Robbie's Beasting Sessions

Part 5: The Redpointing Process

Nat Berry working moves at her limit on a Malham 8b

Ex-British Team Member and Scottish Teams Coach Robbie Phillips talks you through Redpointing

All photos by Will Carroll

The term redpointing was coined by the late, great Kurt Albert. The German (from Frankenjura) was a pioneer of our time, he used to paint red crosses at the bottom of routes he was trying and only when completed from bottom to top would he paint over with a red dot, hence the term, redpointing.

The act of redpointing is to practice all the individual moves of the route, learning the correct sequence of hand, foot and body positions thereby making the climb feel easier. If you want to push yourself to your physical limit in climbing, this is the only way to do it.

My original opinion on redpointing was that anyone could do it, it's easy, all you have to do is try and try, over and over again and eventually you will succeed. The reality is that once a route has grasped your attention, all thoughts converge upon it, your very emotions can bend and sway depending on your progress and a whole new area of climbing challenge is thrust upon you!

How can Redpointing help my climbing?

Many climbers are put off redpointing. Some say it takes away from the adventure of finding your way on the rock, others by the length of time it can take to finally climb your project, however most people are just terrified of the mental process of working a route and eventually going for redpoint attempts (something that can be quite stressful).

If you'd asked me a year ago, I would have been in the latter category. I'd only ever had a couple of project routes before then, both of which were epics and took a lot to overcome. Since, I have had many!

I have learned how to work routes effectively whilst keeping my sanity on redpoint attempts (most of the time). It was almost a year ago that I decided to push myself a bit further, see how hard I could actually climb if I put some more time into it. Up to then, I had on-sighted most of the routes I had climbed and any redpoints were usually done in a day. I had a clinical fear of redpointing due to previous attempts resulting in many nights loss of sleep, stressed out days at the crag and a broken heart on one occasion (my trip ended and I had to leave my project until the next year).

It doesn't sound like I'm giving redpointing a very good press, but actually, redpointing is great fun (even with all the side effects). You can learn so much from trying routes harder than your on-sight limit, technically, physically and mentally. From trying sequences that feel hard on their own and then being forced to link them together, you will learn good technique, how to rest and how to be efficient on the hardest sequences.

You will be challenged to your physical max, to the point that you may have sequences as difficult as some of the

Working moves on a top-rope can give you that bit extra confidence when you need it

Working moves on lead gets you used to the exposure when the footholds aren't the best!

Scaling Tactics:

Bolt to Bolt (Stick Clip)
Moving from bolt to bolt up a route is an effective way of working out the moves and individual sequences. By splitting the route into single bolt sections, you can rest fully between the harder moves and work each section for as long as you need to figure out all the hand and foot placements.

A popular method in the UK of working out sections without a chance of taking a fall is by using a stick clip to get between the bolts. A stick clip is a device used to clip a rope (or QuickDraw) into the next bolt above you without having to be beside it (hence removing the possibility of taking a lead fall whilst attempting to clip in).

Stick clipping is useful on routes where the chances of falling whilst clipping the next clip is very high. Lots of climbers also use stick clipping routes as a nifty way of warming up before attempting the route. Whilst placing the quick draws you can work the individual sequences of the route between the bolts to remind yourself of the moves and warm up the fingers.

Top-rope
A lot of climbers (often those not as comfortable leading) prefer to top-rope a route as many times as it takes until they feel comfortable enough with their sequence to go for it on lead. This can be useful on slab to slightly overhanging routes; however, it loses its effectiveness as the route steepens since it becomes increasingly difficult to get back into the wall when you fall off.

Don't get too attached to this method. In my opinion, working a route on lead is more effective once you know the basic sequence.

I am currently climbing in Verdon, France. My friend and I are working a 60m long 8b+ called 'Tom et je ris'. The tricky bit of this route is the fact that it's 200m off the ground, you have to abseil to get positioned at a hanging belay before starting the route and to top it all, it's also a mega steep tufa!

We have found that top-roping the upper (less steep) section is easier, however the lower section is easier to work on lead. Sometimes certain routes require a bit of a mixture of tactics and it's your inventiveness and ingenuity that will see you succeed.

Lead
I know I mentioned top-roping above, however, in general, I much prefer to lead all my routes whilst redpointing. My reasoning for this is thus:
1. I enjoy lead climbing much more;
2. I find it much more useful for the climbing I do to lead the routes.

