

SPA: What does it stand for?

Holders of the Single Pitch Award for climbers supervising or leading groups have come in for a lot of stick recently. Ray Wood's letter in *Climber* (reprinted opposite) and Alex Messenger's article on page 48 are just two examples of the regular flak that award holders are faced with. Why is it that this award, constituted and monitored with the best of intent, has become the subject of criticism and misunderstanding? Here Forum will look at the background and philosophy of the Award and ask 'is the SPA doing its job'.

Ken Wilson was involved in the original SPSA debates and letters such as Ray's have resurrected past concerns.

"I and others have always felt that to give someone who was not a committed climber anything that could be characterised as a climbing qualification would be wrong. You cannot have half measures when it comes to supervising climbing, and I felt that for a committed climber the Mountain Instructor's Award (MIA) was a perfectly reasonable qualification to attain. Though I have no doubt that most who have acquired the SPA are sensible and caring climbers, it may also have had the effect of giving a spurious and misunderstood legitimacy to individuals who are not really climbers, but who through short term effort have attained the award standard. When the award was originally designed it was insisted that anyone with such a qualification should be able to show competence in leading to at least Severe standard (e.g. multi-pitch mountain climbs like Tennis Shoe, Grooved Arete, Main Wall and the standard Gimmer routes - not just one pitch soft touches). In addition I feel that a competence in soloing, to deal with emergency situations, should be expected.

When the SPA idea was pushed through we were assured that these tough requirements would be maintained, and that those attaining it would also be mindful of crag ethics and other climbing mores. There is a suspicion that these standards are not being maintained and the Northumberland incident suggests that the efforts to inculcate acceptable crag practice for instructional groups are not being entirely successful either."



Corby's Crag in Northumberland, subject of Ray Wood's letter
Photo: Turnbull

Ken is suggesting that the SPA is a flawed concept and an erosion of standards is inevitable. Is this fair? There are thousands of SPA award holders: the vast majority are climbers with the same concerns as you or I, and do a fine job of sensitively introducing novices to the outdoors. There are checks and balances in place and SPA holders are supposed to be committed climbers. Are the experiences of Ray and Alex simply unfortunate encounters with a thoughtless few, or are they over reacting? Are the incidents described here just the tip of the iceberg and does the SPA need a rethink to stop the slide?

SPSA Takeover

(first appeared in Climber August 1999)

Arriving at Corby's Crag in Northumberland on the morning of the 2nd June we couldn't fail to notice the mini-bus load of children waiting at the bottom to go abseiling. Nothing uncommon about that nowadays, I thought, but it didn't cross my mind for an instant that their instructor was planning on sending them down Audacity, a three star Hard V.S. described in a recent article on Northumberland with the old adage "the best known route on Corby's, and a must for any first time visitor to the crag". That was us; just over from North Wales looking forward to the area's unspoilt and un-crowded rocks.

With my climbing partner having led ten foot up Audacity, the freelance instructor appeared at my shoulder asking why we hadn't negotiated to climb this route since they were there first and were setting up ropes to abseil down it.

I was flabbergasted. The climbing was curtailed, and a discussion ensued in which I tried to explain that it was unthinkable to abseil large groups down three star popular routes, and that since she was SPSA qualified, this was surely contrary to their code of practice. All to no avail; for her the crucial point was who was at

the crag first. In their case, it didn't even matter if they weren't ready to start their session. It wasn't the group's fault this confrontation had arisen, and since this wasn't our idea of a congenial day's climbing we simply packed our sacs and went to another crag.

Taking up the matter on the 'phone later with her employer, he said that they had used that site for the last nine or ten years because of the convenient access, and couldn't see anything wrong in abseiling down that climb. He added that as Corby's was "trashed" anyway, it was better to keep on using it rather than trash another crag. The crag looked fine to me and surely it'd be even more convenient to use a building in Newcastle for abseiling?

SPSA qualified instructors it seems are not necessarily climbers. Sadly in this instance the SPSA has clearly failed to foster a stance towards other crag users beyond business as usual. The irony is that the award is endorsed by the sport's governing body, the BMC, who do so much good work securing access for climbing.

Ray Wood, Dinorwig

What is the SPA?

From the SPA Handbook

The scheme is for those who are in a position of responsibility during single-pitch rock climbing activities. It is primarily concerned with good practice, leading to the safe and quiet enjoyment of the activity. It is valid throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland (UKMTB National Guidelines 1995) and is recognised by the Adventure Activity Licensing Authority.

The scheme does not cover:

- general mountaineering skills, such as those needed to approach and return from mountain and moorland crags,
- multi-pitch rock climbing skills, the teaching of leading, or their supervision (these are covered by the Mountain Instructor Scheme),
- access to tidal sea cliffs, or any location where escape is not easily possible,
- the gauging of candidate's personal qualities.

