

# WILD COUNTRY ™

Beginners Leading and Top Roping  
- An Equipment Selection

By Ian Parnell

Editor of Climb Magazine UK



# Beginners Leading and Top Roping - An Equipment Selection

By Ian Parnell

Ian is one of the UK's top Alpinists, and an experienced rock climbing all-rounder. Ian is also gear correspondent for Trail Magazine and tests new gear for Wild Country.

“Even though it's almost 20 years ago I can still remember the day I bought my first rack as though it was yesterday. I'd spent the whole summer working 12 hour night shifts at the local yoghurt factory scraping together the pennies. It was only on Sundays that I could escape the stink of the dairy and together with my sister head down the M4 from Swindon to our climbing nirvana Symonds Yat.

**Ian showing a lack of rack on a sea cliff somewhere...a while ago!! Remember do as he says not what he does!!!**

OK I now realise that the mud splattered 30ft lumps of polished limestone wouldn't make it into many folk's top ten crags but for us three the Yat was our escape into the vertical world. Through those summer Sundays uncluttered by gear we'd scramble up the descent gullies and occasionally solo our way up the easiest V Diffs.

However, one day we managed to fight our way up a Mild Severe. It was a breakthrough and from then on our ambitions began to spiral a little out of control. It was only when I spent all afternoon bridging up and down a thin groove unable to commit to an overhang 60ft above the ground did a passing “real climber” inform us that I was on a route called The Russian apparently graded Hard Very Severe and notorious as the area's biggest accident spot. It seemed time to invest in a rack!”

*Important Note: Most climbing accidents feature beginners as they are the least sure of what they are doing. So even once you've got the gear it is vital you take some time to find out the safest way to use it. Getting an experienced friend to help, joining a local climbing club, hiring a certified guide or going on a recognised course is highly recommended*

## The Right Start - Safety First!

“As the introduction to this section implies, the gear you choose at this point in your climbing career is not the most important thing - although obviously the better the gear the easier it is - it is also knowing how to use it.

So I would like to endorse those sentiments and urge all beginners to spend time learning to use their ‘pro’. It's simple and effective to practice placing nuts and cams at ground level to see how they go in, where they don't fit and to get your ‘eye in’ about the sizes.

One step further is to place nuts while just off the ground, balanced on small footholds perhaps, in an uncomfortable position which imitates how you may be on a climb. All of this practice will help and make you a safer, better leader.

Leading is the biggest step in climbing and being above your gear can be one of the loneliest places in the world, so the better you are at placing gear and the more you trust it the easier it will all feel.

So in the next few pages I'll try to pick a gear selection which should give you enough gear to progress through those all important first stages without breaking the bank or weighing you down.”



## Passive Pro - Nuts

**Small + Mid Size Nuts** - These are your bread and butter protection, with Wild Country making Rocks that cover crack sizes from 4mm through to 50mm.

Wild Country's anodised Rocks are the best there and once you recognise the colours the gear selection and placement is a doddle.

**Larger Nuts** - For the bigger cracks 4cm or bigger I'd opt for Rockcentrics to start with, they are simple to place, harder wearing and significantly cheaper than Friends. Also with their built in dyneema sling they can be clipped directly to the rope saving on quickdraws. For most routes up to VS sizes 5 to 9 should do the trick.

And as an alternative Big Rocks complement Rockcentrics perfectly...and are colour coded to match all of Wild Country's other gear.useful. These Rockcentrics combined with some of the new big Rocks mentioned previously should give ample re-assuringly solid placements and good belaying options.

