



# Wolfgang Gullich

The name and frame of Wolfgang Gullich was made known to American climbers in 1982 with his first visit to the States. The coveted second ascent of *Grand Illusion* (5.13c) is certainly the most famous result of that masterful tour, which also included ascents of *Equinox* (5.12d) in Joshua Tree, *Cosmic Debris* (5.13a) in Yosemite, and the bold *Bachar-Yerian* (5.11 H4) in Tuolumne.

In 1984, Wolfgang visited the Shawangunks, which seemed to be created especially for his powerful style of climbing and impressive endurance. His quick ascents of such testpieces as *Intruders* (5.12+) and *Project X* (5.12+) were a prelude to a virtuoso performance on another continent.

In 1985, Australia's Arapiles offered the endlessly overhanging raw material for his new route *Punks in the Gym*, which rated a 32 on the existing Aussie scale of 1 to 30. With his subsequent ascent of *Wisdom Of Body* (30/31) Wolfgang had established the first and second hardest routes in Australia.

A climber is more than a list of routes, however, or a few shots of flexed muscles cranking through roofs. Little news seems to have filtered into the American magazines about German climbing, its traditions and ethics, or about Gullich's progress and accomplishments on home turf. From Teutonic rock warriors campaigning in the Valley, Joshua Tree, and the Shawangunks, I first began hearing of the vast limestone gardens of Germany's main area, the Frankenjura. Their lists of extreme German routes were usually dominated by Wolfy's creations.

Inspired by these lists and armed with addresses, I made a long detour to Nurnberg while on my way to the 1986 Speed Climbing Championships in the USSR. I arrived at the twin doorsteps of a pair of houses inhabited by the core of the Frankenjura climbing scene: Kurt Albert, Norbert Batz, Norbert Sanders, and Wolfgang Gullich.

Wolfgang has lived in the Frankenjura since 1981 when he moved from the sandstone area of the Sud Pfalz, where he started climbing in 1977. Standards in the vast limestone area of the Frankenjura started to rise about 1982, due in large part to Wolfgang, but also Kurt Albert, Norbert Batz, and the peerless boulderer, Flipper Feitz. In 1983, Gullich did the first IX+ (5.13a).

*Mister Magnesia*, in the South Frankenjura, just edging Jerry Moffatt, who added *Eckel* (IX+) a few weeks later in the North Frankenjura.

## INTERVIEW

by Beth Wald



Previous page: *Separate Reality* (5.11d), Yosemite.  
Edge Lane (E5 5c), Millstone Edge, England.

Standards have continued to jump. The latest leap was Wolfgang's 1986 ascent of *Ghetto Blaster*, the first X+ (5.14a) and a wordless testimony to years of motivation and hard work. During my visit, Wolfgang also managed to establish a new X- (5.13b/c), just one month after a grounding off of *Master's Edge* in England, followed by two weeks of inactivity.

Not content to just physically push the outside of the envelope, Wolfgang has embraced the sport intellectually, developing advanced training methods and radical climbing techniques. Many of these are discussed in *Sportklettern heute*, a 1986 book coauthored with Andreas Kubin, but unfortunately with no English translation. When not traveling, he studies sport science at the University of Erlangen.

