



David Pickford talks to

Nina Caprez

Switzerland is famous for producing exceptional climbers, and there is no stronger contemporary example than twenty-six year old Nina Caprez. Growing up in the alpine valley of Prättigau in Grisons canton, home to the world famous ski area of Klosters, mountain sports were in Nina's blood right from the start. In the Swiss tradition of serving a proper alpine apprenticeship, she started out on big mountains and multipitch routes before discovering sport climbing in her late teens, which was when the fun, as she says, really started. Rocketing from obscurity into the limelight of the international climbing scene in 2010 with a string of 8b+ and 8c redpoints, Nina made a quick ascent earlier this year of Mind Control (8c+) at Oliana in Catalunya. But unlike most of her peers at the top of women's climbing, she has taken her sport away from the conventional, single pitch arena to higher places, making a string of astonishing ascents of some of the hardest big walls in Europe, including Silbergeier (α 300 metre 8b+) on the Rätikon, and more recently Carnet d'Adresse (α 250 metre 8b+) at Rocher du Midi. **Climb** recently caught up with Nina to discover what drives the woman who's proving that girls can climb just as hard as boys, no matter how high above the ground they are.

How did you start climbing?

When I was 13, I took part in a youth camp in the south of France where I was introduced to climbing: I was immediately addicted! Back home in Switzerland, I just did multipitch climbing and mountaineering until I was 17. Then I discovered sport climbing...

You've quickly risen to the very top of women's climbing at an international level. What's the secret of your success?

I have always been highly motivated, and I'm extremely curious about learning new things. Climbing is a very complex sport, and I think it's important to try new moves and new body positions to improve, and to climb as much as you can - without burning yourself out. I've also learnt a lot from watching strong climbers and studying the way they move. ▶



PORTRAIT BY KEITH LADSINSKI



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You did your first 8c+, *Mind Control* at Oliana, earlier this year in an extraordinary few weeks where the route was also climbed by Daila Ojeda, Sasha DiGiulian and later Caroline Ciavaldini. Is climbing with other women at your own level important?

Not at all - for me climbing with boys is much more important. I'm not such a powerful climber, so I've had to develop really good technique to improve. Men climb differently to women, and I find have to climb more like a man to get stronger - doing bigger, more dynamic moves. Climbing with girls is also really fun, but I can't say that it's important for my climbing.

Do you feel there's an element of competition between you and some of the world's other top women climbers?

When I'm climbing with pure outdoor rock climbers, there has never been any kind of competition. But when I'm on the cliff with a competition climber, I sometimes feel that they're looking at my climbing in a critical way. I don't like this feeling, so I ignore it! For me climbing should always be fun. It involves a lot of laughing and, most importantly, sharing what you have with your friends. A lot of girls in the climbing

world compare themselves intensely with other girls, and can develop jealousy as a result. This is not a good way to improve your climbing. After ten minutes, though, they realise that I'm not like this at all, and then the atmosphere is cool.

Is some element of competition important in the process of improvement, perhaps?

As I said, I don't like competitive feelings in climbing. For this reason, I'm definitely not made for comps. We can push each other on the crag and at the wall, but only with positive vibes. I love to feel encouragement around me when I'm fighting on a hard route, and I like to give my own positive energy when my friends are trying hard. This is rock climbing!

Does doing a lot of indoor competition climbing lead to more of a competitive mindset on the cliff?

When you are a pure competition climber, your mindset will not change from the comp to the cliff. But I don't climb a lot with competitors. I have really good climbing friends here in France, and we are mostly pure outdoor climbers; we laugh a lot at the cliff, and everybody wants everybody else to succeed. That's great for

improvement, and I'm really lucky to be part of such a strong scene.

You've had a tremendous run of success on some of Europe's hardest big walls over the past two years. What is it about big wall climbing that inspires you?

