

A short history of sports climbing in the Sarca Valley

1972 The Colodri East Face: the first step towards the revolution

At the beginning of the thirties, the Sarca Valley's vertical exploration begins on the rock faces of Monte Casale, Dain and Brento. For a few decades it will continue with itineraries typical of the Dolomites until in 1972 Ugo and Mario Ischia, Giuliano Emanuelli and Fabio Calzá, mountaineers from Arco, will notice the exceptional potential of the Colodri east face, putting up its first route that year: Umberta Bertamini. Shortly other routes follow: Barbara, Katia, Agostina, Sommadossi, Renata Rossi... all have become classics on this east face, created by the Ischia brothers, Giuliano Stenghel, Franco Monte, Maurizio Giordani, Roberto Bassi, Luigi Giacomelli, Franco Zenatti, Giovanni Groaz...

1982 The first bolt: a revolution

The East face's three hundred meters of red-grey limestone will experience a new revolution for the Sarca valley. In 1982 in fact the first bolt will be placed. Heinz Mariacher and Roberto Bassi (they were among the climbers who opened Renata Rossi and White Crack) placed this first bolt, from above, expressly for sports climbing; they will achieve Specchio delle mie brame, a variant of Renata Rossi, 6b+. No one can imagine yet that from this single gesture one of the most interesting sports climbing areas of the international spectrum will develop.

1982-1984 Heinz Mariacher's intuition

When there is only time in the alpinist's mentality for long routes, Mariacher (author of many difficult ascents on the Marmolada often with his lifetime companion Luisa Iovane, a very strong climber of extremely difficult routes at Karwendel and daring solos in the Dolomites) will be amongst the first to read in a few dozen meters of rock the possibility of bringing to life a difficult, enjoyable, adrenalin inducing, creative space of vertical confrontation. An intuition rewarded by the Sarca Valley putting an infinite number of smooth slabs and vertical routes at his disposal to be cleaned and equipped. Between 1982 and 1984, while on the faces of Colodri, Casale, Cima alle Coste or in Mandrea, multi pitch routes were being opened on the faces around Arco, Mariacher, Luisa Iovane, Maurizio Zanolla (Manolo), Roberto Bassi, Aido Leviti, and later on Bruno Pederiva, became the pioneers of the valley's sports climbing. On the crag in front of Ceniga, Aido Leviti and Renato Bernard opened the 6b route called Nuovi Orizzonti. At the Spiaggia delle Lucertole Roberto Bassi and Mauro De Gasperi bolted Honky Tonky 6b, the first totally bolted route, which Mariacher will go on to climb solo. Nuovi Orizzonti, San Paolo, Swing Area, Spiaggia delle Lucertole, will become the first crags, while Bassi and Leviti (Diego Depretto and Luigi Cola will follow in their footsteps) will put their hands on the slabs and roofs of Marmite dei Giganti.

The MaMaBo grading system

Every route will be climbed with perfect footwork and every possibility of falling (unusual for those who started climbing on the imposing alpine walls), climbed from the ground up, without resting, ready to start again from the bottom in case of a fall, as required by the grading system

imposed by MaMaBa (Manolo, Mariacher, Bassi).

And this is how the Sarca valley's pioneers climbed and freed itineraries which still give you the shivers to this day: the 25 meters of Super Swing, a white wall of 7b+, friction and technique which are of difficult intuition; Tom Tom Club, which on its second pitch, with a difficult sequence of movements on a slab gains the grade of 7b; La signora degli appigli, 7c, Manolo's history master piece, with a single crux move, which is still extremely difficult today; Dracurella, 7a for its first pitch and 7c+ on the second, an extremely technical slab; another Manolo masterpiece; Nisida's twenty six meters of friction 7c and the 7c of Tom e Jerry the home of tiny holds, delicate movements on underclings. Two extremely technical routes, which Luisa Iovane will redpoint in 1985.