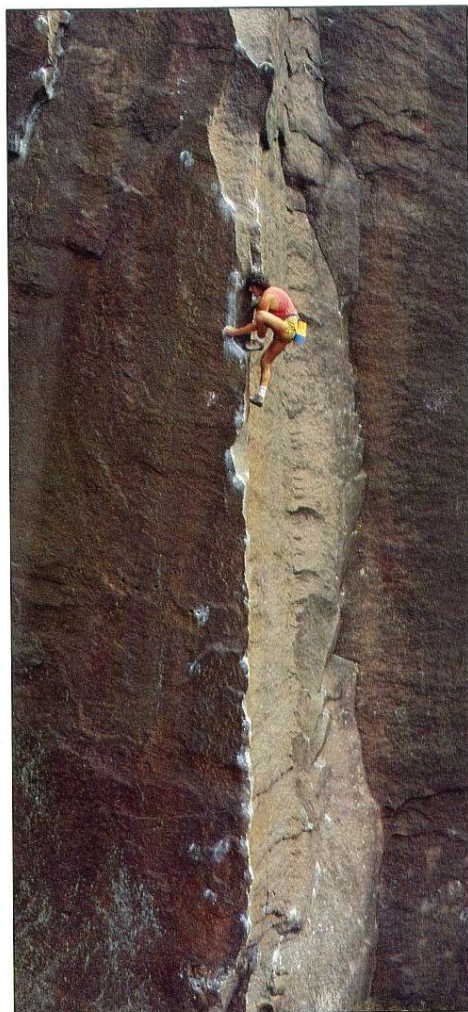
His intellectual journeys have led to globetrotting in search of diverse experiences, climbing in exotic areas such as Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, competing in the USSR Speed Climbing Championships in the Crimea, and most recently, exploring the climbing potential of China. This fall, he visited Yosemite and Australia with a film crew. For the benefit of German television audiences, Wolfgang climbed such classic routes as *The Rostrum Roof*, *Alien*, *The Phoenix*, desperate boulder problems such as *Midnight Lightning* and *Thriller*, and did a spectacular solo of *Separate Reality*.

Wolfgang remains somewhat of an enigma to both the American and European scenes. After two years of continuously brilliant performances on three continents, he disappeared to spend the winter in Oberschollenbach, rebuilding motivation and muscles, then burst back on the scene in the spring of 1986.

After experiencing the hype and pressure of one organized competition, he shuns the glitter and financial lure of the French competition circuit. Ironically, his early repeats of French testpieces helped inspire the French climbing scene to become world class, which has since led to climbing competitions as intense as any big money sport. He is a private climber, who will express dismay at the crowds descending on his favorite bouldering area, while his photogenic image is plastered all over the world, promoting Fires and Edelweiss.

His hardest routes are done in the classic European "rap and drill" bolting style, but he also revels in repeating the hard, scary routes of East Germany's Saxony, or creating his own routes protected by marginal nests of RP's. He is one of the most powerful climbers of the modern scene, but has spent almost as many hours studying the sport as he has in the gym.

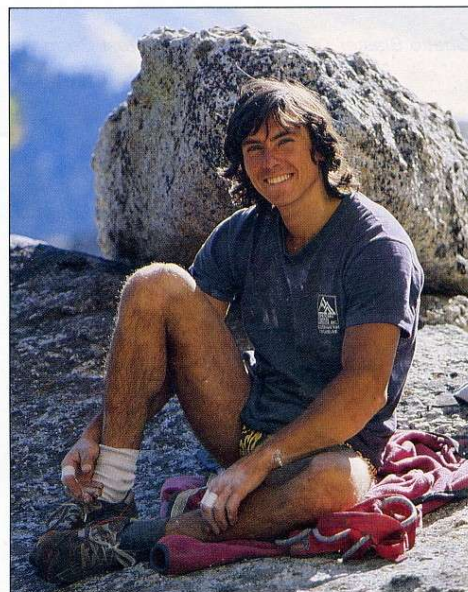
This interview developed during two rather disorganized evenings in Wolfgang's kitchen, over a table cluttered with numerous coffee cups and Kuchen crumbs. Our conversation, which was often interrupted by visiting climbers and frequent trips to the gym for demonstrations, revolved mostly around training and techniques. We discussed the development and future of climbing in Germany and Europe,



and Wolfgang's unique approach to the sport, with only brief ethical asides. The ethics issue, so hotly debated in the U.S., only smolders in Germany, with occasional flare ups over chipped holds.

