



The WIZARD of Brno

He has been called a child prodigy, predicted to be the future of climbing. In October he made the first ascent of the hardest sport route in the world in a cave in Norway. The 19-year old Czech, Adam Ondra, has grown up to become the brightest star of rock-climbing.

By Lars Larsson


The scenery at Hanshellaren is stunning with beautiful views over the Flatanger archipelago. Here Adam has just passed the first lip on **Change** (F9b+) entering a not-as-steep section.

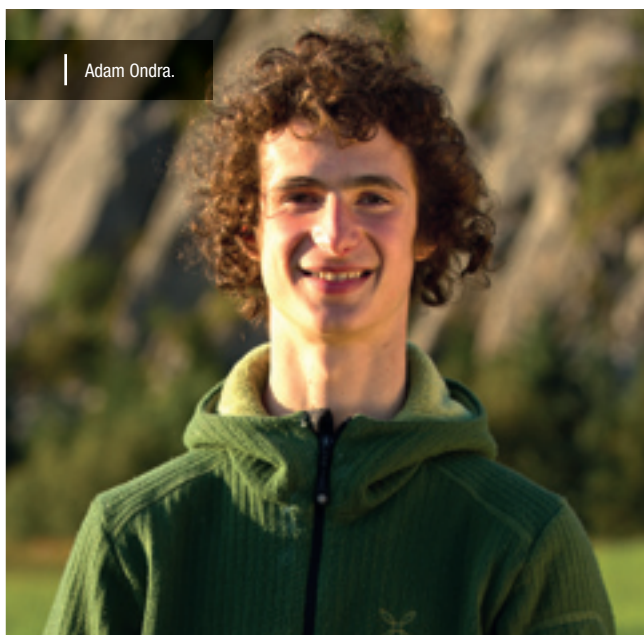
It is Saturday 10th of November 2007 and the awards ceremony after the finals, in the final round of the World Cup in Bouldering, has just ended in Brno Exhibition Centre, a modernist exhibition palace built during the interwar period. A 14-year old boy with glasses and dark curly hair enters the

stage to make his first public appearance in front of a large audience. His name is Adam Ondra and the title of his slide show is 'The Wizard's Apprentice' referring to a route of the same name first climbed by his father's climbing partner Tomáš Pilka, and now repeated by Adam himself. Despite the nervousness all goes well and it is obvious to Adam that this is something he needs to get used to if he wants to achieve his big dream – to become a professional climber.

Five years later, Adam lives his dream on a six-week Scandinavian road trip along with filmmaker, Petr Pavlíček. The main goal of the trip is the gigantic and mysterious cave of Hanshellaren in Flatanger, on the west coast of Norway. The team first arrives in the cave in July and Adam bolts a possible F9b+ route he names *Change*. I meet up with him in beginning of August when he only has a few days left of the trip. We sit down in the afternoon sun on the porch of the Strøm farm, close to Hanshellaren. Adam is wearing a green hooded and his dark curly hair sticks out from beneath his knitted cap. When he was younger random people would stop him on the street and tell him he looked like Harry Potter, but

since he stopped wearing glasses, after having laser surgery, the comparison is less heard. He looks like an ordinary teenager and is very easy to talk to.

In May Adam finished school, which was a significant change in his climbing life, because thus far he has only been focused on repeating routes, since bolting and opening new ones takes so much time. "Finally I have the opportunity to enjoy the feeling of curiosity I get when I bolt, clean and try a new route for the first time. Looking for holds and figuring out the movements is a very exciting feeling." Before Adam chose the route he decided to bolt, he ticked off all the already established hard routes in the cave in only three days. He linked the first two pitches of Magnus Midtbø's huge project, naming the first ascent *Thor's Hammer*, the first F9a+ in Scandinavia. After resting half an hour after his feat, he went on to tackle *Odin's Eye*, a fierce F8c+ that Ethan Pringle had made the first ascent of in competition with Dani Andrada and Magnus Midtbø during a climbing festival held in June. The spectators could not believe their eyes when Adam climbed the same route on-sight. 



Adam Ondra.



Adam climbing **Thor's Hammer** (F9a+) a route he made the first ascent of in July.



Adam and his girlfriend, Inka Matoušková, study an interesting line in the roof of the cave.

"Odin's Eye is the on-sight I value the most ever, because it was very tricky and the sequence of the crux is not obvious. Even so, I managed to pick the right sequence and execute it perfectly." The following day he climbed the 55m long endurance test *Nordic Flower* with 30 quickdraws around his waist and, later, *Muy Verdes* both on-sight and graded F8c+. This means that Adam in total during his career has climbed 12 F8c+ routes on-sight. Only two other climbers in the world have climbed at least one single F8c+ on-sight: Spaniards Ramón Julián Puigblanque and Paxti Usobiaga.

Where does Adam's skill come from? For the bystander it looks like magic, but a more plausible answer is many years of training and early adaptation. Adam started climbing as a three-year old by hanging in the ropes and using them as swing. When he was six he climbed grade F6a and came third in his first competition. It whetted his appetite and ever since he has climbed five times a week. "Climbing is my passion and it has always been so. I'm so glad that I can still feel the same passion now as when I climbed at the age of six." His parents are also climbers and have always been there for him, but he never felt any pressure from their side. On the contrary, his parents often felt they had to persuade him to train less. He has never really seen it as training though. "I do not go training, I go climbing. The difference is huge."

