



Katy Dartford talks to

Shauna Coxsey

Shauna Coxsey is going from strength to strength. The 19 year old from Runcorn has had an outstanding inaugural season on the IFSC Climbing World Cup circuit, and is currently third in their rankings. But she never expected to go this far so soon. After starting climbing at the age of four, inspired by legendary Frenchwoman Catherine Destivelle, Shauna began competing at the age of 7. By 16, she had already climbed F8a both in Spain and in the UK, and Font 7c+ on the boulders. At 18, she climbed Pilgrim (Font 8A) at Parisella's cave in North Wales. This year was meant to be time out to see how she would do on the World Cup circuit, and her success has taken her by surprise. Competition climbing is an unusual path for a British woman, with our strong culture of outdoor climbing. For now, she's keen to keep pushing herself in the competition circuit and develop her outdoor climbing at the same time. Climb recently spoke to Shauna about her extraordinary year so far.

What you've achieved recently is significant: you're the first British woman to have achieved a world-class level in competition climbing. How does that feel?

I'm still in shock really. It's all happened a little too quickly to really comprehend what's going on.

You don't really have a British role model who has achieved what you already have on the competition circuit. How do you cope with this and possibly having to be the role model yourself?

It's been an experience, because it wasn't planned at all. This year was my year to see where I was, and chill out a bit with the comps and not really focus on doing well, but to just have an experience, so it's been a big surprise.

You're very much part of the new generation of very talented young climbers who have developed their skills mainly indoors. But do you enjoy outdoor climbing as much as plywood and plastic?

Yes, definitely. I just haven't done so much before because my family aren't climbers, so the opportunity hasn't been there as much as it might have been for someone brought up into a climbing family. But I'm really psyched to get outdoors and to improve my technique by climbing on different rock types. I think it's important to have a sense of climbing history, and to search out classic routes and boulders.

Are you motivated to push your limits in sport and trad climbing as you've done in competitions and on the boulders?

I don't trad climb, not because I don't want to but I've just not had the opportunity to yet. I really enjoy hard routes, and I'd love to try trad climbing, but gaining the experience of placing gear is going to take a long time and I just don't feel I have the time to dedicate to it right now. But I'd love to in the future. I'm really psyched to push as far as I can in competitions and on rock - both bouldering and sport climbing - and I'm psyched to get a rope back on. Everyone seems to think since I've taken my harness off I've started to do well, but right now I want to get my harness back on!

Do you find it hard to focus on climbing outdoors if you're training hard for indoor competitions?

Well, this year I haven't trained at all for indoor climbing! I've just been climbing here and there so there's been no real focus, but I've been enjoying climbing a lot. So I can't say I find it hard to focus, but maybe I will when I start to train properly, which is something I want to do in the near future.

So you don't really have a training schedule?

No, I don't have a specific training schedule. I just climb. I go climbing with my friends, and try to enjoy it. I find it hard to train on my own because I love the social aspect of bouldering, which is my favourite thing about the sport, so I find it easier to climb with friends because we push each other. So this year I haven't done any specific training but the comps have really highlighted my weaknesses, and I'm psyched to start a specific training regime and work on them. ▶

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX MESSENGER



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What do you think those specific weaknesses are?

Probably just general fitness, because by the time Finals come round I’m always really tired. And strength is definitely one of my weaknesses.

How does climbing fit in with the rest of your life - things like studying and boyfriends?

Well, my boyfriend and I split up about three weeks ago in the middle of the comps, so I guess it doesn’t fit with some things. Climbing is my main priority, and I need people in my life who accept that. It’s hard to have a personal life, but it does show you who your true friends are. When I get back from comps and I’m at home, I just want to chill out, so it can be hard to stay in touch with people. But with regards to college and school, I finished college last year and chose not to go to university right away, because I didn’t know what I wanted to do and I wanted to see how the comps would go for a year. I’m hoping to get full funding so I can continue to do the comps as they are going much better than I expected. I want to go to university at some point, and maybe on my travels I’ll figure out what it is I want to study, but I’m in no rush to jump into university without knowing what I want to do.

Your blog is doing well, are you surprised at the interest in it?

My blog is definitely something I want to continue with: it had sixty thousand hits last month! I didn’t realise anyone would want to read it - it was quite a shock.

How much better and stronger do you think you can get?

I’ve never really thought about that actually. I stopped training because when I was younger I always just worked out what my weaknesses were myself and I’ve never really had a coach. So I’ve just coached myself and done things I didn’t enjoy because they’re my weak areas I guess. Recently, the World Cup circuits highlighted what I might be able to achieve. I’m just really excited about working on it and seeing how far I can push it. I haven’t had a specific training schedule for a few years now, so I’m really psyched to push it as far as I can. I really have no idea how much stronger or better I can get.

Has being in team GB helped your climbing?

