

(S)ENDING THE NEVERENDING

BEAT KAMMERLANDER'S **NEVERENDING STORY (5.14A)** IN THE **RÄTIKON RANGE OF THE CENTRAL ALPS** SAW ONLY ONE REPEAT IN 25 YEARS. **PUT UP IN NEAR-PERFECT STYLE**, THE ROUTE HAD SCARED AWAY MOST OF TODAY'S ELITE **UNTIL TWO WOMEN TOOK IT ON** IN SEPTEMBER, 2015. **THIS IS THEIR STORY**, AND A LOOK BACK AT PART OF CLIMBING HISTORY THAT WAS SO AHEAD OF ITS TIME IT WAS LARGELY IGNORED. BY **PIOTR DROZDZ** AND **MONIKA JEDRZEJEWSKA**

Beat Kammerlander in 1994 on *Silbergeier* (5.14a) on the IV Kirchlispitze. This six-pitch line checked in with pitches of 5.14a, 5.13d and 5.13c, and was established ground up, with the bolts drilled on lead by Kammerlander. Inspired by John Bachar, Kammerlander adhered to a strict ethic that kept bolts to a minimum—*Silbergeier's* falls average 30 feet. Kammerlander redpointed the line after eight days of effort, sealing his career as a professional climber.



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Nina Caprez, belayed by Barbara Zangerl who also completed the route, on *Unendliche Geschichte*, or *Neverending Story* (5.14a) on the Seventh Kirchlispitze, Rätikon, Graubünden, Switzerland. The route took the accomplished duo 10 days of work, then a day each to redpoint. Kammerlander established the line in 1991. At the time it was the world's hardest multi-pitch climb, and even today is rarely repeated.

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While many Americans assume that ground-up, onsight, multi-pitch free climbing reached its apotheosis sometime before the heretical influence of European sport climbers in the 1980s, the truth is that the purest and most difficult multi-pitch free climbs were going up in the Alps right at the same time. The epicenter of the movement was a range called the Rätikon, on the borders of Austria, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. The cutting edge was a 1,400-foot south-facing wall of near-perfect limestone on the Kirlichspitze towers toward the center of the range.

Martin Scheel, a Swiss climber, threw down the gauntlet in 1984 when he established *Amarcord* (5.12c) on the seventh Kirlichspitze tower ground up, with no previewing, and using sketchy hooks only to drill the rare bolt. We laud John Bachar's *Bachar-Yerian* (5.11e) as an exemplary performance, but just three years later Scheel employed the same committing style on a nine-pitch climb four grades harder. At the time, *Amarcord* featured some of the hardest moves ever done on a rope, but Scheel would up the ante even further over the next couple of years, using the same pure approach to push the level to 5.13a with his 1988 route *Accacia*.

The next year a young Austrian climber, Beat Kammerlander, arrived at the Seventh Kirlichspitze and added his own route, emulating Scheel's near-perfect style. *New Age* (5.13c) was only the third multi-pitch route in the Alps to get the grade of 8a (5.13b) or above.

In 1990, Kammerlander equipped the 12-pitch *Unendliche Geschichte* (*Neverending Story*) and redpointed it in 1991. *Neverending Story*, at 5.14a, was the hardest multi-pitch route in the world at the time, just a tick below the hardest single-pitch routes. The *Neverending Story* remains a powerful symbol of its time; of the unique art of climbing, physical and mental strength, and ultra-committing style. Until last year the route had been repeated only once, in 2008 by the Italian powerhouse Pietro dal Prá. The route's reputation for cryptic, hold-less slab sequences and bolts guarded by 70-foot run-outs dissuaded all but the boldest climbers, and even these were invariably turned back, tail tucked between their legs. Nearly 25 years after its first ascent, the 1,400-foot *Neverending Story* remains a formidable test piece.

"Beat and I were very happy to hear that the girls had been trying the route," says Pietro dal Prá. "The girls" refer to Barbara "Babsi" Zangerl (28) and Nina Caprez (30), who last year took on the mythical and fearsome *Neverending Story*. Zangerl, an



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Austrian, is no stranger to breaking ground. In 2008 she became the first woman to climb a V13 with her ascent of *Pura Vida* in Magic Wood, Switzerland. A back tweak the next year removed her from bouldering—doctors said the impact would aggravate her disc injury—so she abruptly switched gears, with brilliant results. Over the next few years she climbed 5.13d crack and 5.14c sport, and became the first woman to complete the infamous Alpine Trilogy—*Kaisers neue Kleider*, *Silbergeier*, *End of Silence*—all runout 5.14a multi-pitch routes on big alpine walls. *Silbergeier* is a Beat Kammerlander testpiece in the Rätikon, and Zangerl made the second female ascent soon after Nina Caprez’s.

