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# RockSTAR

HFM TALKS TO LEO HOULDING  
EXTREME CLIMBER + BASE JUMPER + MADMAN

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# Cliff hanger

Leo Houlding continues to pioneer the most extreme rock faces known to man. Here, he talks exclusively to *HFM* about his death-defying exploits

Words Charlie Norton Photographs Michelle Beatty

The scene opens on a relaxed, laidback young man in an old Panama hat and a red jacket, with blue skies around him on a Californian summer's day. He's making fresh coffee on his camp bed, grinning and yawning lackadaisically. 'It's 5.30am, we think,' he says. 'I need to wake up. It's a brutal start to the day. I think I'll do a 7a for breakfast.'

The camp bed is a portaledge held precariously on the sheer rock face of El Capitan in Yosemite (the 'big daddy' at 3000ft or 910m), where two young climbers have spent a night continuing their mission up 'The Prophet' – maybe the world's hardest-ever free-climb route. And 7a is a very tough move with which to stretch out.

The atmosphere changes, the tempo of the music increases and the clip continues with a voiceover saying 'this is the wildest wild climb of them all'. It feels like a matrix

world of climbing has opened up where the rules of the usual universe are not quite the same and only a chosen few can cope.

These are two of the world's most extreme free-climbers – where you use nothing but the rock face to ascend, and ropes are attached to the wall in case of a fall. One of them, Jason Pickles, says: 'The Fly's about to ascend the crack.'

Then 'The Fly' – better known as mercurial British climber Leo Houlding – starts his ascent. His fingers delve into a crack, searching for a grip as his feet hold him glued to the wall. He flicks himself up move by move, but falls a couple of times and dangles by the thread of his rope (more like a spider than a fly) as he swears to himself. The third time he makes it further. He pauses before taking on the one of the hardest parts of The Prophet with a very tricky move. He goes for it but loses his grip and suddenly falls 20ft to the

portaledge below, knocking Pickles into space. They both dangle in the abyss. Houlding balances himself with his head in his hands, deep in concentration, ready for another go. The clip ends.

Even if you have no interest in climbing – even if it's the last thing you think you will ever try – I guarantee watching this footage will give you an adrenaline rush from your armchair. It's utterly compulsive viewing – a real, live action movie (*The Prophet* by Alastair Lee can be downloaded from [www.posingproductions.com](http://www.posingproductions.com)).

In fact, it took nine years and 60 days of climbing to get to this point – and they finally made it all the way to the top – one of the great endurance free-climbs of all time, built up with years of knowledge of this route up the east side of El Cap. As Houlding says: 'The Prophet was my Olympics in terms of climbing – it could well be the pinnacle of my career.'



## A natural instinct

Houlding believes that all humans are designed to climb. 'It's not about when you start [climbing], but when you stop,' he says. 'We have evolved from apes and we are naturally great at clambering. If you look at the strength of a baby's grip or take time to look at a toddler, they are always trying to climb everything. Then, when we get to five or six, we are told not to climb for our own safety, so later we have to be taught moves that came perfectly naturally to us when we were small.'

But Houlding never stopped climbing. At only 10 years of age he climbed the Old Man of Hoy in the Orkneys – a sandstone stack that Chris Bonington climbed in 1967 for a live BBC transmission. Then, at 15, he made the first ascent of the Lord of the Flies on Dinas Cromlech in Wales with Tim Emmett. They set out after last orders in the local pub (though Leo concedes he wasn't drinking heavily) and made it up in the dark with head torches. By 16, he was a sponsored Berghaus climber.

Houlding, now 30, is hewn from the rocks of the Lake District and speaks with a laconic and deliberate Cumbrian drawl. 'The climbing lifestyle is incredible,' he says. 'You go to some of the most far-out places in the world, searching out the most intense adventures. Climbing has come a long way in the last 20 years.'

Houlding is from a new generation of climbers that have not only matched what has gone before, but made them seem a century out of date. He became British Junior Indoor Climbing Champion in 1996 and was the first Briton to free-climb El Capitan in 1998.

But, in 2001, he lost his footing while on the 5000ft north face of Cerro Torre in Patagonia and fell 70ft, shattering the talus bone in his foot and suffering horrific rope burns to his hands that cut through to the bone. That was just the start of his ordeal. He then had to crawl, *Touching The Void*-style, for three days and it was a week before he received treatment. He thought his foot might have to be amputated, but instead he made a remarkable recovery.

'I wouldn't make that mistake again,' he says. 'It taught me to really minimise the



## HOULDING'S FIVE KEY CLIMBING TIPS

Want to improve your climbing skills? Here's how...

