

15 MINUTES WITH...

Pete Whittaker

Amy Marwick talks Greenland missions, climbing solo, and building a crack climbing community with the Brit who's aced the world's toughest climbs

Amy Marwick: Hi Pete, thanks for chatting with me today. So, right now you're getting prepared for Crack Fest in Germany, can you tell us what that's all about?

Pete Whittaker: Crack Fest is an event we do at Wide Boyz where we essentially set up a crack climbing festival. It's a big community event revolving purely around crack climbing (ascending cracks in the rock face), with fun challenges, boulders, prizes, coaching and workshops. We cater for everybody, from those who have never crack climbed before and want to take their first steps, all the way up to those who are really keen and want to push themselves on some hard crack climbing boulders. We originally set it up because crack climbing is such a popular part of the sport, but it's not usually possible in climbing gyms. We wanted to try and bring it to a grassroots level.

AM: So who are the Wide Boyz and why did you set up this community?

PW: Wide Boyz came about 15 years ago when my climbing partner, Tom Randall, and I wanted to try to climb all the hardest offwidth cracks in the world. That's a style of crack climbing where the cracks are too wide for standard hand-and-fist jams, but not wide enough for a climber to fit their entire body inside, so they require some special techniques, like hand stacking and arm bars. We went on a climbing trip to America and set up a travel blog that we ended up calling the Wide Boyz.

We had some success on the trip, the climbing media picked up on it, and the name stuck. We set up the company Wide Boyz, and it's now expanded into a crack climbing company. We do events like Crack Fest and offer online coaching, crack climbing products, like crack gloves, knee pads and crack climbing holds for climbing gyms. Everything is to do with crack climbing and getting people involved, showing them the techniques to enable them to crack climb. That's kind of our ethos.

AM: You must have tackled some crazy climbs throughout your career so far. What's the wildest crack project you've claimed to date?

PW: I still always go back to the route in Utah that Tom and I did back in 2011, Century Crack, which we did as part of that American trip. It's a horizontal roof crack and it's over 40 metres long. It takes in this kind of gruelling style of offwidth climbing, and although it's not the hardest climb I've done, it's still one of those memorable climbs because I put so much work into it.

AM: That sounds hardcore! So how did you first get into climbing and when did you realise you could turn your passion into a career?

PW: It was my parents who got my sister and me into climbing. They weren't professional climbers, but they were into climbing in the outdoors. I did lots of other sports, but climbing ended up sticking more than the others. I never planned to make it a career, it just happened. Even when I was doing hard routes, first ascents or getting into the climbing media, I had some sponsors, but was still working a regular job. Now, with the Wide Boyz business, it's a full-time gig. So yeah, I'm a professional climber, I work with sponsors like Patagonia and Wild Country, but I also run the



Crack climbing festival Crack Fest is bringing the sport to a wider audience

Wide Boyz side, and both take up equal time and headspace. I never made a clear switch to 'professional climber'; it just evolved.

AM: You're now known as one of the best trad and big wall climbers in the world, making ascents like the first 'solo-free' ascent of El Capitan in under 24 hours, and the first 'solo-free' ascent of Mount Watkins in 15 hours – but help us out here, that's different to free-soloing?

PW: Solo climbing is where you go out climbing by yourself, and that could be free-soloing (with no rope), or that could be soloing with a rope. When you solo-free with a rope, you self belay, so you don't have a partner and you climb and belay yourself at the same time, which takes extra work and extra logistics. That's how I climbed El Cap, Mount Watkins, and some other stuff that I've done in Norway, but on easier sections I also free-solo as well, so that's climbing without a rope or any other form of protection.