As I have little fear of taking a lead fall on bolts, top-roping doesn't really attract me. Also, most of the harder routes I climb are relatively steep and I find top-roping quite awkward.

Lead climbing also offers an important aspect that you won't get whilst on top-rope, i.e. the fear factor. Now I know I don't have much fear of taking a fall, but I can't deny that my climbing can change slightly when on lead. I will become slightly less aggressive, not as confident and won't be as likely to jump for holds that I am unsure of. If I work a route on lead, I become more comfortable for my red-point attempts (also be on lead) and thus I will be more likely to succeed.

Learning Tactics

Practising Individual Moves
Whilst working the route (either bolt to bolt, lead or top-rope), work individual moves until you are confident you know how to do every move on the route. This will mean spending time looking and trying different foot positions or hand sequences for every section. Here are a few things to take into consideration when working the route:

1. Learn when each foot placement is placed in accordance with every hand movement e.g. *'Left hand into side pull, left foot onto ledge, right hand into crimp, right foot up and drop knee, cross over right hand again...'*

2. Learn how to hold all the holds you are using so that you are getting the best out of them e.g. '*the big sloper is best on the right side with a thumb placed on the little chipped crack up the middle' or 'full crimp, half crimp or open hand? Each one can help in different ways, which way is up to you and how it helps you on the route.*

3. Learn how and where to rest. Through every sequence you do, check to see if there is any position you can get which allows you to get a hand free to shake, or even better both hands free! Sometimes a rest position might need working; i.e. learn how to hang off the hold with as little energy as possible (don't overgrip) and find the best balance (where do you place your feet?) in order to be most comfortable resting the other hand.

4. Learn where to clip from. This sounds crazy, but there are right and wrong places to clip. If it's draining you trying to clip, is there a higher hold you can clip from that will save energy (perhaps running you out only a little?). Look at how you balance your body on the rock in order to find the best positions to clip from. If you are sneaky, you can even extend clips from above to allow you to clip from a lower (possibly easier) position.

hardest boulder problems you've done, and you may even have to link these sequences together. This will challenge your body in every aspect of climbing performance (strength, power, power endurance, endurance).

Redpointing Tactics
Any attempt on a route after your on-sight/flash go is a redpoint attempt. As a climber pushing yourself, you should be trying to do the route in as few attempts as possible. To do this, there are a few tactics that can aid your progress for learning the perfect sequence and quickening your success.

Linking Sections

A big part of redpointing routes is practising linking sections whilst working it. Break the route up into sections (e.g. between obvious rests) then attempt at linking the route between those sections. As progress on the route continues, you should be able to link bigger and bigger sections: at the beginning, perhaps only linking the route into 4 or 5 bits until eventually two halves. When you can link the route in two halves, you know that it's on!

Linking sections like this is brilliant for building confidence; this will inevitably bring you closer to the ultimate goal of climbing the route in one whole section from bottom to top.

Earlier this year I was attempting to red point a massive 70m 8b+ called 'The Black Bean' in Ceuse, France. The route involved many different styles of climbing:

• 5m - Font 6C boulder problem on crimps and a big move to catch a jug

• 10m - Fun tufa climbing with knee bars and techy smearing

• 10m - Some easier boulder crux sections separated by rests. Around f8a until recently

• 15m - Harder boulder sections separated by bad rests with smeary feet. About f7c+ for this section alone

Making the powerful moves. Break a route into a series of boulder problems in your head