- 1 'It's all about your feet. Look at your feet, even if you are underhanging [where the climber grabs the bottom of the hold and pulls upwards, using their legs to apply tension and keep them on the rock], use your feet rather than your arms.'
- 2 'Try to keep your arms straight. At the climbing wall lock your arms straight whenever possible and you'll lose 40 per cent less energy.'
- 3 'Don't be afraid to fall. Falling is part of climbing.'
- 4 'Good quality-control is crucial, particularly when it comes to your equipment. Don't use second-hand ropes when you are starting out.'
- 5 'Climbing is all about handling your own body weight. It's a complete body workout for your pecs, biceps, triceps, quads and calves - which are all incredibly important to condition and support your own weight.'

## <<< CONTROLLED RISK

Leo Houlding is one of the world's most extreme climbers, having made a name for himself by taking on some of the world's greatest climbing challenges from the tender age of 10. Here he's pictured battling *The Prophet*

risks. The most worrying times are when you have difficult moves above bad protection. Climbing is dangerous but you can control many of the risks with a lot of skill, knowledge and experience.'

For Houlding, it's a tricky dichotomy – being safe enough to stay alive, but living out a fairground ride of existence at the same time. Despite his nous for safety, he still makes antics in films like *Point Break* seem like a stroll in a meadow. 'I think my craziest experience was when the pilot of the DC3 plane let us jump out over Baffin Island before we went to climb the Asgard. We airdropped all our stuff and asked the pilot if we could jump as well. He said no one had jumped out there before, but that we could go ahead. And we also leapt out at 5000ft over the Arctic Circle, hurtling towards Tolkienesque peaks – free-falling to 500ft before opening our chutes.'

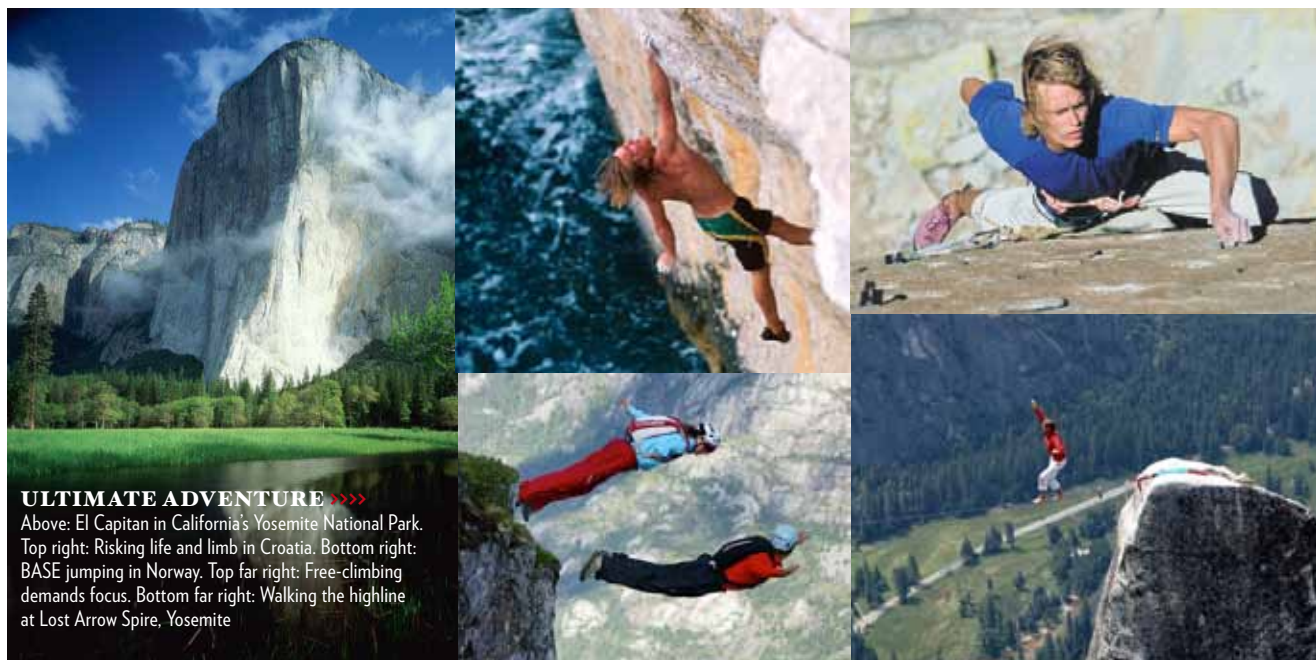
Houlding even bought his parachute on eBay. And then, he adds: 'We had to gather our stuff for a six-week expedition in the Arctic wilderness climbing and filming our adventure up the Asgard.'

