FOCUS ON WINNERS: UELI STECK



The importance of new ideas

Swiss climber Ueli Steck has always been passionate about outdoor activities and sport. Before he started climbing he was into ice hockey and other group sports. However, it was the challenge of reaching the peak that finally won his heart.

"I started climbing when I was 12, 22 years ago," he says. "A friend of my father took me out once and right from the beginning it felt very special and I knew I wanted to get into it." Although it was a hobby, he took the sport very seriously, even from a young age. "I wanted to get better for myself, to push myself to the limit and that still drives me," he explains.

Speed of the essence

During his last climb, Mr Steck soloed the Ginat route, the north-face line on Les Droites in the French Alps above Chamonix. He completed the climb in just two hours and eight minutes, which may be a new record. "I'm most famous for my speed ascents," the climber says. "In the history of alpinism, people have always been looking at their watches. Time has always been an issue in climbing. One day I decided to try it."

He holds the record for his 2008 ascent of the Eiger north face (Switzerland) at two hours 47 minutes and Matterhorn (on the border between Switzerland and Italy) in 2009 with a time of one hour 56 minutes. He cemented another record in 2008 at Grand Jorasses (on the border between

Mr Steck is always on the look out for new innovations to help boost his performance.
OutDry

France and Italy) in just two hours and 21 minutes.

In terms of training, the two areas he focuses on are building stamina and strength, and in order to do this he works to a tight schedule. "People think I spend all my time on the mountain but I have a training plan that helps me when I'm trying to reach a peak. I run a lot as the two disciplines are closely linked. I run in the mornings and climb in the afternoons. But if you spend all your time on the mountain you lose a lot of time," explains Mr Steck. "In 2010 I'll be focusing on training, then in 2011 I'll have some big projects. My body needs to recover this year and training takes eight months at least."

Thinking outside the box

What Mr Steck wears and the equipment he uses is also really important, and he likes to work closely with companies who supply the products he uses when he's out on the mountain. While climbing Gasherbrum II on the border of Pakistan and China—also known as K4—last summer and during his Makalu climb (on the border between Nepal and China) in the autumn, Mr Steck tested Mountain Hardwear gloves containing OutDry. He explains how the gloves altered his preconceived ideas.

"Gore-Tex has been around for years and everyone thinks it's the best in the world. Then Mountain Hardwear came to me with this glove using OutDry and I decided to try it. I thought it would be nothing new but it was a completely different feeling for me. The membrane is attached to the outer fascia so it doesn't feel wet. Gore-Tex gloves are also waterproof but the shell gets wet which makes the glove cold and stiff. With OutDry you don't have that feeling," he claims. In addition to keeping the hands dry, he says the gloves feel thinner, warmer and safer than other climbing gloves as they offer greater dexterity, giving the wearer closer contact with the surfaces they touch.

However, while the results of the glove test were positive for Mr Steck, he understands why people might be reluctant to try different products when they are so used to what they know. "For me, the OutDry membrane is outstanding; the problem is that people don't understand it. Gore-Tex is such a strong brand and people believe in it. OutDry is just as good but people don't believe in it. It's great for gloves and shoes," he says. When it comes to shoes, he says climbing brands are continually coming up with new ideas and developments. The trend continues to be toward lighter shoes that promote better contact with the mountain.

In terms of equipment, the Swiss climber claims the "whole technology of alpinism" has changed because of dry-tooling, rock climbing on non-icy rock using ice climbing equipment such as crampons and ice tools. "Ten years ago on a rock section you took off your crampons but now with dry tooling you use harder crampons and an ice axe," he explains. The way the ice axe is used has also changed a lot. "Until 2001, there was a leash on the ice axe but then it was decided in competition there would be no leash," Mr Steck says. "Now the ice axe is even better. It's a different shape and you need less power to hold it.

"When the decision was made people thought it was a waste of time; everyone thought people would use the ice axe without the leash in competition but would never do that outside of competition. But now everyone does it without the leash. Sometimes you have to start with something that in the beginning you think is totally wrong."

Working together

One of the ways Mr Steck is able to get the most out of the clothing, footwear and equipment he uses is that he is able to work with manufacturers and provide feedback on the products he uses. Whether this means creating a completely new prototype specifically for him, or simply tweaking an existing technology, he claims this can make a huge difference in terms of performance.

"With Scarpa I do [collaborate] a lot, but it depends on the company," he says. "It's harder with Mountain Hardwear because they have a different process. They're based in the US but their samples are made in China. I have some input but it's not as fast as with OutDry, for example." Although OutDry don't currently make clothing, they have already produced some apparel prototypes for Mr Steck to try out. He says: "For me this is very interesting and it's helpful for them. That way you can get a jacket that's better than before. It works better with a smaller company because you usually talk to the boss and he is able to say 'ok, we'll do it'. If you never use it, it doesn't matter. But in the US there's more structure."

He officially became a technical advisor for OutDry in January, with the aim of helping the company to develop new products, testing them out and endorsing their technology. Matteo Morlacchi, co-founder of OutDry, said: "Having one of the world's best climbers on our team means that we can work together to develop better products by selecting the best materials and utilise our technology to its highest degree of performance. Ueli's extensive experience in the mountains with technical products will offer OutDry unique insight to future product developments."



Mountain Hardwear gloves incorporating OutDry are light and keep hands warm and dry.

Mountain Hardwear