

CRACK ADDICT

by Olly Stephenson

WHERE TO GET HELP for drugs? A GP is a good place to start. They can discuss your problems and may offer you treatment at the practice or refer you to your local drug service. If you're not comfortable talking to a GP, you can approach your local drug-treatment service yourself.

Treatment is not without risks – dangers include mums with jogging prams, cyclists, and coxed-four rowing boats. The Crack itself is so intense it generates cosmic levels of bruising, with the backs of addicts' hands quickly rivalling those of street fighters, forcing them to restrict their consumption to just two sessions a week. Leptospirosis (Weil's disease) is an additional risk, but it's often seen as a good thing by addicts, a potential release from the vice-like grip of this habit.

My name is Olly, I'm a Crack addict, and this is my story.

It all began in the latest Lockdown (No 3), which commenced in Scotland on 24 December 2020 and lasted four months, with virtually everything closed, draconian restrictions on movement, gatherings banned, facemasks mandatory, and all sorts of other controls in place to slow the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Much of this will seem incredible to future generations reading this story, but I can assure you it felt equally remarkable living through it too.

Exercise is restricted to starting and finishing in your local authority area which, when living in Edinburgh, never feels much of a restriction as it includes some of the best ski-touring of my life, on the coveted Pentland Skyline (>30km distance, >2300m ascent), together with plenty of bike rides, runs, swims and wild camping all on our doorstep.

The only thing lacking is inspiring local climbing, constrained at this time of year by the typically cold and damp conditions and the paucity of good rock within the boundaries of Edinburgh itself. By chance, however, and within a few weeks of the latest Lockdown starting, a goal emerges that is on my doorstep and is seriously addictive. It's just ten metres in length, probably less than all the words in this story strung together, but like the best addictions it imparts some truly memorable and life-affirming experiences.

To set the scene, picture yourself walking along a canal, in this case the Union Canal at Meggetland in Edinburgh. Joggers, cyclists and rowers hurry past as you gaze upwards at a nondescript road-bridge spanning the water above your head. The underside of this is scored like giant corduroy into half a dozen parallel roof-cracks, formed by the intervening and massive concrete beams. One crack is just about wide enough for a hand-jam: it is 10m long, and was first climbed by Robbie Phillips at the start of the original Lockdown to create *The Troll Toll*, E5,6b. Since then it has only had a handful of repeats and presumably a larger number of swims in the canal.

I'm an average climber who only just scraped into the SMC, and I feel a bit of a fraud even writing this story, but Lockdown No 3 seems the perfect opportunity to throw myself at the challenge. Problems encountered along the way include the fact that I'm weak, I'm rubbish at climbing parallel roof-cracks, I've not climbed anything even remotely at this grade for more than 30 years, and that *The Troll Toll* is just plain hard.

Training for it covers much of what I most enjoy about climbing – an inspiring line, setting a goal and working towards it, embracing the small steps forward and the lurches backwards, the intersection of physical and mental challenge, the movement – and best of all, the fact that I can share this obsession or addiction with two of my children, Jack (19) and Bella (16), who also climb.

We begin our training at a similar bridge at Murrayfield known as 'the Crack Den', with the advantage that there are lots of climbable cracks here (again, all roof-cracks, set in the underside of a bridge), and they are only 1.5m above a concrete floor. All these climbs rely on hanging upside-down suspended entirely on hand and foot jams in smooth, parallel, featureless, concrete cracks: if strength departs, it gets too painful, or any of your jams rip, you instantly fall out. The width of each crack is somewhere between a flat and a flexed hand (i.e. less than a fully clenched fist) and varies by 1cm or 2cm along its length, meaning the jams are consistently pumpy and go from quite challenging to desperate (or *vice versa*) depending on hand size and technique.

On any level Jack and Bella are completely kicking my 52-year-old ass with their climbing prowess, and I was a sorry mess trying to keep up with them, but they are patient as they transform from crack novices to crack heroes in just a couple of sessions. Meanwhile my 'I'll get this in a few sessions' optimism morphs into quiet resignation, as weeks and then two months of effort fly by with glacial progress; but I'm enjoying learning something new, and can feel the addiction taking hold.

