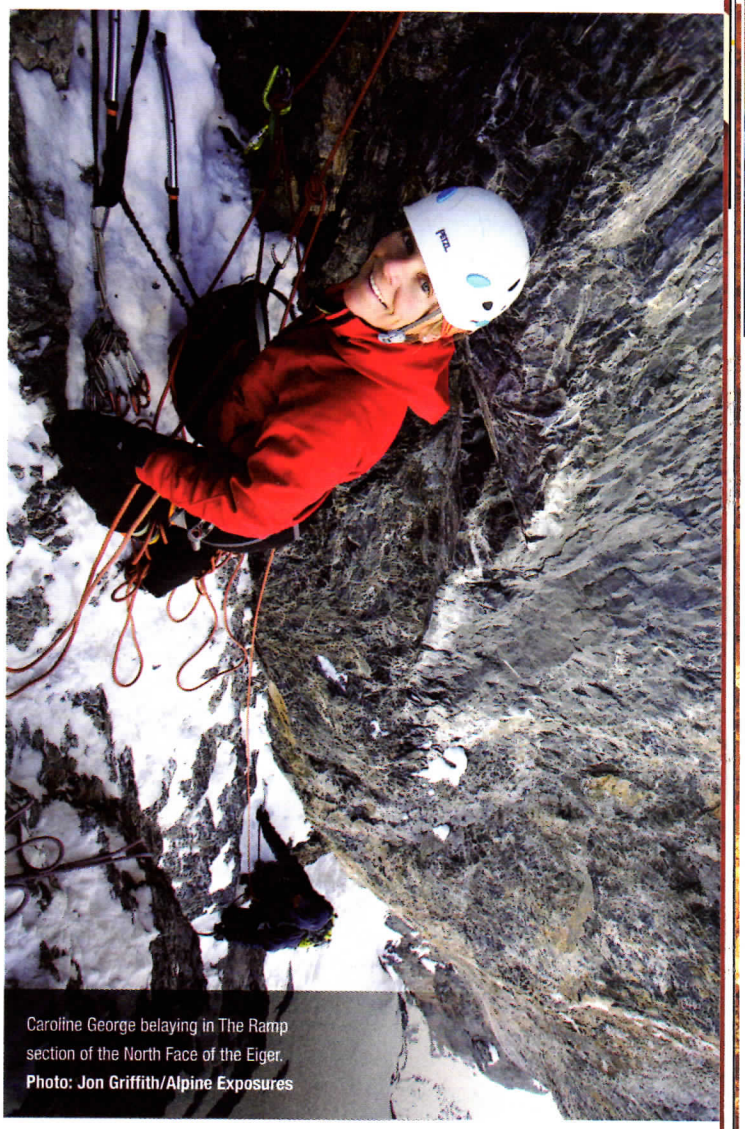
ship) than non-mountaineers, but struggle to describe their emotions and feel a lack of personal agency in emotional relationships. Mountaineering provided a helpful benefit in closing the gap in their expectations, and on returning from a trip, the study showed that they felt more in control of their lives (Woodman and Allen, 2012). So mountaineering has a beneficial effect in terms of helping people self-regulate. It could be argued from studies in gender differences outside of sport, that women are already better at expressing emotions and emotional relationships, and so perhaps are less motivated to pursue mountaineering as a way of self-regulating?"

But it would be wrong to say there aren't women performing at the highest level of Alpinism and that the perception of them isn't changing. "There are certainly are fewer women performing at the top end of extreme Alpinism," says Rick Allen who was also on Cathy's team on the Mazeno Ridge "but you've only got to look at the panel of judges, there's a woman there who's climbed all fourteen 8,000m peaks so it's not a game exclusive for men and there are women out there who perform amongst the highest level." That woman was Gerlinde Kaltenbrunner, who in 2011 was the first woman to climb all fourteen 8,000ers without oxygen. But she's probably not as well-known, at least in the UK, as jury president, Stephen Venables who in 1988 became the first Briton to make the summit of Mount Everest without bottled oxygen. Kaltenbrunner followed that up in 2012 by completing the hardest line of the season from Everest Base Camp: the rarely attempted Scott Route/British Route, up the 25,790-foot Nuptse, first ascended in 1979 by a team of British-French climbers, tackling it in four days. It was just the third successful attempt up the route which ascends a 5,791-foot wall, and they did it without the aid of oxygen or high altitude porters.

