



MIKE TEA

Finding Your Better Half

The search for the perfect (rope) mate

BY MAJKA BURHARDT

You wake up to your alarm at 6:30 a.m. Your dog hears the buzzer and jumps in bed to make his wet nose your second reminder. You have a date today — this morning, in fact. At 7:45 you are meeting a new climbing partner at the local coffee shop and you don't want to be late. You spring out of bed and briefly debate whether to take a shower. Will your new belay slave/rope gun be more impressed with yesterday's odor or today's Irish Spring? You opt for a two-minute oral-hygiene attack instead. By 6:43 you are standing outside in your flip-flops staring into the trunk of your car. You've offered to bring the rack and wonder: Should you go light, to encourage questions about your virtually unknown alpine career, or should you load up with doubles of every cam and the offsets in between — maybe he is a potential wall partner?

You decide on an eclectic mix: your new set of RPs commingled with various bootied nuts, and one

cam of each size, including a couple of rigid Friends to show your climbing breadth. You clip your draws onto a sling and smile as the sun reflects off the biners into your eyes. *Today is the day.*

Arriving at the coffee shop right on time you spot your partner on the patio. You make eye contact and feel the vibe begin. Both of you are wearing the same Verve pants — same length (you don't do capri, and neither, thank God, does he), but different color. You both order double nonfat lattes and skip the baked goods. By the time you load the gear into your car you're chatting effortlessly about the new crag pack you both have.

The approach goes quickly today and you arrive at the base of your first objective before 9 a.m. You offer your partner the first lead and he starts racking up immediately. While flaking the rope you compliment yourself on your generosity. As he scampers up the initial moves you make a list of all the climbs you will

do today, allowing yourself to dream of surpassing the ten-pitch ceiling. That's when the rope stops moving through your hands.

You crane your head up and see that Elvis has joined your partner on the pitch — they are dancing together forty feet up, your partner's left leg beating in time to some long-forgotten tune. You don't let yourself believe that he can be pumped already, but your daydream of cruising pitch after pitch begins to fade. You hear a whimper from above and watch the biner full of new RPs come tumbling down the face. Should you offer words of encouragement? You decide you do not know them well enough for words of encouragement, and mentally review your rescue skills.

Two hours later you are both back on the ground. Your partner apologizes for the ninth time and you nod your head again and say that it's all right. You accept his thanks for lowering him from the midway anchor because he could not seem to see



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through his tears. You promise again that you did not mind only climbing the first quarter of the route, and that you were not too scared down-leading.

As you throw your rack in your pack you gaze wistfully at the party on the route to the left. They have perfected hand signals and rope tugs and don't even have to talk. They move as one up the cliff, having climbed over 500 feet to your forty.

On the drive home from the crag you curse your stupidity. You found this partner at the local mountain shop and had a plan to climb after chatting for less than ten minutes. Never again, you tell yourself. Next time you will do your homework.

The next week you go to a slideshow at the same shop. In line for the bathroom you strike up a conversation with a fellow climber. You casually ask about her experience and feel your heart rate rise with every climb she lists. She seems to have been everywhere. You ask her to go climb. She accepts. You'll meet at eight o'clock.

You arrive at the parking lot late — it's 8:03. Your new partner is leaning against her truck waiting. She is already racked up. You choose not to hold this against her. You shift your attention to her attire, and quickly see that you have very different tastes. She seems to like capris. In fact, her pants would more accurately be called knickers. When she bends down to hide the key in the wheel well of her pickup, you glimpse neoprene-wrapped knees. Her elbows sport matching braces. She'd offered to bring the rack and you had agreed, thinking yourself congenial, but as you eye her gear you promise yourself never to be so careless again. You count seven draws, two of them frayed in the middle. All of the biners are ovals. The five hexes, the bulk of the protection options, are slung with what looks to be secondhand rap webbing, its color long lost in an extended battle with the sun. You wonder if your partner also has wooden pitons stashed in her pockets, and console yourself with your contribution to the climb, a two-week-old sixty-meter bi-color dry-treated rope.

Your partner climbs the first pitch in thirteen minutes. She places two pieces of gear. When you get to the anchor you see that it consists of a hex cammed in a horizontal crack and a jammed knot. When your partner starts to hand you the so-called rack for your lead you tell her to go ahead. You wedge yourself against the rock to avoid weighting the anchor. After following three pitches you broach the subject of modern climbing gear. Your partner harrumphs. When she asks what you are doing next weekend you say you are washing your dog.

The next week you scout the climbing gym every day. You arrive at a different time each visit, and decide that the kind of partner you want is most likely to be found during the 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. shift. You mark off every Tuesday and Thursday night on your calendar. After a month of scoping out the prospects you settle on the criteria for partners: They dress in the current styles, they lead efficiently up all the moderate gym routes, they backstep and foot switch effortlessly. One Thursday you are feeling lucky and identify a candidate to whom to pop the question. You leave that night with a phone number and a tentative plan for Sunday.

Sunday morning dawns crystal clear. You both arrive at the same time, both driving fuel-efficient Honda Civics, yours blue, his gold.

You slide your pack on and within seconds you are on the trail discussing best and worst Honda mechanics in town. You admire your partner's approach shoes and notice how well he smears and edges on the talus leading to the climb.