Wolfgang's mastery of the sport was evident on the rock as I watched him do repeated laps of a IX+ (5.13a) for the pump, and later, read the frequent signature of "Gullich" on climbs listed in the Frankenjura route book, carefully sequestered in a cafe. My most vivid impressions, however, were of his focused enthusiasm as he paced the kitchen, talking of the direction of extreme free climbing, or the obvious excitement of discovery as he demonstrated new theories of movement in a chalk-dusted gym.

Photos: Heinz Zak



#### Ten years ago you started climbing in a sandstone area, the Sud Pfalz. Why did you relocate to the limestone of the Frankenjura?

The Pfalz is too loose for an extreme area and there aren't as many types of routes as there are in the Frankenjura. Most hard routes in the Pfalz are shorter — boulder problems between ledges, with no endurance routes.

Rock in the Frankenjura is very solid and there are so many cliffs and so many sustained routes. Limestone has a wider variety of climbing than any other type of rock — finger cracks, roofs, face climbs through bulges and steep slabs, et cetera.

Limestone also has the most technical climbing, because of the wide variety of moves. What interests me most about climbing on limestone is the "coordination system," in which one must analyze a section of rock, come up with a solution and put it into practice very quickly. This process is very difficult with pocketed limestone and it becomes more of a challenge because a pocket can be used in many ways. You can pull down, to either side, or up — the solution to the problem is more complex and more interesting.

#### Several years ago, the Americans and Brits came to the Frankenjura and supposedly impressed the locals with their ability. But now, you and other Europeans have left quite an impression on the U.S. How much did the Americans influence the development of extreme free climbing in Germany?

At first, there were harder routes in the U.S. *Grand Illusion* at IX+ was done in 1979. The first IX+ in Germany was done in 1983, soon followed by a X-. The most important point, however, is that free climbing started in West Germany in 1975 in the Sud Pfalz, and was influenced by East German climbing and not by American or British.

Free climbing at high standards has been practiced in Saxony (East Germany) since 1910, most recently by Bernd Arnold. Many of the best German climbers visited this area a lot. I have gone (to Saxony) almost three times a year since 1977. The rules there are different and there are no 5.13's, but there are very difficult boulder problems between bolts.

#### You have said it is important to travel. Why?

It is important to go to different areas to get a treasury of movements. If you don't ever travel, it is possible to become a "stupid" climber. A person who climbs only in his own area is very limited and often climbs like a computer.

#### With your ascent of *Grand Illusion*, there is no doubt you have mastered crack climbing. What kind of face routes have drawn you?

Arnold's routes in East Germany, of course, and since 1980, I've gone to France every year, always repeating their hardest routes.

Back then I was always happy to repeat the testpieces — I was totally satisfied. You can always be busy doing second ascents, especially in France, where they claim they have established the hardest route in the world every other week. But then I changed my mind, and began to think that creativity is what makes climbing special. I thought I should expend energy on my own projects.

In 1985, I decided to go to Australia, instead of spending the winter in France. After I did the existing testpieces at Arapiies, I went looking for something harder, and eventually did *Punks In The Gym* and *Wisdom of Body*. I was so much happier with the result.

I think it is important to repeat other people's routes to have a comparison, but only the creative potential makes a climber unique, not the record of repeated routes. "New" is the byword for the creative challenge, although always in the context of the rules of free climbing: new, harder routes at a higher grade, new, better style to repeat — flash, solo, et cetera; to explore a new area, and maybe a whole new country.

#### Was this the idea behind your trip to China?

Certainly everything we did in China was new. Free climbing is completely unknown there. We climbed in Southwest China, near the Great Wall, Near Guilin, and on a tropical island in the South Chinese Sea, and never saw or heard anything about (Chinese) free climbing activities. We got our information about rock formations from travel guides or landscape books.

Since we knew nothing about the areas, it was always exciting to explore. We could pick all the best lines at a high standard. In China we had all the aspects of pioneering; not just doing a new line on a cliff you have seen a thousand times before. If you are trying to climb with very little knowledge like we did in China, everything is exciting. It's the same emotional situation as when you were learning to climb.