1985 Drill and overhangs: the new turning point

As time passes, the fame of the Valley's rock will spread, calling new faces to come and confront themselves with its crags, opening and trying new routes. Wolfgang Gullich, the Remy brothers, Jerry Moffat, Ron Fawcett and Patrick Edlinger will visit the Valley. The grades will consequently increase.

La Gola di Toblino is discovered by Roberto Bassi at the end of 1984. Nuovi Orizzonti (which will then be shut down for climbers since it is on private land) will be frequented and developed by Diego Depretto. Massone will enter climbers vocabulary at the end of 1985 thanks to Giovanni Groaz and Danny Zampiccoli and which Depretto will develop over the years by bolting other sectors. With the advent of the drill and the new climbing technique used on overhangs, 1985 marks a further turning point in Sarca Valley's sports climbing by opening its doors to new climbers: Rolando Larcher, Danilo Bonvecchio, Diego Mabboni, Giorgio Manica together with the untiring Roberto Bassi who has become the king of slabs and will continue discovering, cleaning and restoring the Valley, which by now has been abandoned by Mariacher, Iovane and Zanolla.

1986 The first 8a and 8a+

It is during 1986 that the first 8a and 8a+ enter the vertical history of the Valley. In September of that year, at San Paolo all'Eremo, Rolando Larcher bolts and frees two routes with chipped holds: Elephant Baby 8a and Gravity Games 8a+ (now 8b/8b+ because changed by Francois Legrand). The next year, in 1987, he will free the first natural 8a at Passo San Giovanni: Fafurni, twelve meters of endurance and precision on tiny crimps bolted by Angelo Giovannetti. In the Gola Bassi will answer back, obviously on slab, by freeing Futura 8a+, an eighteen meters wall on tiny holds.

1987 The first Rock Master in history

After two editions of Sport Roccia (in 1985 the first sports climbing competition is held on the Militi wall in Valle Stretta in Bardonecchia, suggested and sponsored by the Tuttosport journalist Emanuele Cassarà and by the alpinists Andrea Mellano and Alberto Risso, when Roberto Bassi wins the Italian Championship; in 1986 it is held in two parts: at Bardonecchia and at Areo on Colodri's yellow wall when Patrick Edlinger is the winner) it will be the crag of the Castle of Arco to baptize the first Rock Master in the history of sports climbing (Lynn Hill and Stefan Glowacz will go on to win the competition).

Late eighties, the first 8b and 8b+

However the Sarca valley is no longer the only queen for climbers. The Poppey route is opened in 1987 at Nomesino in Val di Gresta by Ermanno Dossi and Giuliano Dorigatti, and will further widen the horizons of vertical climbers who on this wall of impossible holds, of one and two finger pockets and slopers will find new challenges. Come sei cambiata Ugo 7c+, continuous in the upper section and with a starting crux on a oné finger pocket will become one of the first difficult routes bolted by Giorgio Manica. The following year, Larcher will bolt a number of great pitches, among which is the first overhanging 8b (Energia = Mc2) (downgraded today to 8a/b). Towards the end of the eighties the walls where the top climbers have been climbing will start to fall to the sound of 8b and 8b+. Mujado, 8b for who opened it and 8b+ to who repeats it, an ultra technical slab route, totally natural, which Roberto Bassi will go on to free in the Gola, which has by now become one of his second homes in the Valley. Larcher will free Maratona 8b, bolted by him at Massone (the first route in the Pueblo sector).

The birth of Nago

In the meantime new crags will be born and developed. Thanks to the goodwill of Danilo Bonvecchio, Santa Massenza (discovered by Bassi), San Siro (discovered by Stefano Pegoretti, known as Pecos) will be equipped and will grow and his Terlago will come to life, home to vertical slabs of fantastic limestone, carved out by tiny holds and crimps on which finger strength and great foot work are paramount. On the rocks of Nago where the Austrians during the First World War had built their trenches to resist the Italians positioned on the opposite side of the valley, the untiring Diego Depretto will come on the scene and start bolting the crag, with the successive intervention of Luigi Coló in the upper section, to make it one of the most beautiful and well known crags in the valley together with Massone.