Adam is extremely disciplined, something that has been a necessity to be able to combine climbing with his schooling. When he travelled the most, he missed about a third of his classes. When he came home after a trip, he sometimes had to catch up several weeks of studying. "Everything was all about climbing and school. Nothing else had a place in my life, but it was definitely worth it, to get the opportunity to travel and devote myself to what I love the most." Adam seems

to be very purposeful when it comes to climbing hard routes. How can he keep his motivation? "There are two aspects of climbing that I like; the challenge of climbing and the beauty of climbing. The challenge is about climbing as hard routes as possible, while the beauty is all about climbing easier routes, just enjoying the movements. If I only climbed hard routes I would be bored and vice versa. For me, both aspects are equally important."

Later in the day, I get an example of what he means. After a hard day in the cave Adam and his girlfriend, Inka Matoušková, go to Sandmælen, a newly developed crag just beside the Strøm farm. Bathing in the late afternoon sun they climb a very beautiful line that consists of four pitches of grade F6a and easier. I feel like a real paparazzi when I watch them from half a kilometre away in my 400millimetre lens. It is Inka's first multi-pitch ever and I can see the happiness when they kiss after reaching the top anchor. This is in contrast to the incredibly hard efforts Adam puts into sending his project in the cave. It is August 6th and the time in Norway is running out. Adam goes quiet in the lead along the path towards Hanshelleren. He knows that today is his last chance to climb the route before they go home. After hours of preparation, where Petr deploys cameras from four angles, we are all ready. I painfully watch Adam fall once more at the first and most difficult crux. A deeply disappointed Adam fires off a tirade of Czech swear words that echo between the walls. At this point I fully realize how hard the reality is for those who push themselves to their absolute limit. The effort at this level is so stressful for his body that just one attempt a day is meaningful. Adam is deeply disappointed and forced to return home without having achieved his goal.

In September, I once again meet up with him for new efforts and to finish what he has started. Since last time

we were there the birches have turned yellow and the desolate cave feels like a cathedral invoking a feeling of reverence. The temperature is rather chilly but perfect for really hard sport climbing. Adam quietly takes off his down jacket and fires up. He is normally quite timid, but when Adam climbs he shows another side of his personality. He is fast, aggressive and growls like an animal when he gets close to his limit. "It is important while I climb to get into my own world. When everything is going well and I do not make any mistakes, it is just me and those couple of square centimetres around me. Nothing else exists in that moment."

The hardest crux comes after just eight metres, a dihedral where the roof is so steep that it even slopes downwards a short distance. With a roar he pushes his body up into the dihedral. Every single muscle fibre is recruited and his body trembles in exertion. I am holding my breath because I have seen him fail so many times at this point. He drops his knee like it was made of rubber, bends backwards and stabs two fingertips into a narrow crack behind his head. He sticks it and this might be the craziest crux ever climbed. Adam has never done anything quite like it before. One week later he sends the whole route in a single push and climbing history is written. "I could not believe it was true, the feelings were overwhelming, a huge relief."

When Adam climbs at his best, it is like he is in some kind of demonic trance. He has climbed five days a week since he was six years old and his movements have become almost completely automatic. This frees up resources in the brain that instead can be used to analyze the next sequence of holds. "When I climb really well, it even feels like it is not myself or my own consciousness that is executing those moves, it is more like I am a toy and everything that I have learned after so many years of climbing, gives the instructions to my body to perform everything as fluently and as efficient as possible." The unique and intuitive style Adam has comes to its full rights when on-sighting. Since early childhood he has focused on this type of climbing and never liked to use too much time working on one single route. "By climbing on-sight, I learned a lot more in less time. I developed a special ability to quickly analyze terrain above and make split-second decisions." Adam's speedy tactic can be risky because sometimes he misses a hold, but the worst thing when on-sighting is when you get stuck and waste time searching for holds that simply are not there.

Adam is still only 19 years old and some people believe that it is just a matter of time before he becomes the first person in the world to climb a F9a on sight. There are a limited number of F9a routes in the world that would be suitable for on-sighting and he only gets one chance, one small mistake and it's all over. He has already on-sighted 12 F8c+ routes and made a couple of serious attempts on F9a. "Of course, it would be a great dream, but it is also a dilemma. Should I decide that the time has come for a certain route, or wait and hope to get stronger with higher chances of sending it?" Adam has many F9a routes he is saving for future on-sighting, but chances are that there will also be another redpoint first ascent of F9b+ in December. Adam and Chris Sharma will reunite to tackle the project La Dura Dura in Spain.

Even though Adam can finally live his dream as a professional climber, he plans to return to school next autumn to study economics at university. He believes that it is healthier to have his life revolve around more than just one thing. "If you only live the lifestyle of the pure climber, your mood depends so much on how you climb. When the climbing is not going well, you easily get in a bad mood because you lack other sources of happiness." Those are the words of a wise man and I cannot think of a better role model for young climbers – or older for that matter. I just have to agree with Petr Pavlíček opinion about Adam after spending so much time together: "Adam is modest, intelligent and warm-hearted. Although he is a big star, he's got his feet on the ground. For me there is nothing greater," says Petr.

It has been a long time since Adam held his first slide show at the World Cup in Brno. Nowadays, it is a much more self-confident young man who gives presentations. Although his sympathetic modesty would never allow him to use these words, I take the liberty to say that Adam passed his examination in Hanshelleren. He is no longer an apprentice. The next time he enters the stage to do a presentation about his F9b+ first ascent, he does so as the leader of the whole sport. Adam Ondra is now officially the 'Wizard of Climbing'. 📷

Adam chalks up for the last moves below the first anchor on **Change** (F9b+).



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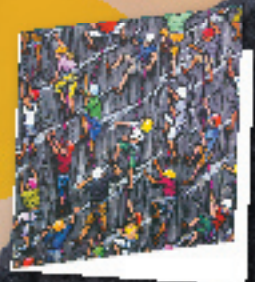
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