

Eleanor Hopkins British Junior Climbing Team



Eleanor Hopkins is a 14 year old British competition sport climber, based at EICA Ratho, Edinburgh. She has been a member of the British Junior Climbing Team for the last two years and is notching up an increasingly impressive series of competition places. She has been selected for European competitions and to represent Great Britain in the World Junior Championship in September at Ratho, Edinburgh.

Eleanor lives in the village of Kippen near Stirling. She had always enjoyed sport and represented Thornhill Primary School for football and running. She started climbing nearly four years ago when her Mother, Anne-Marie, took her along to an activity week organised by the McLaren Leisure Centre, Callander, during the school holidays. One of the activities was climbing on the indoor wall at the centre and Eleanor was hooked by the sport. She was really fortunate because the Callander centre also hosted a volunteer adventure activity club. She had to wait for a space in the club and so her Father, Martin, was sent to learn how to belay her safely until she could join.

A few months later she entered her first youth competition or 'comp' as they are referred to. She described her preparation for it in a recent edition of the British Mountaineering Council's 'Psyched' e-zine:

"Three years ago my local club wall in Callander hosted a round of the British Regional Youth Climbing Series (Youth Climbing Series as it is now). There was a sign-up sheet and I thought

everyone would take part so I put my name down – only one other club member entered! I was happily working my way through the challenging 4+s at the wall practising for the comp when Bob Calvert, the wall manager, came in and said that he had been speaking with the route setters, the grades started at 6a and we had better get started on those!”

In her first year of competition she qualified to represent Scotland South (there are two Scottish regional teams) in the UK final. The final at Ratho was tough and Eleanor had no experience of climbing on steep, overhanging, walls. Some disappointments that day, but she did pretty well on the routes and her appetite for competition climbing grew.

Eleanor moved the focus of her training to Ratho where a Saturday morning coaching club for competition climbing runs. The next year saw her gain a 1st equal place in her category of the Youth Climbing Series. After the summer her coach, Neil McGeachy, suggested that she ought to have a go at British Junior Team Trials at the end of the year “Just to get your name known and show that you are interested”.

At this time virtually all of Eleanor’s climbing had been on ‘top rope’ when the rope which provides safety is already in place above the climber and any fall involves a short drop of say a metre or so. Older categories of competition climb in a style which is called ‘lead climbing’ in which the climber is responsible for pulling up and clipping the rope into quickdraws as they climb up. This is a very different proposition psychologically and can involve falls when the last ‘clipped’ quickdraw is below you and you are pulling the rope up, sometimes using your teeth to grip it, to make a clip above you – when you fall, maybe three, five or even seven metres due to slack in the rope! Safety is built into the sport but there is always risk and it is quite a mental leap of faith to make the transition from top-rope to lead, especially when you are heading towards a major competition a few months away.

The selection event was at Ratho in December and it was bitterly cold, people were sitting around in sleeping bags. Eleanor did well at the event and even though the ‘target’ for the comp was to get her name known there was still an underlying hope and ambition to get onto the team. The selection results were read out and Eleanor was selected as an aspirant member of the British Junior Climbing Team – someone who is too young to compete internationally but whose talent and dedication has been recognised, who can train with the team and wear the Great Britain team top.

Recognising the local youth talent climbing at Ratho the ‘Quickdraw Climbing Club’ was set up to support the young climbers, raising money to help provide additional training opportunities and bringing in some of the best coaches in the UK. By this time things are getting pretty serious. Eleanor is climbing at Ratho three times a week, an hour’s journey from home, once on a ‘home board’ built in her garage and doing circuit training and the all important stretching exercises every day. Although representing her school, Balfour High, at events such as cross country running and athletics she would not be diverted from climbing towards any of these sports.

Being good at a UK level however, is very different to being able to compete internationally. There are some great walls in the UK – and of course Ratho is the biggest indoor wall in the world – and there are some superb volunteer coaches. However, the sport does not have the stature and support that it receives at present in some other countries, notably Austria, France, Germany and Italy. The French team has paid coaches and well-established series of training camps – although Britain is moving ahead and there are some names to be reckoned with.

2010 has been the big year for Eleanor moving into international competition, accompanied by the increased training commitment required. This has not just been on the climbing wall but in

the gym and on outside crags. Heriot Watt University, just 10-15 minutes away from Ratho, has started a strength and conditioning programme for young climbers selected by British Mountaineering Council coaches with rigorous physio screening and coaching to train young climbers while safeguarding their physical development.

It is clear that continental competition climbers gain a lot of strength and skill by combining climbing wall training with outdoor climbing, 'real rock' as it is sometimes called. Weather and rock type give some countries an advantage, not to mention the lack of midges! Nevertheless this year Eleanor has been climbing at Dunkeld in Perthshire, at Malham in Yorkshire – a post ice-age waterfall which is Britain's foremost sport climbing crag, in France with the French junior team at Easter and two weeks at Ceuse in the summer. Ceuse is a massive limestone mushroom on the top of a Munro-sized mountain in France on the edge of the Alps, generally regarded as Europe's and possibly the world's best sports crag. This has given her the opportunity to begin to meet climbers from all around the world and is preparing the way for many great adventures ahead.

In preparation for the World's Eleanor has taken part in two European competitions in Austria and is training hard to get experience of international competition. But it is a big jump between being first in UK and in the top 40 in Europe, and in the World's just a few weeks away.

Describing her experience of competition sports climbing Eleanor says:

"I compete because of the enjoyment I get out of it, because when you come 1st in a competition you know that you have climbed to the best of your ability and you get this huge adrenaline rush before, during and after the climb! You know that it is all down to this route and all your training is down to maybe 30 or 40 moves and you just focus on the moves so much. But you also know next time you can get even further and climb to higher standards and harder grades. The feeling when you get the route is just amazing, because you always want to be at the top."

Scotland is certainly doing well in UK junior climbing with 12 members of the British Junior Team from Scotland and it has a world class training facility at EICA Ratho, together with enthusiastic local coaches and support from the Mountaineering Council of Scotland.

Support:

Red Chilli shoes

TISO Ratho for concessionary kit.

MCofS bursary.

Many climbing walls with concessionary climbing, but special thanks to EICA Ratho.

There is an article by Eleanor in the BMC E-zine Psyched at:

<http://www.thebmc.co.uk/Download.aspx?id=634>