I am possibly the only person in Scotland worrying that Lockdown will be eased too soon, specifically before I complete my self-imposed goal of *The Troll Toll*. Training continues on the easiest roof-crack at Murrayfield. Readers who have experienced the joys of crack climbing in places like Yosemite will know that 'easy' is relative: bronzed American locals routinely solo such climbs before breakfast while we Brits are on them from dawn to – well – benightment. And the guidebook mocks our siege warfare by assigning a grade of 'only' 5.9 (HVS), and all of this on cracks that are merely vertical.

Back to Murrayfield, and the easy route I'm training on is itself called *Lockdown*. It's a 20m-long roof-crack graded 5.11d (E4/5), and was first done by the bronzed local American crack-legend and Edinburgh resident, Andy Hein – in summary, not exactly a warm-up for someone like me. However, after a few sessions I'm making progress and can reliably hang upside down and sustain the jams all the way along it to about 18m. It's

very pleasing to see the progress, but frustrating that the crack narrows at this point and I just can't seem to complete the final 2m. Several times I get close, touching the finishing wall with one foot, then hanging entirely on narrow hand-jams as I slowly pivot my hips and ease the second foot around, inching closer ... but then falling off as I try to touch the wall with my second foot, hands too bruised to continue, arms too tired to hold my weight, lungs bursting as if I've just emerged from a three-minute free dive. Exasperation oozes from every pore as the route only counts when both feet touch, and my children are almost in tears too just watching my efforts. Meanwhile they are lapping *Lockdown* (the climb): 'Come on Dad, keep up.'

On the plus side I am so rubbish that this really is a learning bonanza: crack gloves for example (what a godsend); stiff boots with low-profile toes to twist into the crack better; taping your thumbnail to prevent the quick blowing open under all the pressure; lots of small cuts that only heal with Savlon ... I could go on. Family breakfast chat often involves each of us tapping the jamming bruises on the backs of our hands like karate black-belts: 'Hmm, it's still really sore, but I should be ready for more crack tomorrow.' My Crack addiction has become all-consuming.

A small local crack-climbing scene forms, and other addicts are very generous in their advice, the consensus invoking a trick called FLF, to be deployed at the point of maximum exhaustion and pain, the first two words being *fight* and *like*.

After about six weeks' effort I am consistently making it to 18.5m on *Lockdown*, but still unable to reach the very end. By trial, error, and (frankly) desperation, I discover that headphones and loud music provide a small but noticeable boost. On my next attempt I reach 19m, biceps, lungs and eyeballs all exploding, hands as flaccid and sore as rashers of bacon – and all of this now collectively hardwired in my brain to equal imminent failure, like some sort of cruel Pavlovian torture – but at the final nanosecond I remember FLF, and do the most un-British thing imaginable. It feels as if there is literally nothing else left for me to try.

I let out my very first ever power scream.

Passers-by stop and stare. Mothers clutch their children tightly. Momentarily I feel very self-conscious and stupid. I worry I'm making a scene, that I'll be kicked out of the SMC. But thankfully the music is so loud I can't hear anything, and all such negativity vaporises instantly.

And by way of full disclosure, it's actually two power screams. The shame of it. You may have heard them. Anyway, each one gives a jolt of adrenalin that is precisely equal – no more, no less – to allowing each foot to touch the finishing wall in turn, thereby completing the climb, before the dying picoseconds of hand-jam depart and I slump to the boulder mat in utter and unadulterated ecstasy.

It feels as if an elephant has been walking up and down my hands and feet for the last three minutes, but like the best climbing experiences I quickly forget the pain and instead am able to replay the route in my

mind's eye for several days thereafter (minus the power screams, which being British I edit out), leaving a very profound sense of satisfaction.

Lockdown is sufficiently hard for me that it takes another week of effort just to repeat it, during which time I on-sight two further 20m 5.11d roof-cracks at Murrayfield. It transpires that hand size and technique really are key to this game, and I'm better suited to the wider hand-jamming cracks – who would have guessed?

Meanwhile Robbie Phillips and Andy Hein both warn me to 'get comfortable on the thin cracks at Murrayfield before you attempt *The Troll Toll*,' as the latter is over the canal and generally thought harder than *Lockdown*. I ignore all of this, which is perhaps why my first attempt ends in the canal.