Background

The SPA, originally titled the SPSA, was introduced by the BMC in the early 1990's in response to demands to a national single-pitch supervisory qualification. The idea was to create an award accessible to those who wished to supervise groups on single pitch crags and climbing walls, but who did not want or need a qualification as advanced as the MIA, which was at the time the lowest level nationally recognised rock climbing instructional qualification. The award was felt necessary not only to meet a demand, but also to improve standards of group supervision which at the time had become a serious concern.

The award syllabus and philosophy were argued over long and hard. On one side were those opposed to a dumbing down of climbing instructor qualification, who took the view that award holders should be experienced climbers and be required to demonstrate this. On the other side were those who felt that a qualification should be made as accessible as possible, and that non-climbers should be able to achieve award standard if their rope and supervisory skills were up to scratch. In the end the agreed central principle was that the award should be for committed climbers, but that only a moderate level of experience should be required. At present before a candidate is assessed he or she must have been climbing for a minimum of twelve months, have led at least 40 routes outdoors, on a variety of rock types, on leader placed protection and have led at least Severe (in reality most successful candidates have more experience than this).

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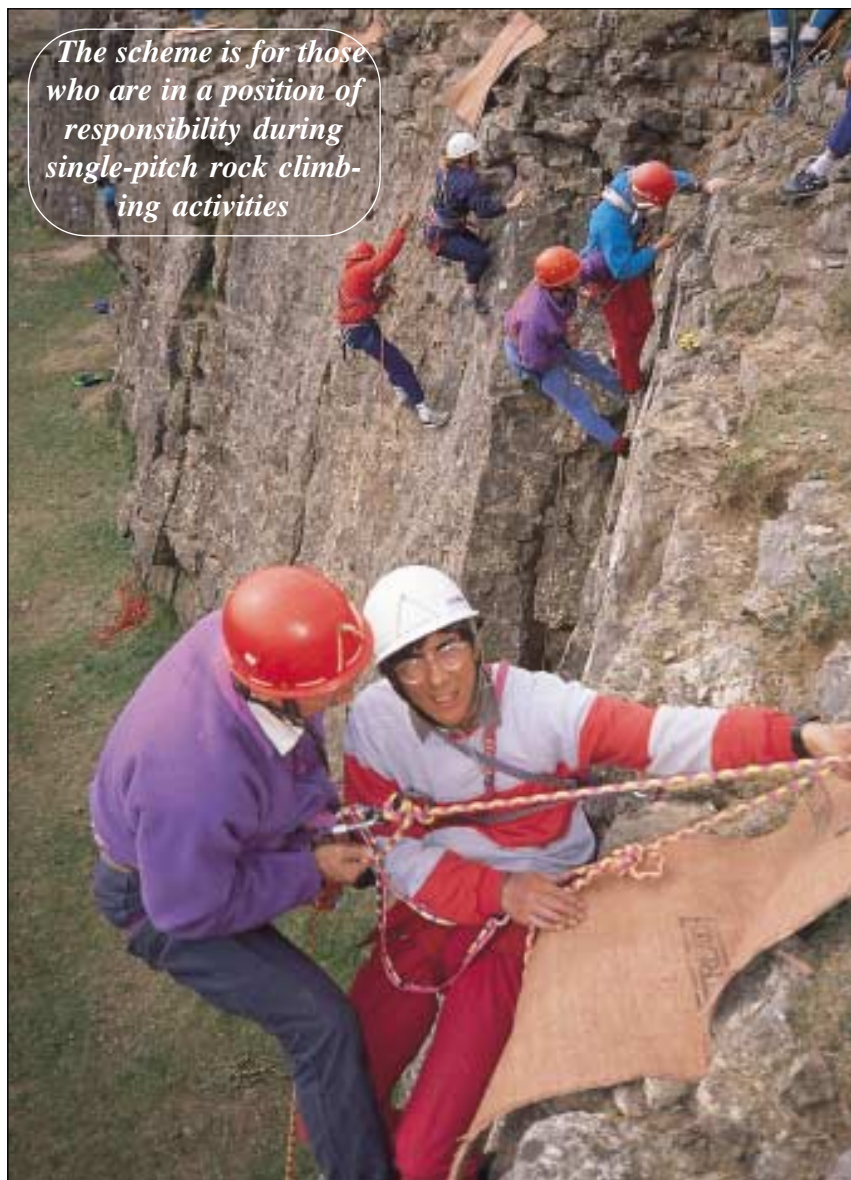


Photo: Payne

Viewpoint

The SPA is co-ordinated by the UKMTB and the providers of the courses are accredited by the Training Boards. Forum asked Adge Last, the MLTB training officer, to respond to the concerns raised here.

Forum: Do you feel that the issues raised by Ray and Alex are indicative of a wider problem or simply unfortunate isolated incidents? Do you feel their criticisms are fair?

AL: I think that the criticisms are fair because the issues they have referred to are not what SPA holders should be doing. However, I do not believe that the problem is getting bigger - in some ways the SPA has improved things rather than made them worse. A classic incident a couple of years ago was when one of our moderators visited an SPA course at the Roaches. The only leading that was taking place on the crag was by people on the SPA course - everyone else was top-roping. A second point is that the guy referred to by Alex was "SPA trained". This is completely meaningless - would you employ a driver who had "done a driving lesson?"