Caprez, a Swiss climber, is also brave and accomplished. Her best ascents include 5.14c sport climbs and big walls like *Silbergeier* and *Orbayu* in the Picos de Europa of Spain. She tried *Orbaya* (5.14b) last year, redpointing all the pitches but not sending it in one push. Caprez and Zangerl share a similar outlook. They’re both up for adventure and knew the Rätikon game, but the *Neverending Story* was a big step up, over 700 feet longer than *Silbergeier* and with a reputation for turning back the world’s best.

It was Zangerl who first had the idea to try *Neverending Story* and passed her vision to Caprez.

“With Beat we were shooting the *Silbergeier* part for the Alpine Trilogy film, and he had an interview about the route and climbing in the Rätikon in general, and at some point he went on to talk about *Unendliche*,” says Zangerl. “He said he did not know why it had had only one repeat ascent, considering the beauty of not only the route but also the wall itself. Indeed, the wall does look amazing. Even while climbing some easier lines in the vicinity you just can’t help glancing in its direction. It was always my goal to get on it at least once.”

Caprez grew up in Küblis, the village next to the range, an area where Martin Scheel and Beat Kammerlander are referred to as heroes. With a quicklink on her harness to use in case of retreat, the Swiss climber was always aware that climbing in the Rätikon is like entering a completely new dimension where you might need to bail mid-route. Dealing with the unknown is part of the game and exactly what makes climbing there so special.

“It’s pure climbing,” Caprez says. “No chalk, no visible holds or footholds and that unique, bouldery yet tricky style that makes you feel weak on 5.10d pitches.”

When the two women reached the foot of the Seventh Kirlichspitze, their plan was to climb up to the first 5.13d crux pitch.

“We spent approximately two hours on the first three meters of 5.13d, trying many times in many different ways with no success,”

Zangerl says. “We didn’t have any beta. One of my mottos is less information equals more adventure and I think that’s the coolest way, although I admit that sometimes beta does help! After having been on the route three times we thought maybe we should give up. But every time we ended up saying ‘OK, let’s give it one more go, one final go.’”

The ensuing 5.14a pitch required a sort of yo-yo game. Caprez and Zangerl changed the lead five times, each of them trying to reach one bolt higher or find one more new hold.

“For me it’s very important to go through the entire process

Upper left: Nina Caprez und Barbara Zangerl at the Kletterhütte (climber’s hut) Pardutz, Rätikon. Left: The landscape and walls of Rätikon are equally spectacular. Above: Zangerl high on *Neverending Story*. Lengthy runouts such as this one are typical.

of bouldering on a route,” Zangerl says. “Being scared, facing the unknown. Good teamwork is the thing that literally pushes you toward your best performance and up to the top. And that was exactly what I have experienced with Nina. Not to mention all the fun we had together!”

Eventually, their efforts, combined with some clues from Kammerlander, started paying off, and after 10 days of attempts, Caprez and Zangerl sent every single pitch individually.

“For various reasons we had to take a three-week break,” Caprez says. “Then Babsi gave me a call and said she was ready to try again. I had been traveling a lot in the meantime and felt pretty exhausted but decided to have a four-day rest, which hardly ever happens in my case, and I started recovering.”

They met in the Rätikon in September and discussed the options, finally agreeing upon individual redpoint ascents.” I was thinking more of the team ascent because I didn’t want to lose our great team spirit,” Caprez says. “An individual redpoint meant that one of us would have to go first and probably be the first to send the route. Then, as usual, all the media would call it the first female ascent, but

in my eyes there is no difference between girls and boys, especially on vertical and technical faces like the ones in the Rätikon. There is only one difference that matters and it is between the first ascent and all that follow. Redpointers are always in the privileged position, they already know that the route is possible.”

Zangerl says: “Right now, first female ascents are more like a marketing thing. In the case of important or historic climbs, such a reference seems justifiable but otherwise, for example in sport climbing, it’s rather irrelevant. And definitely, this is never a reason why I try a route.”