The Early Nineties

The nineties witness a consolidation without change in the direction of sports climbing in the Valley. For the beauty and variety of its rock, for the Rock Master which by now takes place on artificial walls attracting thousands of enthusiasts from all over the world, Arco is one of those legendary places, the destination of every climber at least once in their lifetime. The huge influx to the walls in the area even involves the local administrations who finance a project to clean up and improve the most frequented crags. Massone, Nago, Spiaggia delle Lucertole, San Siro, Baone, will be amongst the places to undergo some restyling.

1994 The Sisyphos group is born

But alongside the sponsored initiatives of the public administration, too sporadic and limited compared to the speed with which the sites in the Valley are born and are developing (amongst these the gems of Margone and Ranzo discovered and bolted by Danilo Bonvecchio), the voluntary action of a group of climbing friends has started to become stronger which, under the name of Sisyphos, in 1994 starts off by bolting La Gola. The group is led by Roberto Bassi. The first

members are Bonvecchio, Larcher, Mauro Turri, Andrea Stenico, Marco Curti. However, in the autumn of this same year, Roberto Bassi tragically loses his life in a car accident. His thinking, his energy, his love for the Sarca valley will seek to be perpetuated in the work of the group founded by him, which will have as objective the bolting and maintenance of the great part of the crags of the Sarca valley considered to be at risk.

1995 Sisyphos grows

The membership of Sisyphos increases. Fabio Leoni, Roland Galvagni, Michele Cagol, Daniele Lira join up. La Gola di Toblino will again see Sisyphos busy fixing all anchors, bolts and opening new routes. Then the projects will expand. The idea will be to open new climbing sites, improve and make safer the vertical treasure of the Sarca valley. Of every site rebolted or created from scratch, the members will write reports and make drawings. With "The Best of Sisyphos", a home made guide book made from a ring binder of photocopies which gathers together the latest exploits of the untiring group of friends, the voluntary climber-bolters earn some money to go ahead with the projects in the Valley. Or better still, to feed the terracotta piggy bank which Fabio Leoni keeps on the counter of his first Vertical Sport shop at Pietramurata, the only form of finance these boys had. Sisyphos, the king of Corinth condemned by Zeus to carry out the exhausting task of preventing the inexorable descent of an enormous boulder which rolled down incessantly from one side of a mountain to the other, will create from the mid nineties the new sectors of Transatlantico (thanks mainly to the precious work of Roland Galvagni); Muro di Chitarra, Baule, Giardino di Nato, with the enthusiasm of Fabio Leoni and comp.; II Diamante del BA.RO. Sisyphos will concentrate again on La Gola di Toblino with new pitches, and will develop the Muro di Sisyphos, and begin Camerette, Cavedine and Lon.

Late nineties, the most difficult overhang in Italy goes down

And at the end of the nineties another impossible barrier will fall at the hands of Manfred Stuffer: Underground 9a, Massone's top, Italy's most difficult overhang at that time. It is time to stop talking only about the untiring group, other new things are happening around Arco: Alessandro Chiarani and Ivan Bertamini open new routes at Laghel; Reinhold Scherer bolts spectacular pitches at Massone in the Pueblo sector, which has by now become an overhanging playground for the strongest climbers, where Francois Legrand frees Reini's Vibes 8c+ in 1997 as well as other difficult routes. Scherer and Legrand, together will bolt in the same year Terra promessa (where Legrand will free Claudio Caffè 8c). Red Point Wall and Muro dell'asino, are born thanks to Diego Mabboni and partners.