**From your travels, would you say the U.S. is behind in extreme free climbing?**

To say "behind" is perhaps deceiving. What is important is the route. A route, even a very hard one, only counts in comparison with other routes at the time it was done. That point in time will inspire the climbers to excel, and in this way climbing builds on itself. Behind is not so important.

**Your new route *Ghetto Blaster* (X+) would certainly be 5.14 in the U.S. Do you think rating systems can be compared?**

At the higher ratings, yes, because each grade is such a clear step. The difference between IX+ and X- is that you can train on a IX+, but a X- or harder requires so much motivation that I never do them again. For example, there are ten X's in the Frankenjura, and all have very hard coordination moves, combined with highly powerful moves. To do them, you must be totally fit, concentrated, and motivated.

**In contrast, when you were in the Gunks, you did *Intruders* (5.12+) with just one fall. Your famous quote describing that route was, "It would be hard if there were any hard moves."**

*Intruders* was only a fitness problem. On *Punks in the Gym*, even after 20 meters of strenuous climbing, you still must have the exact crux moves and muscle coordination ready in your brain. On an extreme route, you must have an incredible amount of information organized in your mind before you start. It is a big mental problem as well as a fitness and motivation problem. To flash a difficult route, you need to get the information, analyze it, and execute the moves while you are climbing.

This is not possible on extreme routes. All X's have B2 sections. Say on a very hard route, above X-, you try it in the autumn and find one specific crux move which you simply cannot do without training all winter for it in the gym. Even when you are incredibly fit, you are not able to execute the move without specific training. But, of course, as climbing progresses, there will come a time when climbers will have more complete strength, and, quicker ascents, perhaps flashes, of these routes will be possible.

**What is most important in your training?**

Bouldering is a very important training device, especially since the hardest routes are extended boulder problems. I also concentrate on repeating routes from IX- to IX+. I train my coordination and timing by studying and practicing moves in the gym and on the rock using the "deadpoint."

The deadpoint is the point on an arc of movement or a jump in the air before the body starts to fall and is weightless and motionless for a split second. Free, precise movement is possible at this point. We studied the deadpoint and its potentials at the University of Erlangen with basketball players who are specialists in the deadpoint, making most of their throws from that point. Applied to climbing, one can use the deadpoint to increase efficiency.

*Wolfgang hangs from a small edge, and pulls up on it in one quick, controlled motion. At the precise moment his body stops moving, his left hand shoots out for the next higher edge, easily grabbing it and sticking. A simple exercise with profound applications.*

It is much easier to grab a small hold at the deadpoint and more efficiently move off it. In the future, with total training of your coordination and timing, it may be possible to grab and move off a one finger pocket that you couldn't even hang on statically.

I've written a book about climbing and training methods which explores these techniques. It is very popular, but I would like to write one on training exclusively, because there is so much to learn.

**Techniques such as the deadpoint have obviously allowed you to stay at the forefront of German climbing for years, especially in the Frankenjura. There is an incredible number of very hard gymnastic routes there.**

But I think that there are too many bolts in the Frankenjura. I also enjoy doing hard routes where the protection is difficult to place, because it is another technique to master and involves the head. I am doing more of these routes in the Frankenjura. For example, I think the climbing in the Gunks with their no-bolt ethic is good.

**Don't you think that kind of climbing is much more restrictive?**

It is more of a challenge; if there were a bolt, it wouldn't be so interesting. It is good to master different styles of ascent.

**But for the most extreme routes, which seem to be limited to limestone, don't you rap to place bolts?**

Yes, because in general, limestone doesn't take protection well.

**The French seem to accept "improving" holds as well as placing bolts on rappel.**

I don't believe this is a good practice, but it is a tactic sometimes used in Germany on routes I won't name.