## Seeking new adventures

Since 2005, Houlding has started getting into para-alpinism as well – which is basically BASE jumping, or throwing himself off the top of a route after a climb. (Houlding also skydives, snowboards, surfs and mountain bikes.) He says of BASE jumping: 'When it works, it's the most beautiful thing in the world as it can be three days up and three minutes down, so you're back in time for beers and medals. A 120mph descent kind-of beats climbing down. But it's not always simple. You have to get all your climbing gear down the route. You can't always just tuck it into a pair of baggy trousers and throw yourself over.'

Perhaps Houlding's most famous feat was following in the footsteps of George Mallory [the legendary British climber who died on his way to a possible summiting in





### ULTIMATE ADVENTURE >>>

Above: El Capitan in California's Yosemite National Park. Top right: Risking life and limb in Croatia. Bottom right: BASE jumping in Norway. Top far right: Free-climbing demands focus. Bottom far right: Walking the highline at Lost Arrow Spire, Yosemite

1924] up the north-east ridge of Everest with American mountaineer Conrad Anker in 2007. 'It was special following such an amazing story,' says Houlding. 'The altitude was tough as I had never been above 5000m and had no idea how I would cope, but the climbing was fine.' It was, nevertheless, the first recorded unaided ascent of this side of Everest and features in the acclaimed documentary *The Wildest Dream*.

Climbing has so much variety, from sprint bouldering in the Lake District and big wall climbing on El Cap to mountaineering marathons like Everest. It depends what you are climbing, how and who with. It's not difficult to find a climbing wall near you in the UK, which means it's easy to give it a go. Climbing surely provides the leanest, strongest and most sinewy natural physique you can obtain outside a gym. But this is just a side effect of the whole experience. As the maestro Houlding says: 'You are in this epic tangible cloud somewhere wild, in an intense situation. You have to be very self-reliant and there's no hope of rescue – but you're there with cool people, in a balls-to-the-wall adventure. There's simply nothing quite like it.' *Leo Houlding has been sponsored by UK outdoor brand Berghaus since 1997. The company has supported him throughout his climbing career and has recently helped fund some of his major expeditions.* **HFM**

### HFM PROFILE

Leo Houlding

**Full name:** Leo Houlding

**Nickname:** The Fly, Springer

**DOB:** 28 July 1980

**Birthplace:** Penrith, Cumbria

**Height:** 5ft 11in

**Weight:** 70kg

**Relationship status:** Married to Jessica, a doctor.

**Career highlight:** 'Beating Jeremy Clarkson on *Top Gear*.' [Houlding climbed the face of Verdon Gorge, France, while Clarkson raced up the mountain roads in a Audi RS4]

**Longest climb:** 'North pillar of Fitzroy, Patagonia – one mile of climbing and 56 hours with no sleep. Also numerous hours spent on El Capitan.'

**Hardest climbing move:** 'The 'Devil's Dyno' – an extraordinary 2.5m sideways jump between two holes 500m above ground. A sideways leap of faith and a very rare move on *The Prophet*.'

**Favourite climbing mountain:** El Capitan

**Favourite surf break:** Lakey Peak, Indonesia

**Favourite mountain for snowsports:** Aiguille du Midi, Chamonix

**Best base jump:** 'Half Dome, Yosemite National Park' – just don't get caught!

**Climber you respect:** Tommy Caldwell [American who made the first free ascents of El Capitan]

**Your role model:** Laird Hamilton [American big-wave surfer]

**Free time:** 'Not much, I keep up-to-date by reading about current affairs in the papers.'

**Carnivore:** 'Zebu, served medium rare [a breed of buffalo also known as 'humped cattle'].'

**Herbivore:** 'My neighbour's delicious lettuce.'

**Fruit:** 'Mango – fresh and in season.'

**Snack:** Kendal Jacksmiths flapjacks

**Beverage:** San Pellegrino Limonata

**Psyche-up music/training track:** 'The album *FabricLive.37* by Caspa & Rusko at the moment.'

**Best bit of gear:** Passport and working credit card

**Movie:** *Fight Club*

**Book:** *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran

**Actress:** 'Cate Blanchett – she looks like my wife!'

**Superstitious:** 'I try not to be, but I don't refuse blessings from Catholic Priests or Buddhist Lamas if they are going around.'

**Worst habit:** 'Ask my wife – maybe that I'm over-ambitious and never satisfied.'

**Most embarrassing moment:** 'Ha, there have been a few. I was trying to break into a music festival in Bariloche, Argentina when I fell into an open sewer and got covered in s\*\*\*. It would only have cost \$10 to get in!'

**Holiday destination:** Dalmatian Coast, Croatia

**Life after climbing:** 'I'm committed to the adventure world, so I hope I'll use my strength and wits to engage my mind somewhere.'