We don’t work individually with coaches, so I don’t feel I really benefit from their training. I’m not interested in having a coach as I don’t work so well when I’m being told what to do. I train with my friends, and that’s definitely where most of my motivation and determination comes from. Being with other people and pushing it in the climbing wall, I guess they’ve acted as coaches by getting my determination up and pointing out my weakness.

What’s your view of the possibility of being a professional climber?

This is something I’ve been thinking about, but I don’t know the answer. I’m interested in a sponsorship deal so I can put all my efforts into climbing, because up until the beginning of season I was working full time so I haven’t had the opportunity to train as hard as I’d like to. The possibilities are exciting, but it’s hard for British climbers to gain such funding. It’s not going to be easy, but I really want to push the sport and show that British athletes can do it.

It’s the Olympics this month. Do you think you could win if climbing was in London 2012, and you were competing?

I’ve no idea. I’d give it my best shot and try as hard as I could. I didn’t think I’d make the Finals in any of the World Cups, so perhaps my judgement of my own climbing isn’t very good.

You’ve often said that self-limiting behaviour is often a major factor in women’s underachievement in climbing. Why do you think this is?

I’ve always been quite naïve or oblivious to it because I’ve always climbed with guys and I’ve never really climbed with girls. Because I’ve always been around guys, and seen their attitudes to climbing, I guess I’ve gained their attitude of just trying to push yourself as hard as you can, and trying really hard, and believing you can do things. This is the right kind of positive approach to climbing. Okay, this is a massive generalisation but women tend

to be afraid of steeper climbing and not want to climb in front of guys and think they’re not going to be as powerful. These limitations don’t have to be there, and you can do what you want. If you enjoy climbing on steep walls or not, then that’s okay, and it’s not wrong for a woman not to want to climb them. I think it’s a really interesting subject.

You mention, ‘trying harder’. It’s a phrase Lynn Hill uses also. Does it really work?

Trying harder is something I only literally began to do at the beginning of this year. I was training with a friend and we said, ‘okay, we’re going to try really hard now’ and it really worked. I got my five projects on the wall in one day and I never expected to even do them, so I’ve adopted that attitude in competitions and it has definitely worked for me. But there’s no reason why you don’t have to have that attitude on every session and on every boulder. I coach women quite a lot. I run a women’s climbing coaching session when I’m in the UK, and a women’s climbing symposium where we celebrate female climbing. We did a talk on self-limiting behaviours and analysed people throughout the day, asking them before they even tried anything how they thought they would do and they would often say ‘oh I can’t do that’. But if you take that away, or take grades away, who knows how far you can push yourself. It’s definitely a head game, but when you get to the stage when it’s just your physical weaknesses limiting you, that’s when it gets exciting and you can begin to train. I’m running another symposium on October 13th in Liverpool. I’m really looking forward to it, and we’ll be looking at self-limiting behaviours again. I think it’s probably the biggest weakness in women’s climbing, or in climbing generally. And guys are as guilty of it too – it’s an individual sport at the end of the day. ▶





Do you think you get fairly treated by the climbing media compared to those operating in more traditional disciplines of the sport?

This isn't really something I've thought about much before this year as my success has all happened so fast. Trad climbing is important in this country: it's amazing, and full of history, and I guess it's where the majority of the climbing community in the UK come from, so it's understandable they don't admire competition climbing in the same way. But I think success should be celebrated throughout all of the disciplines of the sport; we've got lots of young athletes doing well in the comps that you don't really hear about. I've been told results through friends, and I think you should see that as soon as you log on to UKC or UK bouldering. In competition climbing we are definitely catching up with other countries in on the international stage.

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How does the UK's indoor scene compare to the set up abroad?

The main difference I've noticed is how almost every wall in Europe has an individual climbing team for the youth, and they all train together, and really encourage each other, and train for comps together. They all have their own training programmes and at just the right levels for the children. It's really inspirational and something I'd like to do at The Climbing Hanger where I work; to get a comp team together for the youngsters and try and get them to train together. I think you need the motivation there and if they all train together and push each other, they are going to get much stronger than they would if they were climbing alone. But I think the level of climbing in the States is also a lot higher; there are many more hard boulder problems for example. I find, as do a lot of the British team, that it's a struggle to train because bouldering walls don't set very hard problems. They don't make money from hard problems as there are not enough people climbing them. But if the problems aren't there then you've got nothing to aspire to, so I guess it's a hard situation to be in, but I think it needs development for sure.

What's the set up in the most successful countries in indoor climbing like France and Austria?

I've not spent much time over there yet, but I know the gyms are set up differently, and people train together a lot more and plan their training. We don't have specific coaching for example. But they definitely have a lot more money than we do with regards to competition climbing.

Where would you really like to climb next?

There are so many places I want to go to. I was in Australia once for a comp near the Blue Mountains, but I didn't get to climb outdoors. The Blue Mountains are so beautiful, and I'd love to climb there. I want to climb anywhere and everywhere, and be outside more, and push the levels of women's climbing, and advance the sport in any way I can. ■