Big Rocks, like the Rock 12 below give solid placement option in big sizes

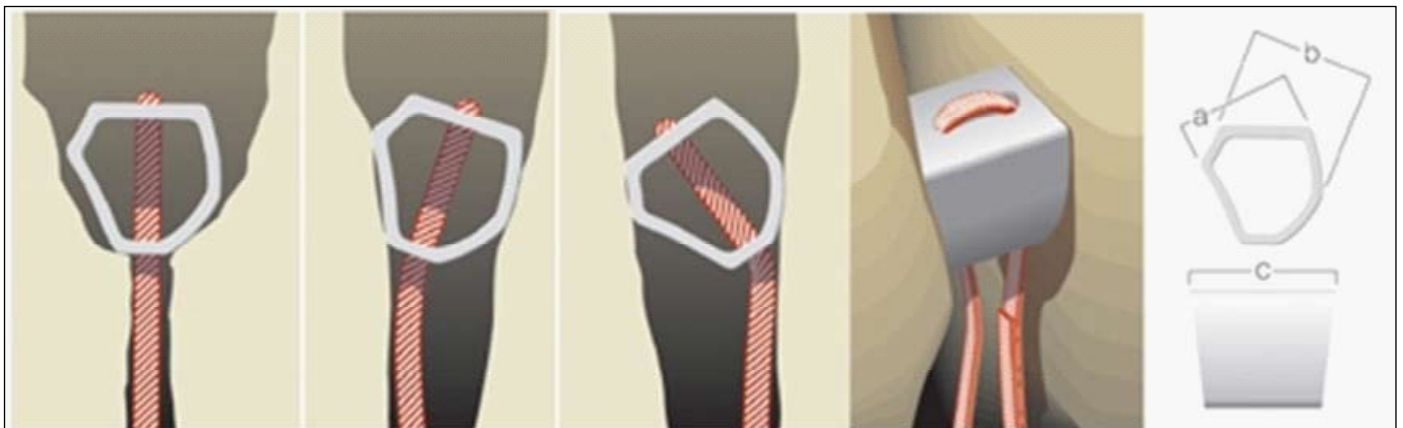


**Top ropes and first leads up to Severe** - One of each size 3 to 10 of Rock should cover most sizes, rack these on a single snapgate such as the Wild Wire. Rocks come in handy sets and you even make a saving over buying them separately...winner..!

**Severe to VS** - You'll want to gradually build up your selection. The new bigger Rocks sizes 11 to 14 offer an alternative to the smaller Rockcentrics and I'd consider making a choice and taking 1 of each size. From size 9 Rocks downwards I'd recommend working towards two of each, doubling up at first in the mid range size 4 to 7.

*Ian's Top Tip – I prefer to rack all my Rockcentrics on one biner and carry spare snaps with me to clip when the time comes.*

The picture below shows why Rockcentrics are so useful, they fit a wide variety of placements and also a wide variation of dimensions per nut meaning one unit fits many cracks...



## Active Pro - First Friends

“As i implied before, for easier routes placing solid nuts, and learning how to place them quickly and efficiently is the safest option for beginners and most reliable for belays. However, as you move up through the grades into VS, where territory will get steeper, Friends will be an option to look at as they give - when placed properly - a quick expandable alternative for cracks.

**The Helium Friend set 1, 2, 3 is a good starter set - but learn how to place them safely...**

It is not worth investing in a huge rack to start off with until: you are sure you will keep climbing and you are secure in how to use them properly. Friends require more technique to place than nuts because they are less intuitive so once again practice makes perfect and the longer you spend placing and practicing the better your placements will be.

I would recommend to start with, getting a selection that will cover a widish range of cracks and backs up the main sizes of nuts you will be placing. A good start would be either 1, 2, 3 or perhaps 0.5, 1.5, and 2.5. The other advantage of starting with these sizes is that Wild Country do two sets that cover these sizes and are at a premium price to help to get a rack together.”

*See Hints and Tips section Cams and Camming and you can also download 'The Cam Book' Wild Country's guide to Friends and Friends placement and use.*

## Karabiners

**Top Roping to Severe** - For top roping see the Screwgates section on page 2 as these are what you will need mainly.

**Severe to VS** - For your first leads you will need not only a selection of Quickdraws - about 8 should do but also a selection of karabiners for clipping your Friends and nuts to your harness and for using with loose nuts and Rockcentrics. I would go for a selection consisting of Oxygen Quickdraws as a great all rounder, they come on 12mm Dyneema, and i would probably get 3 x 10cm, 3 x 15cm and 2 x 20cm - this should give you a good choice on most routes.

I would then add to this about dozen single Wild Wire karabiners to use as your 'clippers'. Light and simple they are a great all rounder.

**A sets of Oxygen QDs** - a trad pack, with a mix of lengths these are a great value way to start your rack.

**VS to HVS** - I would simply add a couple or three draws, probably Wild Wire QDs to complete the rack.

**Top Tip** - When buying your first selection you can get all Wild Country's loose biners and QDs in sets which saves you a bit of money.



## Helmets

There's one thing that's for sure and that is when starting off a helmet is worth its weight in gold.

And like any activity where there's a danger of banging your head it's fairly obvious to most people that a helmet is a great way of helping confidence as well as offering protection.

**The 360 helmet is solid strong and not easily damaged..**

So whether you're on shorter climbs, when the chance of a crater is greater, or on longer routes where a fall can tip you upside down there's good reason to invest in a bone dome. And finally for those on bigger cliffs or out in winter the danger can be from above and with rocks and ice raining down protecting your head is a must.

So a good recommendation for all of these things would be the 360 helmet - not only is it strong and easy to fit but the shell is more durable than many 'cycle type' helmets and so is easier to look after.

Note: The 360 also comes in two sizes fitting smaller heads and juniors climbers.



## Karabiners – Screwgates

Top ropes and first leads - You'll want to use screwgates on any crucial safety piece such as belays and your belay device (see below). I'd therefore plumb for 4 screwgates to start – the Oxygen screwgate with its impressive strength and neat clean nose design is a good choice.

