

The Skymaster Challenge

By Robert Mackenzie Photos: Dave Simonite

“Combine brightly coloured swinging volumes, awesome routes, fast dynamic head to head action and you’ve got yourself the mix to one of the coolest competitions: the Skymasters was definitely one of the craziest and most fun comps I have ever done”



I had never done this sort of competition before so had no idea what to expect. I arrived at the Birmingham NEC expecting to be completely thrashed by big dogs I was up against. Most of the others had done it the year before and had that experience. So I didn't even expect to make the finals. I walked in there just wanting to have a bit of a laugh on the coolest wall I will ever get to go on. It turns out that's the right attitude to have.

Two routes mirror images of each other form the setting for the competition. Two qualifiers see the competitors paired up and you each climb both lines head to head. Your times are combined and fastest 16 times get through to Sundays final. The finals see the top 16 go through head to head tournaments to finally come down to the best of the best. The final two go all out in the final round and I don't think James Garden and I could have cut it any closer.

Qualifiers saw me paired up with the mighty Gaz Parry. I knew I wouldn't make the finals but now I thought I was going to be made to look stupid as well. I did shock myself when I got to the end of the first qualifier and Gaz was still miles away. He did beat me, just, in the second qualifier but we both did enough to cruise into the finals.

I was having a very good day and loads of fun. Going to the comp was good as it is, getting into the finals was the icing on the cake. On the Sunday I found myself up against the one and only Jonny Field from Edinburgh, Jordan Buys and Dave Barrens. I did not expect to come out on top of that line up but somehow made it to the grand finale up against my good mate James Garden. What a final.

Two smelly, spotty teenagers had thrashed some of the best climbers in the world! Don't ask me how. The two of us stood at the bottom of our routes. Looking across the vast crowd at each other in friendly rivalry, we dipped endlessly into our white gold preparing for one of the fastest climbs of our lives.

The countdown sounded through the building followed by the uneasy silent pause before the whistle. The start was a blur of colour and chalk. We reached the first volume at the same time but a slip up from James at a clip let me get a good volumes length ahead.

I was ahead of James as I reached the final volume but the new sequence confused me and slowed me down a lot. This allowed James to pull off an amazing comeback and to the naked eye you couldn't tell between us. A photo finish finally revealed the result. 0.5 seconds between the two of us. Too close for comfort.

James pulled off a new wall record of 1 minute 20 seconds. I had by the skin of my teeth managed a 1 minute 19.5 seconds. I always wanted a photo finish in a competition.

Thank you to Julie Zitter, Jez and all the organisers and route setters for one of the best competitions I have ever had. Thanks also to Climb Caledonia for allowing not only me but the north Scotland team to climb and train for these events. Without their support we might not be the MACHINES that we are – ha ha!

2010 Skymaster... thank you and goodnight.



Robert (right) shakes hands with Jordan Buys after their head-to-head PHOTO: R Mackenzie