

JOHN GILL

and the art of levitation

by Ross Weiter

Boulder, to: climbing unroped on boulders or at the foot of climbs to a height where it is still safe to jump off.
The Climbing Dictionary (on Web)

I was once bouldering in solitude in the Needles, when a young female walked up and introduced herself and asked who I was. I told her and continued bouldering. She turned and walked away after a few minutes, saying over her shoulder, "you can't be John Gill. He climbs much better than that"

John Gill, interviewed in book "Master of Rock" by Pat Ament

Welcome to the John Gill legend. This demigod of bouldering had achieved such status amongst the followers of his craft that the man himself, the human being, seems lost in the mythical soup. We are left with feats, legacies and stories. Gill permeates the history of American bouldering the way Elvis did rock'n'roll – been everywhere, done everything in his day, pretty much single handedly legitimised this peculiar activity in the eyes of the then establishment. Even unconfirmed sightings of him and his deeds excite the hatchlings.

Mmm, that's great, you say,.....so who is John Gill ?

We have to backtrack a bit, to the olden days of the late fifties and early sixties, when there was a generally agreed way to go about "real" climbing. This involved huge racks of gear, large mountains or walls, weather and various bodily deprivations. Hold me back, you say ! Well, Gill could see 40 years ago that what he wanted to do was not "real" climbing, but some real "climbing". Not bushbashing, shivering and lugging around a ton of nylon and ironmongery, not working hard for the privilege of forking out a fortune on gear, not praying for long spells of good weather. As such, he was a genius, a visionary, a man so far ahead of his time it is just not funny to contemplate. Gill was doing grade 26 / V5 moves on boulders in days when the hardest climbing routes were grade 21 !

John Gill was born in Alabama in 1937 and took up climbing at the age of 16, as a junior in his high school in Atlanta, Georgia. During his college years at Georgia Tech Gill trained as a gymnast. The gymnastic moves appealed to his sense of aesthetics and to his need for a physical challenge. With this background, it is only logical that in the late 50s he viewed climbing as an extension of gymnastics, rather than, as others did, as an extension of hiking. It is also not surprising then that Gill introduced gymnastic chalk to climbing, to improve the contact between climber and rock. In the mid 50's he spotted a couple of climbers drying their hands into the forest duff before trying a climb. As a gymnast he just put two and two together.

His other gymnastic transplant is the dynamic move, or "dyno". Every other climber then used the "three points of contact" method, meaning that three out of the four limbs had to be in contact with the rock at all times. Of course "dynos" are used by gymnasts all the time, for example in parallel bars or on rings. Gill even put up some "no hands" problems, to test his balance and train for footwork. Yet another "legacy" is the use of tiny white arrows Gill painted on the rock all those years ago to show where the boulder problems go. Punters have been renewing them ever since.

Gill even invented a bouldering grades scale, the closed B-scale, which was in use until the mid-80s. It seems that "B" stands for "bouldering", obvious enough. John Sherman then introduced his open-ended V-scale at Hueco Tanks, where "V" comes (less obviously) from Sherman's nickname "Vermin".

Later in life Gill taught maths as a college professor. Dr.Gill actually authored some quite un-scientific papers on levitation and the ability to use your mind and spirit to reduce the pull of gravity on the human body. The only people who scoff at this idea are those who have not tried to repeat his ascents ! To Gill, belief was the Mother of Reality.

The Thimble is a V5 problem he put up in 1961, 7m high, with the crux at 5 meters above the ground. It was soloed by Gill without any trials on top rope. Under the boulder there used to be a guard rail (since removed) – if he fell down, the rail would have broken his back. Nobody could repeat this madness for 20 years. Even with the rail now gone, only 3 men did it in the next 10 years after 1981. Scary stuff. All this in shoes that were about as sticky as today's runners.

What was the secret of this unique man? Nothing special, actually. Gill trained every other day, resting in between, to give his life more variety and his training more commitment. He felt that climbing fitted into his life only as part of the larger picture, it was never the be all or end all. Even in training, he normally did not push to failure or exhaustion. Easy to do what you are gifted with extraordinary strengths to start off with! He did almost no specific finger training. Gill did not think anything special about this approach and never did preach any one method of training: he always believed that each person is unique and that each climber has to find what works for them.

John Gill is still famous for his legendary feats of strength: namely the pinch grip pull-up and the one-arm side lever. In his late fifties he could still do a one-arm pull-up. Once he was told (wrongly) that the legendary German alpinist Hermann Buhl could do a one-finger pull-up, so he did one too!

It seems that overuse injuries have finally caught up with him, as they do with almost all boulderers. Today Gill can be seen soloing long easier routes on remote peaks, where he is unlikely to be disturbed. As he says: "What is freedom to a bird, if he is in the middle of a flock ?"

The sport of bouldering has taken off. It is fun, physical, and all you need is shoes and a chalk bag. What could be better for the money starved climber ! The hardest moves in the world are now being done on boulders, not on routes. Crash pads and spotters have taken some of the insanity out of the "high balls", camaraderie and a fun social atmosphere has replaced the solitude in some places. Luckily, there are many of boulders and other areas near Perth to last anyone for years. The just-published *Perth Rock Climbing Guide* gives some good pointers on how to get to them.

So what are you waiting for ? Grab a chalk bag and a spotter, and may John Gill be with you !

References:

1. *Web sources: just type "John Gill bouldering" into Google !*
2. *Training interview with John Gill in Flash Training by Eric J.Horst, 1994*
3. *John Gill - Master of Rock by Pat Ament, 1998*

Comparison of Australian Climbing Grades with the Hueco Bouldering Scale

Climbing	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36
Bouldering	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6	V7	V8	V9	V10	V11	V12	V13	V14	V15