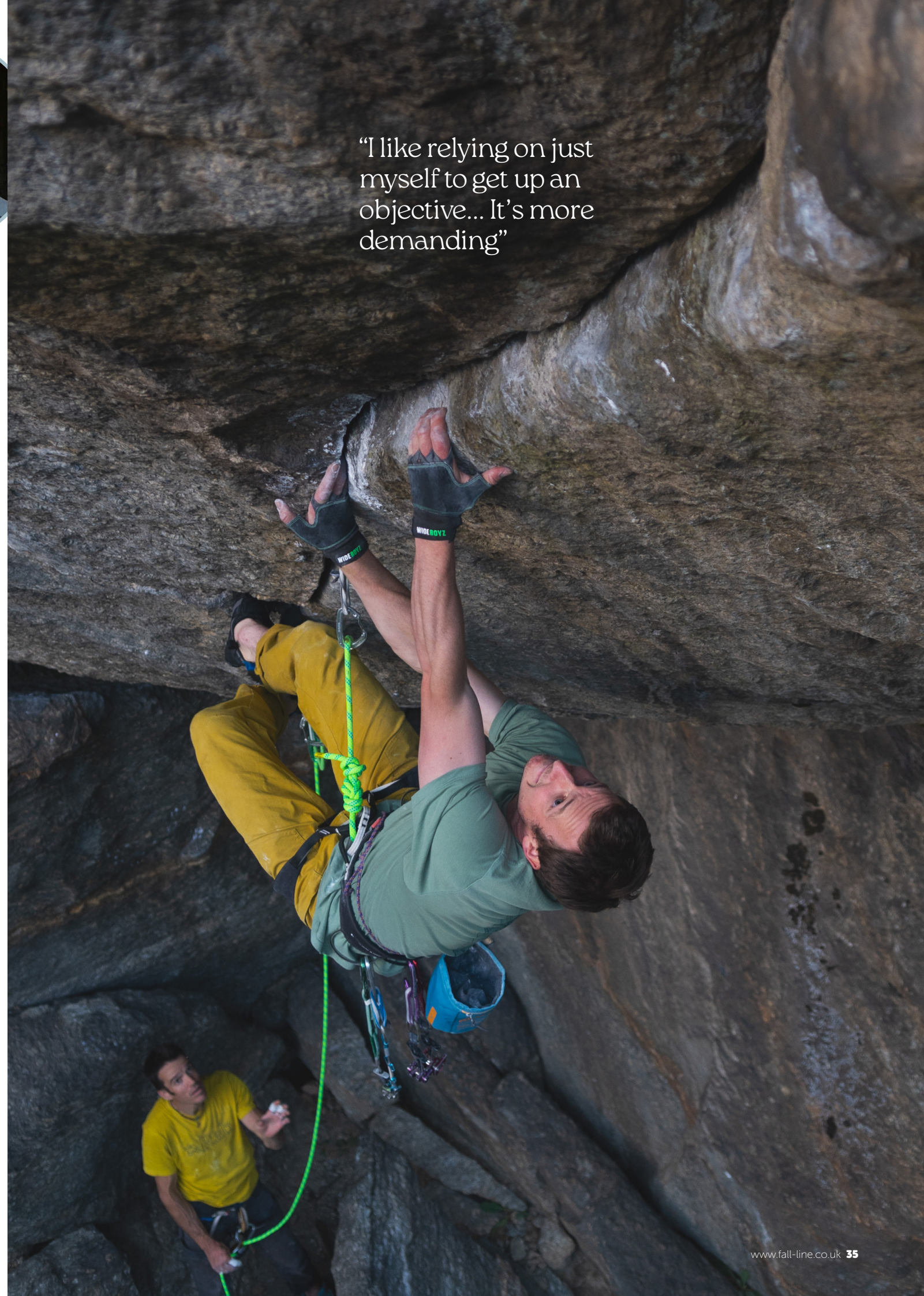
AM: What attracts you to these solo speed ascents?

PW: I like relying on just myself to get up an objective. Being able to do everything yourself, having the ability, the knowledge, the skill, the confidence, to do it all on your own – it just takes a little extra. It's more demanding. You can travel lighter and, in terms of speed, it's less of a race because you're not trying to go fast. You're climbing at a normal speed, but you don't stop – it's kind of an endurance feat that you go for in one push.

I also like doing things in a day. You get up in the morning, you do your objective, and then you get back down. It's really fun to be able to climb such big walls by yourself in a short space of time. I do also really like the longer big wall-style climbs, where you take a portaledge (hanging tent system) and camp on the side of the wall. I don't prefer one over the other – I just like to mix things up.

AM: More recently, you established a new climb on the Mirror Wall in Greenland with Julia Cassou, Sean Warren and Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll. How did you get involved in this project?

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Photo: Mari Salvesen

PW: This was through my friend, Sean Villanueva. He'd originally asked me to go in 2023, but I was unavailable. He went on the expedition with some other people, but they didn't manage to do the wall and so he was keen to go back – although the people he went with the first time weren't. He asked me to go again, and I was free, so we put a team together.

AM: What were the biggest logistical or physical challenges?

PW: There's a huge amount of planning with all the logistics, gear and food, and all while preparing for some very difficult climbing. The spreadsheets come out and there are lots of meetings and constant prep to make sure everyone's ready. Then, just weeks before we left, Keita Kurakami, one of our original team members, tragically died of a heart attack during training. His friend dropped out too understandably, so it was suddenly just me and Sean scrambling to find two more teammates. We seriously questioned if we should still go, but eventually we re-grouped and managed to find Sean and Julia to join us.

AM: What was your first impression of the wall when you saw it for the first time?

PW: When I first saw Mirror Wall, it looked incredible. It's pretty smooth – there are features, but nothing huge like on El Cap. The line we were going for was especially blank in the middle. It took a while for us to reach the line, with a couple of weeks stuck in Iceland waiting for the ice to break, then sailing over, and a full week walking in. From the time we all met up to reaching the

With the likes of Mirror Wall in Greenland under his climbing belt, Pete has big plans for 2025

base, it had been about a month already, so finally standing beneath it, ready to climb, was very exciting.

AM: After 11 gruelling days on the wall, you reached the summit. How difficult was the climb?

PW: We spent 11 days getting to the summit, then another week on the wall climbing extra pitches. The route was tough, but it went smoothly. The 2023 team had failed because they couldn't get past this one section, so we knew it would be hard. The lower wall had long runouts, demanding aid climbing (climbing using gear to assist upward movement, not just protection) and free climbing (climbing using your hands and feet only). You had to be confident in both styles and able to switch between them. The grades might not look extreme on paper, but after a month in the wilderness, far from help, those bold leads felt serious. The upper wall was safer, with more cracks, but the route still required a wide variety of different skills.

AM: Wow, what an adventure. Are you preparing for any other big expeditions or future projects?

PW: After Greenland, I focused on training. Expedition fitness doesn't always translate to climbing performance, so I rebuilt over winter. Now I've got some single-pitch goals for spring and summer, and maybe some big wall plans in Norway, but these are weather dependent. We'll see what conditions the seasons bring. *Fall Line*

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