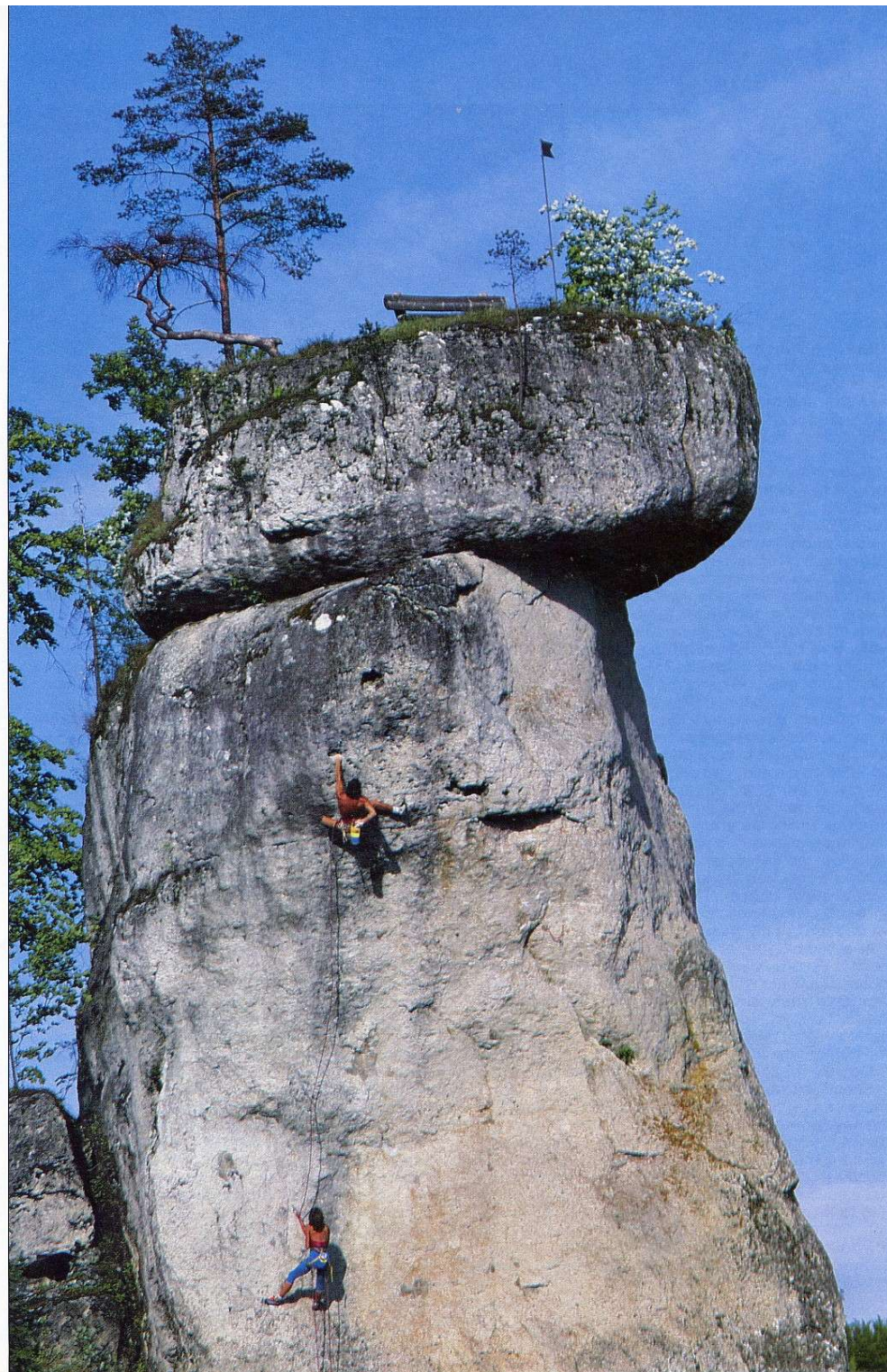
**So what is the acceptable style of first ascent in Germany?**

A route is considered established when a climber leads the route from top to bottom without falls, either placing all gear (redpoint), or with the rope through a high piece (yoyo). I think a yoyo ascent is fine, because a redpoint only means you have practiced the route more. Anyone who yoyos a route could eventually redpoint it.