General Plan for the Crags

During this period, the local authority of Arco will promote the General Plan for the Crags, or the identification of a series of climbing sites for which the authorities, now proprietors, guarantee their maintenance and improvement by intervening not only in the bolting and cleaning up but also on the surrounding environment, creating access routes,

signposts, structures. Massone, Placche di Baone, Muro dell'Asino and Colodri will be the sites of the Plan looked after by the local administration of Arco. But in the Valley the crags continue to be born, grow and maintain themselves still, and above all, self financing due to private initiatives. Amongst these, beside the Lake of Toblino, Bassilandia is born (Leoni, Gianguido Dalfovo, Curti, Celva, Bonvecchio and co.); beside the wall of Sisyphos the crag of Sarche rises up (Curti, Giordano Di Matteo and co.). Bonvecchio will give us Climax which will develop between 1999 and 2000, but whose first two pitches he already bolted before developing Santa Massenza; he will discover and bolt with Simone Banal Limarock, a small summer crag, which is competitive and of quality.

The Millennium... and new crags are on the increase

And here we are in the new millennium, the year 2000. The activity of the single private bolters never ceases and the crags are born and renewed thanks to their enthusiasm. The Rockmaster is 20 years old in 2005. Paolo Calza re bolts San Paolo and the Pilastro delle Vergini, thus re opening the challenge with walls which have made Arco's history. Sauro Merighi will discover and bolt the crags of Grottosauro and Ceniga Alta; Gianguido Dalfovo and Lino Celva will invest their energies in the beautiful crag named La Pizzeria. Bonvecchio and Banal will instead concentrate their energies on the new sector at Ranzo, giving Limarock new pitches and re bolting Santa Massenza (together with Fabio Leoni). The difficult cave of Coel de la Val dela Porta (Larcher, Bonvecchio and partners) will be added to the list.

2005-2009 overhangs persist...

Over the past four years, ten months from the end of the first decade of the new millenium, overhangs will still be the main protagonists. Nicolas Favresse will free (2007) Mezzo Biologico 8a+, the Valley's hardest trad/bolt route, which he will open just beside San Paolo's Eremo. From 2005-2009 St. Anger 8c+/9a (Eremo) will be the most difficult project to be freed, by the German climber Andreas Bindhammer (2008). While in April 2009, Riccardo Scarian will free Adidas 8b+ at Coel dela Val dela Porta, a continuous and fingery overhanging sector which has grown and in the last few years has become one of the top reference points in the Arco area for the best climbers.

...vertical walls return

The last four years also witness a return to the art of climbing on vertical walls. Campaneros 8b (Bassilandia) will enter the history books, considered by who has repeated it as one of the most beautiful pitches in the Sarca Valley. Gianguido Dalfovo frees it in 2005, one of the most active local climbers. Other fine projects will fall, some bolted several years ago by the same Roberto Bassi. This is the case of Madame doc 8b, at Pezzent Area (Gola di Toblino), freed in 2008 by Cristian Giovannini. Still in the same year, on a project of Bonvecchio, Thin ice (Terlago). A pitch which in 2009, at a few days distance one from the other, will be repeated by Riccardo Scarian, Maurizio Zanolla (Manolo) and Gianguido Dalfovo who will confirm the beauty of it and will grade it 8c.

The new climbers

Compared to five years ago, the influx of foreigners has increased. The new entries are the climbers from Eastern Europe, together with an ever increasing number of British and American climbers. But the German speakers are still first. Next to the top climbers, who complain of the lack of new super difficult routes, the number of those climbing medium-high difficulty as well as low is also growing. New crags will make their appearance. Amongst these, in 2007, Fabio Leoni will open Piccola Dallas, at little more than a kilometer from the historic centre of Arco, and the great Babilonia above Sarche. Regina del Lago, just beside Lago di Ledro and Riva del Garda, and Belvedere in the lower sector (sector B), will contribute instead to widening the response of the Sarca valley to the easy grades always more requested but difficult to find on account of the type of rock itself in the area, compact and rarely leaning. The local council administrations (Arco and Nago-Torbole) will continue to manage and maintain some crags in the area, now handing them over to the Friends of Arco. The new legislation foresees that no new pitches can be modified or created in these crags, without the authorization of the council concerned: Massone, Massi di Prabi, Placche di Baone, Muro dell'Asino, il Calvario (Arco); Nago, Belvedere, Corno di Bo', Spiaggia delle Lucertole, San Giovanni (Nago-Torbole).