The next morning, September 8, brought cold temps, with the holds either icy or soaking wet and the team had to wait for the first two pitches to dry. They might not be the hardest pitches but low-grade pitches in Rätikon are never easy, and long runouts do not make them easier—definitely not for a warm-up.

Caprez was supposed to go first.

“I was really stressed,” she says. “I got close to saying, ‘Babsi, go for it because I can’t.’ But then I put my climbing shoes on, grabbed the first holds, and the whole world disappeared. The bad feeling was gone. I really focused on what I was doing. My mind opened to everything: taking falls, sticking moves, failing, whatever. I felt in my element.”

“Watching Nina climb was a great experience,” Zangerl says. “I could tell she felt a bit unconfident at the beginning but once she set off, her mindset changed. Despite taking falls on 5.12c and

ROBERT BOESCH (BOTH)

ROBERT BOESCH

5.13a, she stayed cool and motivated. The 5.13a is a particularly hard pitch. It's very difficult to climb it in a controlled way, unlike the 5.14a, which, with the right dose of power, won't surprise you that much."

The next thing Caprez remembers is the summit and an awkward mixture of happiness and a sense of duty, "It was the awareness that so far the mission was only 50 percent complete. Every time I sent a pitch, Babsi got psyched, super happy and even more supportive. It was amazing to feel the energy she had. Now it was her turn and I wanted to give it all back to her."

The next day, September 9, the pressure was on the Austrian and the game was on again, but clouds effectively prevented the first part of the route from drying.

"I made a choice to start climbing anyway," Zangerl says. "On the 5.10d part I took a different undercling and both feet slipped. I still stuck to the wall, however, and I think that was my luckiest moment on the route, as I did the rest of the pitches on my first attempts. This is climbing in Rätikon—the worst moments often happen on the 'easiest' sections."

Zangerl entered the same machine mode Caprez had experienced the day before—going for it and accepting all the risks in a state of absolute concentration.

"Concentration is like an inner watch, which comes and goes," Kammerlander once said after soloing a 5.13c. "Fear can come with it as well. But there is also familiarity and sometimes the possibility to look down into your soul. Because in the soul there are no more lies. There is only truth."

Their mission complete, Caprez and Zangerl spent the afternoon lying on the top of the Kirlichspitze watching the blood-orange sun setting over the Alps. Their long journey had reached its end, and they both had given everything to make it as perfect as possible.

"I was super happy when I heard the news," says dal Prá. "First of all I was happy for Nina and Babsi because I knew what a great experience it had been for them. Second, I felt happy for the route as I'd always thought it never got the attention it deserves. When I climbed it I did not speak much about it, and the route got a bit forgotten, I would say. There has been always something to it that made climbers give up on it, and it is really one of the best lines in the Alps. Finally, I was really happy for Beat."

Respect for Martin Scheel, Beat Kammerlander and Pietro dal Prá, eminent figures who have already taken their well-deserved seats in the climbing pantheon, grows with every year that others climb or attempt their routes.

ZANGERL ENTERED THE SAME MACHINE MODE CAPREZ HAD EXPERIENCED —GOING FOR IT AND ACCEPTING ALL THE RISKS IN A STATE OF ABSOLUTE CONCENTRATION

"*Unendliche Geschichte* and *Silbergeier* will never lose their charm like other routes do," dal Prá says. "It is because of their style and character, the way they are bolted and the place they are located. They are accessible to many climbers but you always look down at the last bolt. Even if the grade scale has expanded so much over the recent years, the difficulties offered by routes in the Rätikon are unique and challenging. And I am always happy if people can respect the ethics."

"The practices you see on *Silbergeier* more and more often are quite disturbing," Caprez says. "Using fixed draws and long clip sticks kills the thrill."

"Of course the choice is individual," Zangerl adds. "But when you think about the first ascents and their style, it seems unfair to use all these tools and then talk about a fast ascent. Apart from respecting the author's ethics, there is also the adventure factor and reaching every bolt in areas like Rätikon is an adventure."