**The superb new Oxygen Locker which is as strong as you'll ever need and has a no-hook nose for easy clipping.**

VS – HVS leads. Some people like to add a screwgate to every 120cm sling they carry for threads, this is a matter of personal preference but I prefer snapgates on threads.

Top Tip: Rather than doubling the 120cm to carry over your shoulder use the snapgate to clip them round your shoulder then you should be able to just unclip and pull them off snag free.



## Belay Devices

**Top Roping to Severe** - A lot of your climbing will be done with a classic “thick” single rope (10.5mm) therefore I’d recommend the Variable Controller. Its slightly wider slots are ideal for easier single rope handling while still working well on the occasion that you use double ropes. Twin the VC with its own dedicated Synergy screwgate karabiner, the smooth contours of this 12mm round bar HMS (Pear) shaped Krab make for clean rope handling.

The new VC Pro is available in a great set with its best partner the Synergy screwgate.

**VS / HVS** - As you move on to double rope techniques you will require a little more control. And for 9mm ropes or even the newer thinner cords a great partner is the new VC Pro. With slightly thinner slots as well as a ribbed upper it gives more control on thinner ropes and is superb for abseiling. Again twinned with a dedicated Synergy biner this is a great device.

Read reviews of VC Pro

*Top Tip: Sitting on top of the seacliffs of Sennen in Cornwall my hyper- ventilating began to calm down. I’d just completed my first HVS lead now all I had to do was bring up my partner and then we could celebrate in the pub. My shaking hands reached for my belay device only to fumble this vital piece of equipment from my grip, bouncing down the cliff twice before disappearing into sea. Disaster! Well maybe not, although it took a while to remember the knot I was using an HMS Krab to belay which allowed me the option to use a “munter” hitch as an effective backup belay system. One knot its really worth learning.*



## Harnesses

The key points to look for in your first harness are comfort and support. The Vision ziplock is an ideal choice, available in both mens and womens fit and 3 different sizes and plenty of gear loops on all sizes - great for trad.

Harness shown is the mens version of the Vision harness - super comfortable and plenty of gear loops.

The batwing belt and elasticated leg loops ensure you won’t have to worry about crushed kidneys while abseiling or pushing your grade on top rope.

The best feature I think however is the Ziplock buckle system which is permanently threaded for security – you only have to tighten up the waist and climb without having to worry about threading back – simple and safe.



## Shoes

As a start in the wide world of shoes the most important thing to go to is fit and comfort. Don't be bludgeoned into getting a super tight pair for your first climbing as they will only make you feel uncomfortable. You should still have a little bit of room at the toe in your first pair.

A great starting recommendation which would take you through these grades would be the Red Chili Sausalito this is a great solid all rounder but with a comfortable upper and long lasting sole.

If you have had a pair of shoes and are looking to move up a little then the Spirit range ( including the Impact Zone) will climb through to E4 or E5 and beyond but are still not too radical to wear on easier climbs.

**The Red Chili Sausalito is a great starter and will climb easily up to E2+ when needed.**

Go to Red Chili Pages



## Slings

Wild Country make three widths of slings – the classic 16mm nylon and the more radical and thinner 10mm and 12mm dyneema.

**The cordelette is a huge but hugely useful sling...but cinches down to carry easily.**

Top ropes and first leads - you'll need plenty of slings therefore I'd recommend getting the bulk in 12mm dyneema perhaps 2 or 3 120cm ones and one of the super long 240cm ones to fit round large boulders or the bigger trees.

VS – HVS leads. In addition I'd add in a couple of the 10mm Dyneema slings which with their narrow profile work better in the tighter thread runners on lead. Perhaps 1 120cm and 2 60cm carried over the shoulder.

Top Tip: Setting up a good top rope belay takes some care. For safety you'll be looking at probably 3 "bomber" bits of gear which have to equalised to share the strain of any lob.

To do this consider using a cordelette which at 400cm long can be clipped into all the pieces and then gathered together into an overhand knot leaving a perfectly equalised independent loop going to each piece.

The cordelette also proves useful in extending any top rope belay (when belaying at the bottom of the cliff) to just over the edge of the crag leaving the rope to run free without drag and wear.

A top rope set up on sandstone without this extension will quickly carve a slot into the rock not only wrecking the crag but your rope as well.

See Cordelette instructions for a better idea - [click here](#).



## Accessories

No not the type you buy on a railway station but a couple of little things to make life easier...

No1. A nut key. Not only will this baby save you money but it will also save embarrassment as you and your partner fight at the crag as to whose fault it was that your nuts are stuck....

The ProKey nut key is a great choice!!



No2. A good sized chalk bag. Remember you may be out all day in the hot sun and those tiny 'wall-rats' bags just won't pass muster. The faster you can get your hands in it the slower you'll fall off..

The Wild Country Grand Bloc holds enough chalk a for a long day out...and come with a belt and a pocket for keys...