Your partner lets you have the first lead and you think that this is the way to start the day. You offer to carry a CamelBak up the route and he agrees to this plan. You have never before had a partner who will drink from the same nozzle on the first climb. Your lead goes well (you're sure your partner doesn't see you pull on the cam behind the roof). The sun is just warming the ledge as you set up the first belay. Minutes later your partner arrives. As you hand him the rack you watch as he arranges gear on his harness, making a mental note of the style: left shoulder gear sling, carabiner gates in, draws on both sides of the harness, gates out. You decide to make this your style, too, shaving precious seconds at the belay changes. By the end of the day you are discussing hand signals.

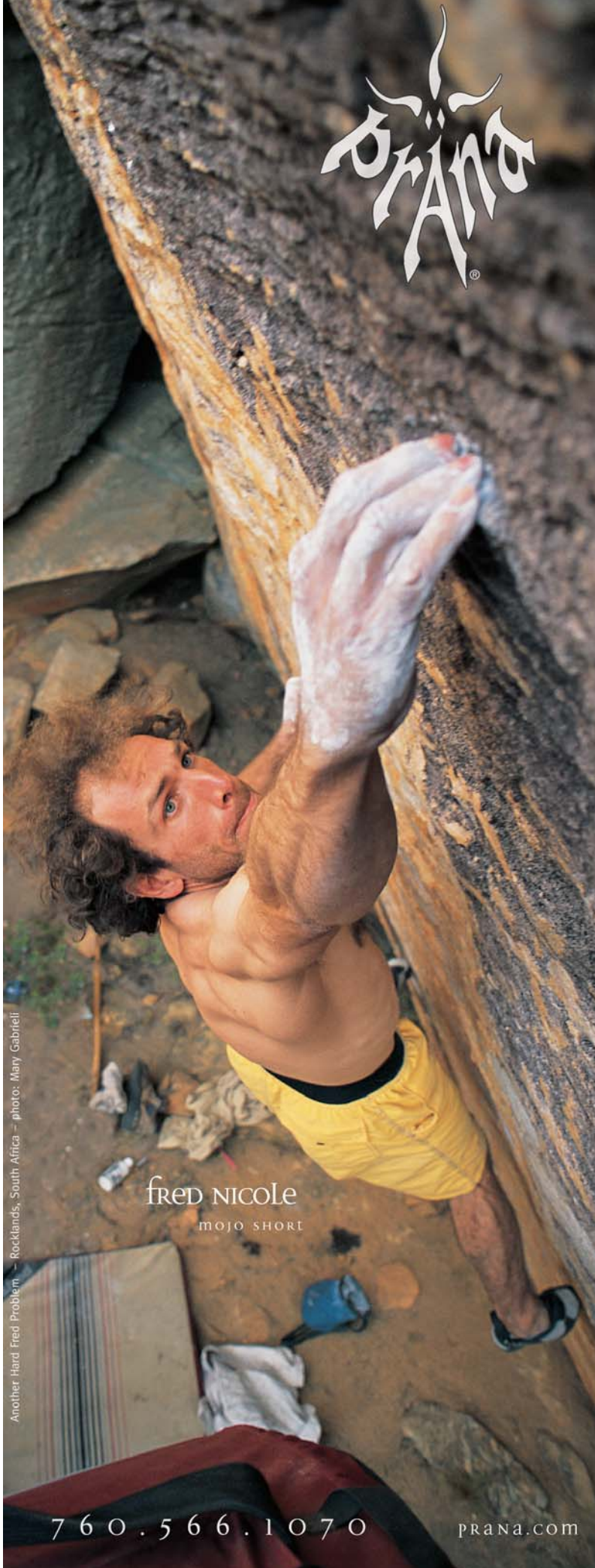
After two weekends of climbing you and your new partner have logged over twenty pitches. At the bar you discuss stepping it up. Your partner wants to push his leading grade; you pretend you want the same. The next weekend you arrive with extra TCUs and hope he will not mind the additional gear. Your partner warms up and by 9:30 is ready to take it to the next level. Nestled in for a comfortable belay, you are surprised when the rope barely stops moving through your hands. You try to be an attentive belayer, tie in, and lace your shoes all at the same time. You almost make it, but end up making your partner wait at the anchor while you run and pee.

Thirty feet of moderate climbing bolsters your ego. By the time you reach the second piece, however, you start to worry. The lieback corner he raced up seems to lack footholds. As you pull into the first move you tentatively place your left toe onto the granite. It skids back down to meet your right. You try again. The belay tightens as you achieve a desperate smear with your left foot, dyno for a finger lock — and skid back down the corner. Looking up you make eye contact with your partner at the belay. He gives you what you hope is a smile.

A half an hour, two aid moves, and one stuck nut later you join your partner on the belay ledge. He has already threaded his end of the rope through the rap rings. You meekly untie your own end and watch it snap to the ground. As you rappel you search for a plausible excuse but your partner is already a step ahead. He's forgotten about an appointment, he says. You wonder who has appointments on Saturday, but do not ask.

At 1:30 p.m. you pull up to the gear shop. You make your way over to the clothing department and check out the newest capris. Suddenly they don't look so bad. You take them to the register and strike up a conversation with the person ringing up your sale. You leave your name and number on the back of a piece of register tape and drive home hoping she will call.

Majka Burhardt, Climbing's newest columnist, has a BA in anthropology from Princeton University, and often can be found eavesdropping on nearby climbing teams under the guise of research. She is a climbing guide and expedition coordinator for the Colorado Mountain School, based in Estes Park, Colorado, and currently prefers runouts above small wires on Eldorado sandstone or Lumpy Ridge granite to all other types of climbing.



Another Hard Fred Problem — Rocklands, South Africa — photo: Mary Gabrieli

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