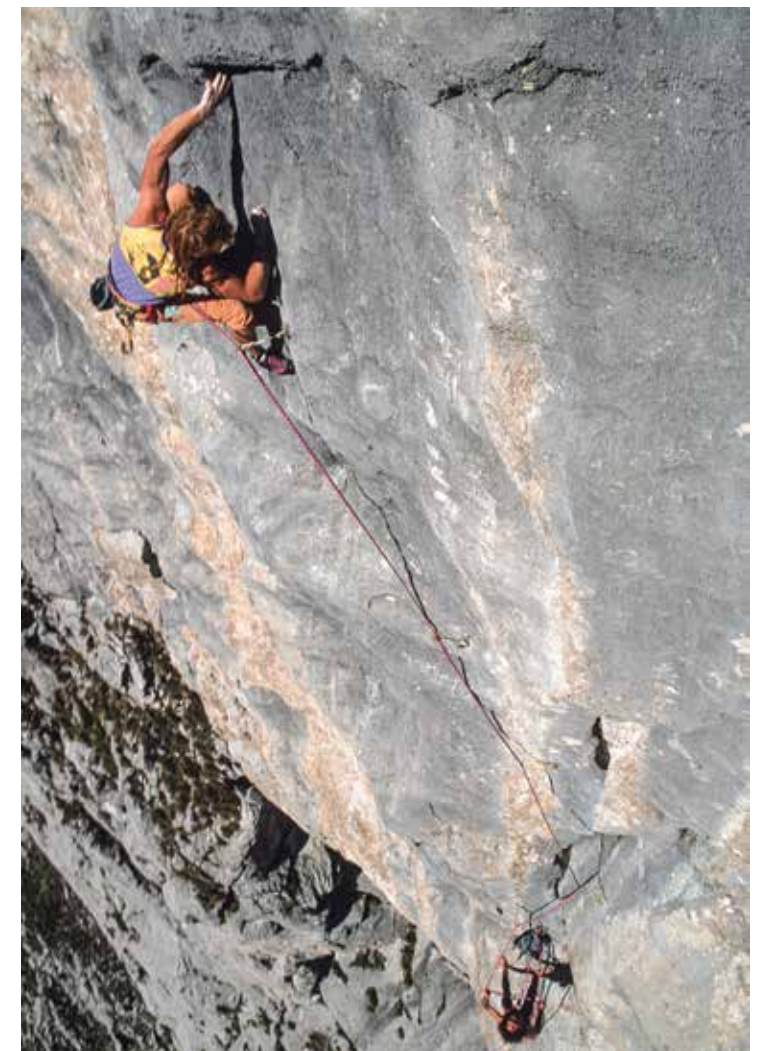


Left: Caprez leads off while Zangerl holds down the belay. Above: The big wall of *Neverending Story*. Right: Kammerlander works through *Neverending Story* after having bolted it on lead. Once the bolts were drilled, much of the route's heavy lifting was done. *Neverending Story* back in 1991 was groundbreaking for Kammerlander. "Never before could I climb those hard moves," he says. "Maybe, if I look back, this was my biggest step. However, opening the route was always more important than the red-point, because of my bolting style. The red point is the sportive part—and especially with that project the redpoint seemed nearly impossible. I thought a redpoint in a day would never happen; it seemed to be too hard for that time with a pitch of 5.14a, 5.13d, and 5.13c. I trained like a maniac and in 1991 after eight days on the route the success came and was surprising."

"Evolution in sport climbing and bouldering has been huge in the last two decades but in multi-pitch climbing things have been more or less the same. And *Unendliche Geschichte* is evidence of that," says Caprez.

Hers and Zangerl's repeats of Kammerlander's masterpiece mark another important moment in the history of the Rätikon. But other lines are still waiting to be rediscovered, and one of them is definitely *WoGü*, the neighbor of *Unendliche*. Its seven pitches feature difficulties reaching 5.14b up the smooth and compact rock and offer long, hard sequences accompanied by the constant possibility of even longer falls. The only one who has accepted the challenge is Adam Ondra, who redpointed *WoGü* in 2008. Will the next generation follow in his footsteps? Will they strive to open new routes of equal importance?

"One of the keys to success is the enjoyment of the entire process," Caprez says. "At the end of the day it should not matter if you send a route or not. The experience is what counts most. Babsi and I treat our goals not as projects, but as dreams."



ROBERT BOESCH

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BEAT KAMMERLANDER / *Mann Ohne Nerven*

Before Beat Kammerlander turned his eyes to the blank slabs of Rätikon, the Austrian had made the first solo of the Central *Pillar of Heiligkreuzkofel* (5.11b), a route established by Reinhold Messner and his brother Gunther and considered among the most difficult climbs of the 1960s in Italy's Dolomites, as well as a winter ascent of the Eiger North Face. Inspired by John Bachar's and other climbers' activity in Yosemite, Kammerlander and other European alpinists started prioritizing free climbing. In the early 1980s he met Scheel, and they got together a few times not only for sport climbing, but to exchange ideas about what they considered important in opening new routes and climbing in general.