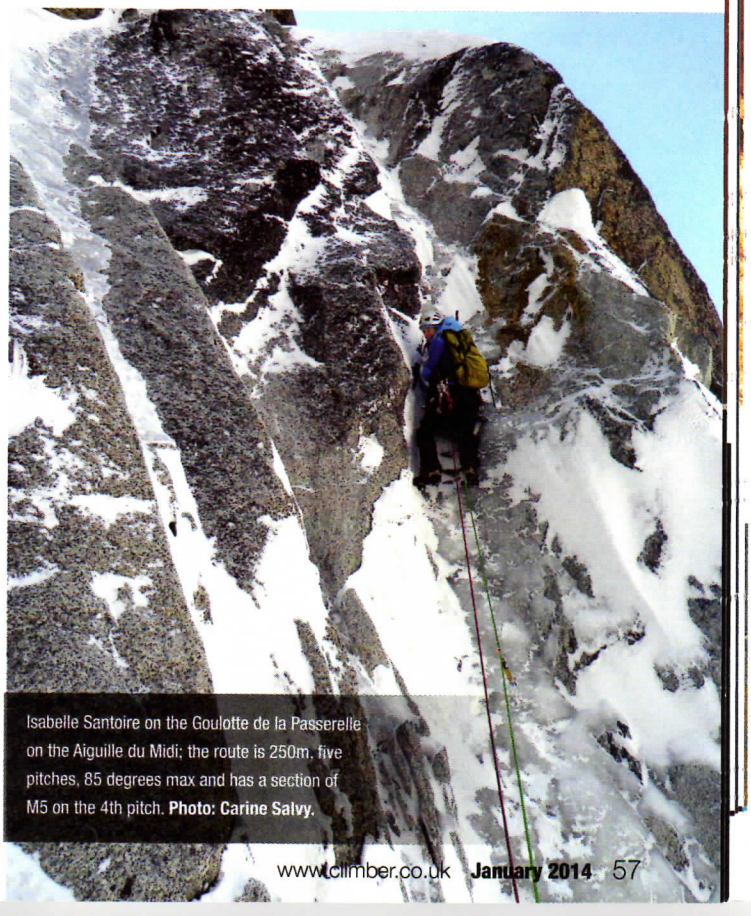
Caroline George is a Mountain Guide in Chamonix and agrees that whilst the Piolets d'Or is indeed a reflection of the reality, things are changing. "There are far fewer women in the mountain climbing world than men... and it's the same with the guiding world. But I think women are going more and more on expeditions and more and more women are becoming Mountain Guides as well. I think mountaineering is still new and that women are slowly but steadily taking to it. I think it's a male-dominated world and women are often comfortable following in men's footsteps first, before becoming their own person in the world. Personally, I have worked with lots of women-focused climbing groups and they are all very keen to learn and find their way in that world; it takes time. There are lots of women achieving great things in the mountains. Kate Rutherford just had an amazing winter (summer) in Patagonia; bery impressive. Pat Deavoll is doing first ascents all over the Himalaya, sometimes solo. Ines Papert does lots of expeditions and has pushed the standard for women in ice-climbing and mixed climbing quite far beyond what it was until she came on the scene. It's really impressive and committed."

And having children also affects men too. British mountaineer, Andy Kirkpatrick says having children changes everything: "Anyone who just ignores the responsibility of having kids will probably suffer for it later on. When my kids were small it was easier, as they didn't miss me so much and climbing was my job anyway. As they grew – say from three upwards – things got much harder, and I think for a while I did serious damage to my kids by being away, especially my son. Luckily I think I pulled back from climbing just in the nick of time, and for the last six years have really focused totally on trying to be a good dad. I have one trip away a year that I would view as being a proper climbing trip (three weeks away from home), and all these bar one were to low stress places (Yosemite, Romsdal etc).

"There isn't a simple answer as to whether there are gender differences in risk-taking and whether this accounts for the lack of women in high level mountaineering," says Rebecca Williams. "It's more likely to be mix of socialization effects and a lack of role models impacting on performance and aspiration and opportunity rather than a biological difference which is fixed and can't be overcome." So perhaps in order to make more women climb mountains we need to really assess what is risky in our lives and to better understand why people might find reward in accepting. It's hugely important for women to find friends and family who can understand and support women's dreams. "I'm not saying that men are A and women are B," says Cathy O'Dowd, "but in my opinion, it is a spectrum and men and women who love extreme sport have far more in common with each other than with men and women at the more sedentary end of the spectrum. But when you get to the absolute cutting edge of the extreme sport spectrum, which is what the Piolets are about, there are few men that make the grade and very few women. I don't think that's a criticism of women; there is nothing wrong about being sensible about risk. In mountaineering it is a very fine line between being the best in the world and being dead."



Caroline George belaying in The Ramp section of the North Face of the Eiger. **Photo: Jon Griffith/Alpine Exposures**



Isabelle Santoire on the Goulotte de la Passerelle on the Aiguille du Midi; the route is 250m, five pitches, 85 degrees max and has a section of M5 on the 4th pitch. **Photo: Carine Salvy.**