Big walls are really inspiring for me. The coolest thing in my climbing life is that I'm naturally going through different genres - from alpinism to sport climbing, and now on to big walls. None of my success has been accidental, though. If you look at my climbing career, it's pretty normal. I started with mountaineering and multipitch climbing, so I've always had a good mindset and the feeling for long routes. From 17 to 22, I learnt to sport climb, and learnt about training, and I did some comps and travelled and climbed a lot around the world. My level was getting higher because I was climbing so many different rock types and styles of routes. When I was 22, by chance a friend of mine introduced me to the hard multipitch climbing in the Verdon, and for two years I got better and better at big walling and everything that goes with it. Then, aged 25, I was able to realise my big dream, *Silbergeier*, near my home in Switzerland on the massive Rätikon.

Big walling is the natural result of where I've taken my climbing.

Even on a bolted big wall free climb there's a lot more to think about than when sport climbing straight off the ground. What would you say are the key things for successful big wall free climbing?

Having good ropework and general competence on the cliff is vital because it gives you confidence. Because I also do a lot of caving, I'm really good with ropework and bolting. When I'm climbing 200 metres above the ground, it's the same for me as climbing on a single pitch 10 metres above the ground. My psyche is also really good, and this is also vital for big routes - you need to want to be up there in the first place. I sometimes feel fear on a hard redpoint high up, and feel the sewing machine in my legs, but I love it - I love the adrenaline push it creates. I learned a lot from my boyfriend Cédric [Lachat], who is very good on big walls, and together we're a really strong team.

Top French big wall climbers Stephanie Bodet and Arnaud Petit have spoken of how they are more concerned about each other on big walls than if they were climbing with another partner. You and Cedric obviously have a very good partnership on the cliff. But can it be stressful climbing very hard routes with your boyfriend?

Not at all. I make him 100% confident, and it's the same for me. We are really strong in extreme situations, and I get more stressed when I'm climbing with people who are not comfortable with a lot of air under their ass!

What do women need to climb at their best?

For either women or men, in my eyes, the most important thing to improve our climbing is to work on our weakness. This is really hard for the mind, but it means we can progress in the long term.

Does trad climbing attract you at all?

Yes, definitely - but it's for later in my life.

What about ice and mixed?

I don't like it so much. In the winter, I prefer to ski and occasionally go and do an ice route, but I don't feel that comfortable with axes - I'd rather have skis on my feet than crampons.

Can you see yourself getting into more serious big wall free climbing, without bolts, or in the high mountains, in the future?

Yes, definitely in the future.

What do you like most about contemporary rock climbing?

THIS PAGE: Nina totally focused on the crux pitch of *Carnet d'Adresse* (8b+, 280m) at the Rocher du Midi, near her home in Grenoble, France. Her successful ascent in July 2012 was the third free ascent of the route: the first was made by unsung French legend Yann Ghesquiers and the second by Nina's partner Cedric Lachat. SAM BIE

I love the way sport climbing on big walls enables us to climb in safety in totally outrageous situations, places you could never get to with trad climbing. It's so cool to be climbing at your limit in safety, 1000 metres above the ground. Modern climbing technology has created something wonderful in big wall sport climbing.

Do you have any role models from the past?

I admire Lynn Hill very much - she is a major inspiration for women climbers everywhere.

Are role models important?

I don't think they're as important as some people

think. I admire Lynn because she really pushed the limits and she was able to show that girls can climb what boys are climbing, and even better. This is fantastic, and it's also what I'm trying to do a little bit on the big wall routes.

Can you describe the challenges of living the dream as a full time pro climber?

Every day, I realise how lucky I am to live in the way I do. I need a lot of autonomy in life, and I love working for myself. To be a pro climber you have to be like this, and it's not for everybody. You need to be an adventurous person who can try a lot of things, make mistakes, and learn from



those mistakes to become a stronger person. I've learnt a lot from my errors, and this is an important part of life as a pro climber. I also do a lot of work to do for my sponsors; even though it seems I'm always climbing, I work hard. I'm happy not to climb all the time, and because I never know how much I will earn in a year and I always need to have ideas and goals. I'm always looking for new challenges, and this is part of what makes the climbing life so rich and rewarding.