**Is climbing a mainstream sport in Germany?**

It is starting to become very popular — over the last couple years, TV, film, and newspapers have become interested. In the German Alpine Club, mountaineering is considered an almost cultural thing rather than a sport, and they have always held free climbing very low. Before, free climbers didn't fit into the brains of the Alpine Club; they were considered freaks who didn't want to be organized.

Photo: Gerhard Heidorn







The youth organization in the Alpine Club was even more against free climbing as a sport. Germans tend to be conservative and think free climbing has a bad influence, especially on young people; they think rock climbers don't work.

But now the Club is discovering how popular free climbing is becoming and that it can be considered a mainstream sport. They see that if climbing is a true, popular sport, the club which represents this sport is entitled to a lot of money from the Government — for development of the sport. Plus, they would get a lot of new members. So suddenly, they are very interested in free climbing and eager to help. They supported our rock climbing expedition to China.

**Do you think that climbing competitions may help promote climbing?**

I don't think they are good for the sport; the intention of climbing is something different. A climber can go in two different directions. One is to go out and earn money, which is possible in competitions. But I go out to do a route, not to burn off a competitor. When you go out to do a route, you only have eyes and mind for the route, but at a competition, you are looking at everyone, seeing how they perform, and hoping they aren't as strong as you.

At competitions, it is nonsense if someone says to you, "Go, go!" People at competitions change so much. People you have known for a long time only want to know what shape you are in, and when you will start. I want to climb when I feel for climbing, not when they call my name.

At a climbing area, there is competition, but it is indirect. For me, climbing is creative. I want to do new routes or a route with a name and an identity — you hear of a route and have a dream to do it. At a competition, you have nothing in mind, only a chipped track on a piece of rock in front of you. If you go, you go only for the money.

**Do you think competitions can distinguish the "best" climbers?**

There can be no such thing as a "best" climber. You can say someone is a successful climber, but not the best. A "successful" climber would be someone who has done many hard routes in many areas, not a local specialist. There are many disciplines in free climbing and a successful climber should be able to do all: be able to flash hard routes, do some solos, do routes with difficult protection, do extreme routes, and do new routes, be creative.

Competitions are good for earning money. I see it as nothing more.

**Why have you chosen to be successful at climbing, rather than at another sport?**

If you see sport as a combination of body and psyche, climbing allows you to choose which to concentrate on. For example, on total-limit routes the body dominates, versus scary routes or solos where the mind dominates. Climbing also gives me a goal for travel. I see discovering exotic areas, such as the Sinai in Egypt, or our expedition to rock climb in China, as another discipline in free climbing.

You can also use the mind to study the scientific aspects of climbing, like movement, training, or the dynamic aspects we talked about. In other athletics, you start from the beginning; you learn the game or the specific motion, and then you perform. But in climbing, you are always faced with new problems in which you must perform using intuitive movements, and then later analyze them to figure out why they work, and learn from them.

In the study of free climbing there is so much new to discover. I can't see this in other sports. Everything you discover about training, about techniques, about movement, is new.

After you have climbed for a long time, you get to the point where you want your ideas on the sport to materialize by establishing new routes, new areas — even in another part of the world. To do a new hard route is such a challenge, because you have to do everything on your own; learn the mental and physical coordination and come up with the motivation to continue a project which may be impossible.

When you just repeat a route, that burden is much less, because someone has climbed it before, and you know there is a way to solve the problem. But on your own route, you might not see the way for a long time, and quit because no one could help you to realize the possibility. And it's only natural that the more effort you put into something, the more you are satisfied when you succeed. Your creation — made up of the line, the difficulty, the protection, and even the name, expressing all the emotions about the route — has a special, unique character. If climbing is an art, then creativity is its main component.

Photo: Gerhard Heidorn