The Troll Toll is higher off the ground and feels more committing the instant you commence hand-jamming and pull your feet up into the crack. The jams start out painfully narrow, meaning the hand-jams are poor and your toes are scarcely in the crack, so you are constantly on the cusp of falling like a sack of coal, landing on your back on the hard concrete lip of the canal 2.5m below. The roof-crack then widens over the middle of the canal to 'comfortable' (a relative term when you're hanging upside down entirely on hand- and foot-jams), and then back to sustained thin hands to finish, with the very real prospect of falling out again and smacking your head on the opposite edge of the canal. This is all done ropeless, or solo, as it's quicker and each second counts.

On the plus side I am still learning, and my first attempt at *The Troll Toll* teaches me that the canal is neck-deep in places, which is good, but the water itself is possibly even more infectious than a race-meeting at Cheltenham at the start of the pandemic. The joys and stench of knee-deep sludge probably won't be mentioned in future editions of the



The Troll Toll: seconds from a swim on the first attempt. Photo: Mary Harvey.

climbing guide, and I discover that emerging from it like a swamp monster causes something of a stir amongst the locals. But luckily no contact with jogging prams, cyclists, rowing boats, or leptospirosis thus far.

Tail between my legs, I resume training at Murrayfield. Mentally it all feels a bit hard, to be honest, and I struggle to repeat *Lockdown*. I start to lose excitement and belief in ever doing *The Troll Toll*.

And then a small miracle appears. Specifically, a calendar reminder pops up on my computer at work. In a week's time it will be my second anniversary of completing chemo. The realisation dawns that I can use the anniversary to expedite and turbo-charge my second attempt at *The Troll Toll*, and I start to tell a few friends to ratchet up the commitment.

It feels far too soon to make any further training gains at Murrayfield, and instead my next *Troll Toll* attempt will have to be based entirely on an improved mental approach – focusing on how lucky I am simply to be alive, how life-affirming it is to be back to health and doing stuff like this again, to be sharing experiences like this with my kids – hell, getting to the end doesn't even matter anymore, it'll be a memorable way to mark the day regardless of the outcome.

On 15 April 2021, my second anniversary of completing six rounds of chemo, surviving Stage 4 cancer and much more besides, I'm standing on the south side of the Union Canal at Meggetland, 90% certain I'm destined for another swim, but open to whatever the next few minutes bring.

I'm feeling that intoxicating mix of excitement and nerves, as if I am about to go on stage, but remain focused and calm as my hands reach into the roof-crack above. I squeeze hard on the jams, the concrete pressing like a vice, tensing my core to pull my body up, and twisting the tips of my toes into the crack.



The Troll Toll: seconds from success on the second attempt. Photo: Hugo Tay.

The timer on a three-minute fuse has just been lit. I know from all my training that a single second longer and I will lose all strength and fall out. I'm aware of every wisp of breeze, and enter that delicious state of focus and calm that only comes to the fully committed.

I'm hanging upside down like a bat, suspended entirely by hands and feet jamming into the underside of a bridge-crack, shuffling along as fast as I can. It's evidently not a very common sight, as mums with jogging prams stop and stare, cyclists ring their bells and cheer, and the crew of a rowing boat beneath me pause their stroke, jaws agape. The crack widens over the middle of the canal, which brings some respite, but the fuse continues to burn quickly, and I'm aware of every second as I battle along the crack for the sustained fight at the end. Muscles are flashed and I'm on the brink of imminent failure, a few desperate grunts issuing involuntarily (it's far too public for full FLF power screams) and sending a small ripple of concern through the crowd, but thankfully I avoid another swim, or worse still landing on top of them.

After precisely 10m I drop my feet, release my hand-jams, and step on to the tow path on the north side of the canal. Exhausted. Elated.¹

It feels like a great way to celebrate my second chemo anniversary and simply being alive, how lucky I am. The NHS should prescribe this to all Crack addicts.

¹ A video clip of the author on *The Troll Toll* can be downloaded from this Dropbox link <tinyurl.com/pb9pupdm>. Retrieved 9 September 2021. – HON. ED.