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Forum: It has been suggested that despite the award's stipulations many non climbers are able to gain an SPA. Is this a fair view? How are standards monitored to ensure that course providers are keeping to the spirit of the SPA. Is there more that could be done?

AL: Firstly the new guidance - that they should have led at least 15 routes on leader placed gear routes outdoors - has really helped raise the standard of training. Feedback from providers indicates that they are getting fewer beginners on training courses because of this. What is a "non-climber"? Only people who have led - quote: "a minimum of 40 climbs, outdoors on leader placed protection. Some of these must be at least Severe grade and they should be on a variety of rock types" - are accepted onto courses. If someone turns up without this they should be deferred until they have gained sufficient experience, however good their performance happens to be. We have an expensive quality control process. The MLTB visit course providers in action - Mike Rosser, myself and our team of part-time moderators. This puts us into direct contact with candidates too, so we can see what is really going on during courses. Nearly all of these visits are reassuring - the Providers share our concerns about the quality of candidates and the need for respect for others and the environment, as well as safety. Those that are not satisfactory get the heavy treatment - they may have to register every course with the MLTB in advance so we can then do "spot visits" to their courses to check on standards. In reality this is very rare. In addition to visiting course providers on a regular basis, they have to attend our workshops once every three years. To ensure that they don't get rusty, we are also starting a system whereby they lose their approval to run courses if they are inactive for two years.

Forum: What are your personal concerns regarding supervision of climbing groups?

AL: My concern lies with the fact that novices are rarely introduced to climbing in the way that climbers climb. When climbing is used for other aims (such as personal development) and when financial pressures are applied, it is increasingly common for the activity of climbing to be distorted to fit the purpose of the session - rather than as a means of introducing the sport. As first impressions are so significant and have such a potentially lasting impact, then I feel it is significant (and potentially damaging) for the future if we disregard aspects such as the need to be afraid of falling, to be sensitive to the interests of others, to be sensitive to the environment, to acquire gear placing skills at the same time as movement skills etc. To me, a group with a bottom rope set up on a good quality climb, or abseiling down one, are showing little respect for others, for the environment or for the sport. What they are doing is probably running a safe and secure session, but this is overlooking other important aspects of their job.

Forum: Do you feel that changes could be made to the SPA to make incidents of the type described by Alex and Ray less likely?

AL: I really don't think that changes to the SPA would eliminate the incidents referred to. I always take a break from climbing in the Peak in October - not because of groups with SPA holders, but because of swarms of student groups behaving in similar disrespectful ways. I genuinely believe that if climbers are going to supervise climbing, then they will do it better having undergone SPA training and assessment. The real problem lies with the employer who then deploys these SPA holders in ways that force them to make too many compromises. If you are a

junior instructor it is difficult to say "no" when told to take 12 kids abseiling at the local crag - unless you want to lose your job...

Forum: Do you feel there is pressure to lower the SPA entry standards? Is such pressure likely to lead to changes?

AL: No I don't know of any pressure like this. If there was pressure - the Mountain Training Boards and Mountaineering Councils would all hold it off, because as guardians of the sport we don't want to see standards compromised. The only changes I can foresee in the future are a raising in standards as climbers get better at what they are doing!

Forum: Will we be seeing any changes to the SPA in the short term? And what of the long term? Has the SPA featured in the Training Boards 'Blank Paper' exercise?

AL: Short-term no changes. We continuously review the guidance notes and disseminate this through workshops, but no changes of substance are planned. The award is set for a UK-wide review to start next year. In relation to the UKMTB Blank Paper exercise, issues related to the SPA have been raised - such as "is there a need for a single pitch instructor?", but this is all just at discussion/debate stages without any significant support.

And finally:

Listening to Adge several elements stood out. Firstly the very genuine way in which the MLTB believes that the advent of the SPA has improved standards overall, and coupled with this is their commitment to maintaining the quality of SPA provision. There seems no reason to doubt this bigger picture. Secondly- the suggestion that it is commercial pressure behind many incidents of poor practice, where the SPA holder is put in an impossible position by an operator looking for the most convenient crag and maximum ratio. And thirdly is the very real issue of 'crag behaviour', it would seem that many climbers could do with being a bit more considerate to both their fellow climbers and the rock that they climb on.

So where do we go from here? The MLTB will be maintaining and hopefully increasing the frequency of their course checks. But what of commercial operators who are not following good practice? What further pressure can be brought to bear to ensure that they do not cut corners at the expense of the crag environment. And what more can the BMC and MLTB do to help climbers understand more about how best to preserve the crag environment?

How do you feel about the issues raised here? Summit would like to hear your views.



What more can the BMC and MLTB do to help climbers understand more about how best to preserve the crag environment?
Photo: John Cousins