

Sport climbing making its debut at the Games comes with a ready-made star in Czech Republic's sinewy six-footer Adam Ondra, who has been called the Bubka and Bolt of the new Olympic sport

FASTER STRONGER

GAURAVBHATT

RUNNING. JUMPING. Kicking... Climbing. Adam Ondra, the 28-year-old climbing phenom from Czech Republic, explains why the motor skill is a natural fit for the Olympics. "It is what I would call a natural sport. Until now the sport in general was huge. The competition side was still not very well known among the mainstream, but it definitely deserves to be at the Olympics," says Ondra, a gold-medal contender at climbing's upcoming Olympic debut in Tokyo. "I believe climbing is in our genetic code. We somehow want to go higher to see the world from above."

Ondra has been on top of the world for a long time. He is the world's greatest climber, has been for some time, and was both born and built for it.

Born in 1993 to recreational rock climbers, Ondra's childhood was spent scaling rugged cliffs outside hometown Brno, and the walls and ceilings in his house. At 8, he climbed his first 7b+ and at 13 his first 9th difficulty ratings achieved only by elite climbers with significant experience and strength. He has conquered three of the four toughest sports routes in the world, including 45m long curving Norwegian cave walls and 50m high Spanish limestone cliffs.

Indoors, he had won World Cup season titles in both lead and bouldering by the age of 17.

With achievements followed international recognition. At 15, he was "climbing's answer to Sergei Bubka and pole-vaulting". At 20, he was "to climbing what Usain Bolt is to sprinting". *Climbing Magazine*, the bible of the sport, described Ondra in action: "...it's easy to see a level of mastery that only two or three people on the planet possess, like watching Michael Jordan play basketball or Einstein do math."

Fittingly subject of superlative literature, Ondra has also been the subject of scientific studies. In 2018, Czech data journalists turned the 3D modelling technology — the tech used in the *'Lord of the Rings'* films to realise the character of Gollum, a superhuman climber in his own right — to Ondra's sinewy, 6'1, 68-kg frame. They deduced that during the climb, at some places, Ondra's pulse rate drops to fewer than 70 beats per minute, lower than an average office-dweller's.

In the study, Biomechanics expert Martin Zvonar pointed out Ondra using his long neck as a lever, tilting his head back at the end of the move to improve centre of gravity. "Human's head weighs seven kilos," Zvonar noted. "Add Adam's long neck to it and you get a very effective machine from the point of view of biomechanics."

Ondra's one-hand peak finger force (measured on a 20mm hold) is approximately 110 per cent of his body weight. The grip strength is accentuated by the remarkably robust shoulders.

Part of his team is the Czech national ballet's physiotherapist, who helps with ankle posture and keeping his naturally-flat feet as beautifully pointed as a ballerina, to secure the smallest of footholds. A track coach was

roped in to help with the explosiveness needed for speed climbing. He has utilised traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture and does *pranayama* after waking up and *yoga nidra* just before the competition.

The demands are unbelievably physical, but Ondra shares details of the mental process. "I train the mental aspect every single time I climb. Climbing is fun, for sure. But I always try to give everything that I have into every single route into every single training session. If you create that little bit of pressure in order to perform every time you climb, then when you're for real competition, it's not something new," says Ondra.

During a climb, a split second of hesitation means loss of valuable energy which could come into play later.

"Of course the pressure of the competitions and the pressure of the training is very different. The pressure that you're going to be facing during the Olympics is way more than during a normal World Cup. I mostly try to distract myself, read, chat and only right before I start climbing is when I really focus on myself. I try to visualise, for example, the last time that I felt great during climbing. The mental dialogue is, 'If I felt so good last time that I climbed, why should it be any different today?'"



REMEMBER THE NAME

SPORT CLIMBING
ADAM ONDRA

In Tokyo, climbers will compete across three disciplines — speed: a vertical sprint to the top, bouldering: ropeless crawls up overhanging walls which require power and problem solving, and lead climbing: the classic test of endurance. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) wanted the format for easily-understandable, made for TV, speed climbing. Climbing's governing body wanted all three disciplines to be recognised. A combination of all three events was the compromise. The gold in Tokyo will go to the climber with the lowest combined score, a multiplication of their rankings in each of the three disciplines.