Is it difficult to maintain motivation to climb at a very high level all the time? How do you find the winning balance? For me it's not a problem, because I balance my climbing with other sports. I'll do some really hard projects during the year, but I'm fascinated by a lot of other things: particularly caving, skiing, cooking, and gardening. I'm changing all the time, and also in my climbing. In winter, I boulder a lot. In spring, it's sport climbing time in Spain. In summer, I do hard multipitch climbing in the Alps. And in autumn it's once more back to sport climbing. Because I have this balance, I never get bored or burnt out in my climbing.

Do you ever feel pressure to perform?

No, not really. It's only when I fail to redpoint something that I'm not happy with myself. But I have never the impression that I have to perform for my sponsors or for others. I also feel that by climbing well, I can inspire others. I guess this should be the ultimate goal for professional climbers. When I achieve something in my climbing, I hope that others will want to go and achieve things that they want to do, too.

Would you say you're a performance-oriented person?

I am, but performance is not connected with numbers or grades. For example at the moment I have a really hard sport climbing project, *Les Specialistes*, a classic 8b+ in the Verdon. It's on a 45 degree overhanging wall, it's really short, and has never been redpointed by a woman. If I redpoint this, it will be a much higher level of performance for me than climbing something like *Mind Control*, the 8c+ I did this spring, because that route suits me 100%. My ethic is that when I have the impression that I performed really well, I will tell people about that, and not about the grade. People should remember that the difficulty of a climb isn't really related to the grade but how well the movement and style of the routes suits you as a climber.

What's your relationship with risk? Do you ever get scared before a big runout on a hard route hundreds of metres off the ground?



PORTRAIT BY SAM BIE

I get scared, for sure. Often it's not a good idea to fall on a big runout, even on a bolted big wall route. For example, when you have an F8b+ pitch on a big wall route, if there's a section of F7a at the top then there won't be any no more bolts for perhaps 6 or even 7 metres, because you should be able to climb F7a with closed eyes. It can be hard mentally looking at a twenty metre fall from tricky climbing hundreds of metres above the ground, but I like it a lot - the feeling of fear on a big wall makes me feel really alive.

What's your normal schedule of climbing and training days and rest days?

There are no rules. In my year, I'm doing so many different climbs that it changes all the time. The most important is for me to listen to my body and to respect when he needs a rest. After *Silbergeier* for example, I was so exhausted that I didn't climb for one month. I was pushing really hard, which is part of the deal if you want to make extraordinary ascents, but afterwards your body often needs a big break. Because I choose my projects, train for them, climb them and then take a good rest afterwards, I hope I'll be able to climb for a long time. Listening to your body and respecting what it tells you is crucial to long term success in climbing.

A lot of keen climbers have problems due to under-resting. How important is the right

amount of rest?

It's very, very important. As I said before, your body absolutely must have a break from time to time if you're pushing hard.

Do you ever take any time out from climbing during the winter?

Once a year I take a break from climbing for 4 weeks. This can be after a huge multipitch project in summer, or often I'll have my break in winter, so I can ski a lot for a month or so.

How much bouldering do you do? Normally I just boulder during the months of January and February. I usually just boulder in the gym because I need the pure power training of plastic, and I love the way I can boulder for two hours per day, then go skiing, and then do some really good cooking back at home. From March until November I concentrate on outdoor climbing, which means that I need good preparation and training over the winter.

How important is bouldering for all-round improvement?

It's really important, especially for me as a girl. Bouldering makes you dynamic, and you are more open to taking risks in onsight climbing like doing a really big dyno or doing a sequence very fast.

How much further do you think you can take your climbing from where you are now?

I will climb for my whole life, and I think I'll progress more and more every year. When I'm 30, my pure power capacity will reach its maximum, but improvements in technique will never stop!

Is doing other sports important to you?

Yes - particularly caving and skiing. With Cédric and my friends, I often do huge expeditions underground, sometimes for two days. Discovering this separate, subterranean world is really enriching, and after two days of mud and darkness, you feel so happy and lucky to go rock climbing again!

What advice would you give to an ambitious climber who wants to make it as a pro?

Just open your mind and believe you can do it.

What's your favourite cliff?

The Verdon Gorge in Provence, France.

And what would you take to a desert island?

My music collection, so I can chill on the beach.