"Before I met Martin, I had been totally against bolts," says Kammerlander. "My background was strongly tradition-oriented; it was all about the style. If you go to the mountains, you climb a blank slab route, you lead and you have no equipment to drill. It's more dangerous and it's more a head game than when you have a bolt on your rack. The elite of Tyrolean climbers, guys like Reinhard Schiestl, Heinz Mariacher and Luggi Rieser, had the ethics of not taking any bolts on a climb because if you have them the whole thing becomes much easier mentally. And my approach was similar. I never, ever carried any bolt with me when I was on a mountain opening a route. We believed in Reinhold Messner's

opinion that the bolt kills the impossible."

Over the next few years technological development improved climbing gear, and that opened up a new spectrum of possibilities, especially on the alpine faces that previously had seemed unclimbable. After some years of chasing grades on single-pitch sport climbs, Kammerlander returned to his roots, picking up where Scheel left off.

"After I had repeated some of Martin's routes I understood that the bolt can be used only for protection and not for aid," he says. "For Martin it made perfect sense not to place bolts where it's too hard. Just to place them where it's necessary and then climb the hard part. So I told myself I wanted to climb in that style because it was really good and serious at the same time. After all, we were the first ones who were allowed to fall."

The decision to use bolts only when absolutely necessary, placed on lead from hooks or stances, resulted in a number of exceptional Rätikon lines opened from 1986 to 1997, from *Maximum* (5.13b) and *Morbus Scheuermann* (5.12d, still unrepeated) to *New Age* (5.13c) and finally *Unendliche Geschichte* (5.14a), *Silbergeier* (5.14a) and *WoGü* (5.14b), the most recognized triad. All of these lines are 100 percent quality, way ahead of their time.

Kammerlander put up his first of the three mega routes, *Unendliche Geschichte*, in 1990 on the Seventh Kirlichspitze.

There was something mysterious about the line, whose difficulties had overwhelmed even the author himself, one of the world's best climbers at the time. It took the Austrian a year to make the first ascent.

"*Unendliche Geschichte* was definitely one of the milestones in my career," he says. "Initially, I didn't plan to do the route in one day. I could do individual sequences but my level was not high enough to do it in one push. And then I trained like I had never trained before ... for the whole year and specifically for that project."

"Beat sent *Unendliche* in 1991, and back then it was something like *Action Directe* in sport climbing," says Pietro dal Prà, Kammerlander's friend and climbing partner. "He was an innovator, a visionary. He was always thinking about something new that would push the sport of climbing, especially when it comes to opening new routes."

The route had to wait a full 14 years for a repeat ascent when, in 2005, the Italian dal Prà redpointed it on his fourth day of attempts. As the years passed the line garnered a frightening reputation. Kammerlander's later achievements, such as free soloing the 115-foot *Mordillo* (5.13c) or the WI 6 ice climb *Marilyn Manson*, earned him a nickname *Mann ohne Nerven* (Man without Nerves) and only emphasized his quest for adventure far from the last piece of protection.

HANNIBALS ALPTRUM (5.??)

MARTIN SCHEEL

MORBUS SCHEUERMANN

WOGU



Upper left: Kammerlander on *Morbus Scheuermann* (5.12d), in 1986. The route remains unrepeated. Left: Nina Caprez and Marc le Menestral make a rare ascent of *Hannibals Alptrum* (5.13b). Established by Martin Scheel and Robert Bosch in 1986, *Hannibals Alptrum* took Caprez three attempts over three seasons to complete; she took over 20, 35-foot falls on just one pitch. Scheel (near left) was an early Rätikon pioneer. His ethic of bolting on lead from hooks (below) if necessary, as shown here on his route *Vin Acacia* (9+), set the stage for Kammerlander.



ROBERT BOSCHE, BEAT KAMMERLANDER, ROBERT BOSCHE

BEAT KAMMERLANDER, TKT/TKTK/TKTK

Kammerlander on *WoGu*. He established this seven-pitch line in 1997, but was unable to redpoint the entire line. In 2008, a 15-year-old Adam Ondra (below right) snagged the redpoint. The pitches are 5.14b, 5.12d, 5.14a/b, 5.14b, 5.14a, 5.13c, and 5.12d. Sixty-foot falls are possible.

