



## COUCH POTATO

Infamy is only what you make of it

**I BLAME THE DEAD GOAT.** I thought something smelled off – perhaps a bird slowly decaying or a wayward baboon. It never occurred to me that an overly ambitious goat might have fallen a week earlier, his maggot-ensconced body lodged deep inside the buttress we climbed in northern Ethiopia. We arrived in spring 2007 seeking new routes. I hadn't, however, climbed in five months and was a mere three months out from a procedure to shave down a bone spur in my left shoulder.

I'd spent January and February in Addis Ababa, where I came for love, money, and rehab. Hanging out in Joseph and my block-and-mortar rental house, I diligently swung two-pound weights along every possible vector to prepare for our all-female climbing expedition to the soft sandstone of the Gheralta Spires. I also laid plans for a *responsible* re-entry into the vertical world and conceptualized a new climbing style and racking system. I would climb with my right arm above my head and my left at my waist, like a lopsided crab making a last go for the ocean. Meanwhile, on my harness racking loops, I would face the gates inward to reduce unnecessary torque and hang draws on the front gear loops to reduce reach. I rehearsed my system daily.

In March, when my team members deplaned in Addis, I told them I was "mostly better," and then asked them to carry the heavier bags. Two days later we landed in Mekele, capital of the northern Tigray province and launching point for our expedition; here, we made a quick detour to a small limestone crag to "warm up." Now, 20 feet up, with that goat carcass reeking and no good end in sight, I realized my error.

*I would reach up only with my right arm.* The only hold lay to the left.

*I would wait at least a month before doing a thumbs-down jam.* My hand slipped out of every position but the thumbs-down jam.

*I would not – NOT – climb any offwidths.* Hanging off a fist jam, I looked up at 30 feet of hand stacks to arm bars.

I'd like to say this was a behavioral anomaly; I'd like to say the rotting goat forced choices otherwise avoided. But last year, following an eight-month rehab for a broken foot, I ignored better judgment and went from 5.7 to 5.11 in one day – even though I'd vowed to wait at least a month before even considering 5.10. That was last May... four

months before I found out I needed shoulder surgery. Other people might have seen the combination of the two injuries as a sign to slow down. I saw it as too many months in rehab. I stubbornly plugged my left fist into the last reasonable jam.

*I imagined the stitches tearing, even though they'd dissolved two months earlier.* I pulled.

*I pictured bone grating against something metal, even though I had no pins.* I twisted.

*I climbed until the sweet smell of my sweat overpowered the disgusting, rotting goat.* Then, 20 feet later, out of gear and totally worked, I backed off.

**WHEN I BEGAN CLIMBING,** 14 years ago, I fed off stories of greatness. It seemed that everyone but me was a phenomenal climber. "Did you hear what Marla did last weekend? She sent that overhanging finger crack (hanging pillar, soloed the Nordwand, made a nine-foot dyno)." Then, when I moved to Estes Park in 1999, I heard about Jeff Ofsanko. His story was standard, flashing some hard climb or another... but then came the qualifier: "...and he did it off-the-couch." Although I had a futon at the time, I still wanted to be an off-the-couch hardwoman. Perhaps it was the balance it suggested – that you could be a gnarly climber *and* a sane and normal human. That you could tick the hardest climbs when the mood struck, but otherwise spend your days mastering minor brain surgery or learning Farsi.

I wasn't ready for greatness that day in Ethiopia, but perhaps this is the true challenge of climbing off the couch: it is never a conscious decision but more of a brief rage against the sucking void of the couch itself. My couch in Addis was Kelly green and lumpy, and as my butt started molding to the springs, I knew I had to make a decision: to leave its safe embrace or sink farther into the corduroy cushions. This time, the climber in me won out, but the couch often offers a far more rational – and deluxe – existence. Consider this classic exchange between Bobbi Bensman and Jimmy Surrette in the mid-1990s:

Bobbi to Jimmy, trying to coax him out to Rifle: "You're the best

## WHIPPED

Johnny-off-the-couch climber I know.”

Jimmy (sitting on the couch watching MTV, making no motion to pack his climbing gear): “More like Johnny-*on*-the-couch.”

Climbing is devious. There is always the moment when you know just enough about a sport to get yourself into trouble (or, as with Jimmy, when you know yourself well enough to stay out of it). With climbing, especially post-couch climbing, that window opens even wider. I escaped the decomposing goat that day in Ethiopia, levering desperately against the slick, calcified belly of that offwidth, clinging silently when my foot slipped (and shock-loaded my shoulder), and fighting for every inch before down-aiding out of there. And I was proud – or at least, I was until later that night. ...

Ironically, my legs gave out first. “Do anyone else’s shins hurt?” I asked.

“Like, after you do too many foot jams?” asked my partner Helen while we sat in our hotel room back in Hawzien, pop. 909.

“Um, no. Different.” I looked at the team; to them, we’d had a light day – 1.5 pitches and a hike. I stretched my toes under the table and motioned for more whiskey.

It didn’t stop there. That night, and every night for the next two weeks, I awoke with a numb left arm and searing pain lining my hamstrings from knee to ass. At dinner one evening, I pulled a neck muscle laughing. Just the thought of a trip to the Turkish toilet made my hips quiver. What I used to think of as delicious soreness, I now found insidious. When I was younger (and keep in mind, I say this when I am *only* 30), soreness meant getting stronger. Soreness meant I was a climber. Times have changed. Still, I kept my cool. I laid a towel on the tile floor each morning and stretched. I drank Emergen-C, Gatorade, and Guke-nade by the gallon. Still, I ached. I felt a bit like the fellow who’d run a marathon off the couch, only to be hobbled for the next two months.

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**IN HAWZIEN, LYING FLAT ON MY BACK** and pondering whether I could find ice for my shoulder in the middle of a desert, I had the sudden urge to call Jeff Ofsanko. It struck me that I never saw Jeff the day after one of his climbs, and that no one ever talked about whether he was able to turn the doorknob that night or wash his hair the next morning. On that hotel-room floor, my left fist white-knuckling on the metal bed frame as I twisted at the torso in hopes of stretching my shoulder, I started to see a pattern. People land on the couch for a variety of reasons: they get hurt, they take up saner pastimes, they fall in love. Then they get off the couch – valiantly in some cases – only to end up right back on it. What did this mean for *my* dream of off-the-couch greatness?

After 12 days of this, I realized I could still have my dream. I just had to redefine the terms. Couching: anything you do that maintains a heart rate of under 80 bpm. Factor in driving, eating, reading, sleeping, watching movies, sitting at a bar, and foreplay, and I estimate that 80 percent of the average climber’s day is spent couching. So, maybe all climbing is off the couch. Or on the couch. Maybe I have arrived after all.

*Despite the call of the couch, Majka Burhardt and team established a handful of first ascents in Ethiopia. Stay tuned for a feature article about the trip.*

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