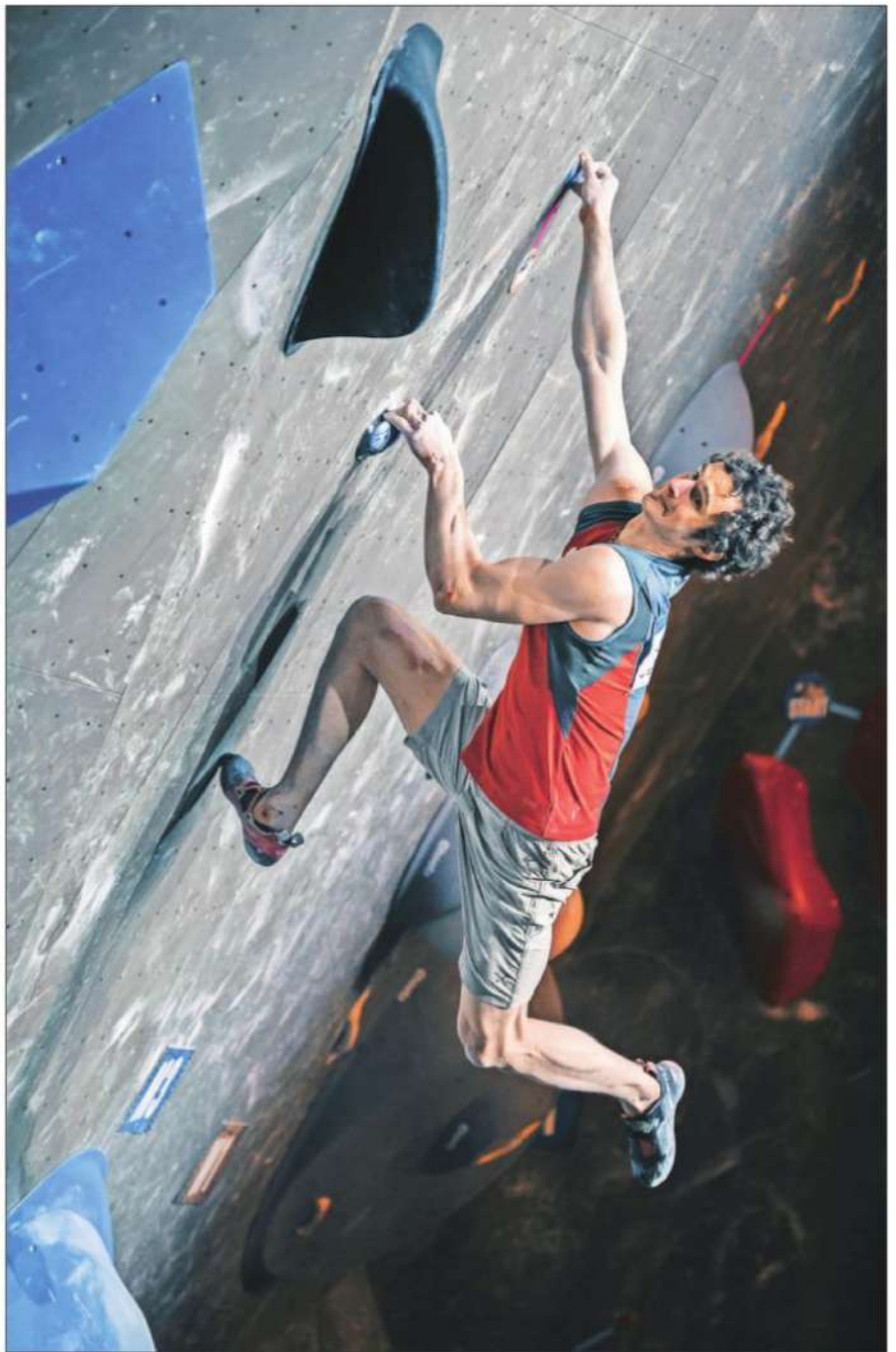
"It's a bit like asking Usain Bolt to run a marathon and then do the hurdles," double world champion Shauna Coxsey told *Olympics.com* in an interview. "No one has really transitioned before. No boulderer has transitioned to speed and lead, and no speed climber has done it to bouldering and lead."

The limit on medals prompted some top climbers to pull out from the Olympics. The format will also challenge Ondra, who isn't a speed practitioner and has previously likened the discipline to a "circus." Paris 2024 will provide some relief, with speed set to be split from bouldering and lead climbing.

"I really, really hope that in the future, there will be three sets of medals for three disciplines," says Ondra. "Because I think what you should display at the Olympics should be the best climbers doing their own thing on the very best level."

The Covid 19-induced Olympic postponement was a double blow for Ondra. Not only did it delay the possible realisation of the childhood dream of winning an Olympic medal, it also meant one more year of training speed climbing.

HIGHER



Ondra is the only male climber to win world titles in both lead and bouldering. Photographer PETR CHODURA, source ADAM ONDRA

"Training the discipline which you don't particularly enjoy is not that easy," he says. "If you told me in January last year, the Olympics would be postponed, it would be harder to stomach. But when the decision finally happened in March, I really tried to see the positive, the beneficial side, of having one extra year to work on my weaknesses. All of a sudden it just felt great. I was really hoping that I could improve some speed climbing, and in the end, I think what is a very good surprise is that I also worked on my bouldering weaknesses way more than I expected."

In February 2019, Ondra began the 'Road to Tokyo' series on his popular *YouTube* channel. The videos feature his equipment, guides and tutorials, and even the love for crickets as a protein source.

"I had the time, I had a great team and the support from the sponsors. And we were thinking, this is something that could motivate a lot of young climbers. It could be motivation for any kind of person doing any kind of stuff in their life," says Ondra. "I've been enjoying that. I don't really feel like a very extroverted kind of person. But it helped me to kind of open myself up a little bit."

The pandemic meant reshuffling schedules and releasing fewer videos. Cruelly, it also meant "sacrificing one more year of rock climbing." For all his indoor competition glory, climbing for Ondra still means conquering rocks, cliffs and crags outdoors. The year thus effectively put him between a rock and a hard place. "I did some rock climbing within the last 12 months. But I think I found

a really good balance between just trying to spend as much time as possible, indoors working towards the Olympic goal, while at the same time, not going crazy. Rock is where I feel really at home and I think if I wasn't able to touch any rock at all... without the rock I would just go insane."

Would rock climbing at the Olympics be the dream, then?

"I definitely don't think that outdoor rock climbing should be included. It's actually a very nice thing that there are two sides of climbing," Ondra says. "Furthermore, if you want to bring thousands of people to fragile rock climbing areas, it is not very environmentally friendly. You should make the events at the competitions where it makes sense and that for me means on the artificial wall."