• 15m - Sustained f6c/7a climbing but with massive runouts and good shakeouts

• 15m - A technical, vertical section weighing in at around f7b. Includes a couple of sketchy, balancy sections up until the chains
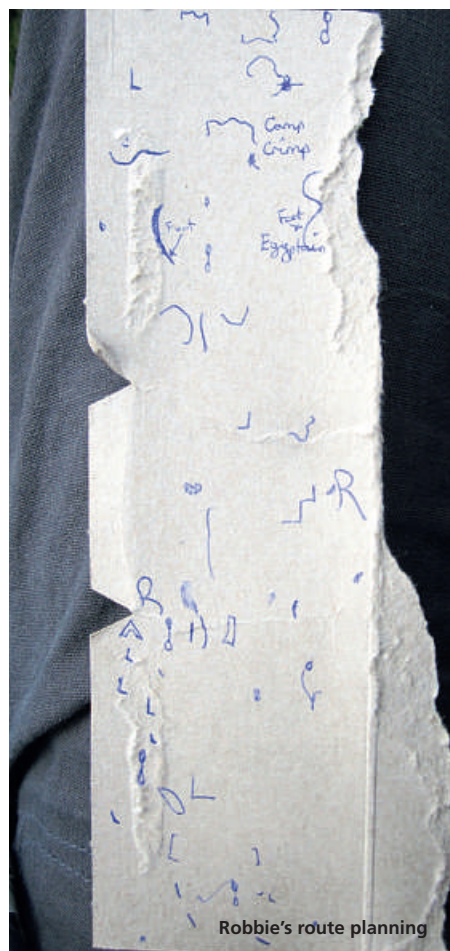
As you can see, a lot of different styles of climbing for one big pitch! The individual climbing alone isn't too hard, but add it all together and it creates a new level of difficulty. When I weighed this route up in my mind, I would visualise myself climbing through each section on its own with no difficulty.

I had climbed every section as a whole and all I had to do was link them. On my second attempt, I managed to link the first three sections of 8a climbing into the final moves of the fourth before falling. I knew that if I could get past the fourth section, it would be on since I had linked the last two sections (five and six) together from the end of the fourth. On my third go I fell off right at the top of section six! On my fourth go I sent the route...

So, through redpointing tactics like "Linking", I built my confidence up on the route and achieved a successful ascent!

Visualisation

Since you've been on the route and are now trying to redpoint it, you should already have a good idea of the sequence. With this in mind, attempt to visualise the sequence of moves in your head before

Robbie's route planning

climbing. This can be done in a few different ways:

Outward Visualisation
Inner Visualisation
Active Sequence Reading

These different methods come into play for different scenarios, but it's also down to what you prefer.

Outward Visualisation is when you visualise yourself climbing from the perspective of a ghost floating above you; imagine watching yourself climbing on film from a cameraman position on ropes looking down, from the side and from different close angles. This is as close as I can get to describing this method.

I use this type for psyching myself up before a climb rather than for remembering a sequence, e.g. I visualise myself succeeding through the crux, fighting my way to the top and clipping the chains successfully! I also accompany this with music sometimes to psyche myself up even more. This is usually done within the hour that you are building yourself up to climbing the route (equally it can be done at any time though).

Inner Visualisation is the most useful for remembering the sequence. It's from the perspective of you climbing, through your own eyes as you move from handhold to handhold. I usually combine this with the latter of my techniques: "Active Sequence Reading".

Active Sequence Reading is my own terminology for using your hands (and feet) to mimic the movements you'll be re-enacting on the wall. I find this the most helpful form of visualisation. Although mocked by many, this really helps me focus my mind and body for repeating the hard sequences that I will be doing on the route.

As I said, I combine this with inner visualisation. Now bear with me as I'm going to sound a bit like a Buddhist monk, but honestly it works!

I imagine myself climbing the route (inner visualisation) and at the same time,

I mimic the hand and foot movements with active sequence reading. Usually I do this sitting on the ground, my eyes shut, looking a bit like a crazy monk having a fit. I get lots of strange looks when down at Malham (from climbers rather than sightseers). I even gesture difficult moves by acting more aggressively on those sequences I'm imagining - but it all helps to get myself prepared for the route ahead.

Route Mapping

Route mapping is something you will see a lot of the kids I coach doing, but it's not only for them. Route mapping is the process of writing the climb down on paper in order to learn more about it. How, you ask, does writing a route down on paper help? Easy; by writing the route down on paper, you spend a lot of time thinking about the individual moves, where you place your feet, hand sequences, clipping positions, rest positions and cruxes. It forces you to think extra hard about the sequence and sometimes even helps you notice things you haven't seen before!

See below - an example route map and key.

Conclusion

So as you see, there is a lot more to redpointing than simply having as many goes as possible. It isn't just a matter of time and slugging it out until you've ticked it, there are a number of tactical ways to approach hard routes and if you employ them all to your strategy, you will maximise success on every route you try!

Redpointing harder routes is a tasking experience - you have to learn the sequence perfectly, train accordingly and when it comes to crunch time, you have to keep your head on and not fluff it up (a difficult thing to do, trust me) but it's also a rewarding one.

When you finally complete your route after putting in all that effort: it's one of the best feelings ever!

Redpointing can take a lot of effort, but the reward of success is worth it