

KEEPING IT SHARP

Would you start up a difficult rock climb with mud on the soles of your shoes and holes in the side of your boots? NO! You would take some time and wipe the mud clear, wash the dirt off the bottom and rands and fix the holes. You know that better friction means better adhesion and performance, making your job easier. In ice climbing it's no different except that the better performance you are seeking can be found by keeping your picks in good shape and always as sharp as possible.

When you swing that tool and the pick makes its trajectory into the ice it imparts a great deal of energy that goes into the ice. With a blunt pick you must strike much harder and repeatedly than with a sharp pick. Repeatedly striking the ice just fractures the surface and you waste energy smashing the fragile ice away. Sometimes you break so much ice from the placement you have to replace the pick in another spot.

The best example is when climbing thin ice over rock. If your picks are not razor sharp you may as well be striking the ice with a hammer because the ice just breaks up as the fractures (you make striking it) go full depth, say an inch or two. On delicate slabs this can prove terminal as the ice you need to climb in balance is being destroyed by using too heavy of a swing with a dull pick. Climbers with dull tools and poor technique will often say that these sorts of climbs, with really thin ice are not in shape and the ice too thin to climb on when in fact, the ice is fine and if they had sharp tools they could climb it.

With sharp tools you can tap the pick in with a minimum controlled amount of force. Good ice climbers go for one or at most two inches of penetration but it also depends on how gripped you are feeling at the time. I guess good ice climbers just don't get gripped!! A sharp pick slices through any ice more easily, requiring less energy than a dull pick.

The same goes for mixed routes. On mixed routes a sharp pick is even more critical as it allows the blade to go into thin cracks, corners and edges better with more security. A thin pick also works well on thin droplets of frozen moss and water, therefore you can use that dribble instead of hitting it with a blunt pick, knocking it off. There have been many instances when having a sharp, pointy pick made the difference between making the crux and completing the pitch or missing the key placement and falling.....

Filing your picks and modifying them down

Picks from a manufacturer are better than ever but some still require pick modification. Reshaping your pick will maximize its and your performance, allowing you to save a great deal of energy in cleaning (removing) your pick from the ice. A major factor in fatigue, which usually happens when you don't want it. All the tools you need are a file and some spare time.....30 minutes or less.

Begin by filing down the teeth on the underside of the pick that lie two inches further than the shaft or handle. The teeth can be made sharper by beveling the sides so the teeth are pointed. This allows for a cutting action as the sharp pick enters the ice. That action creates fewer fractures and allows for easier and quicker pick removal. With lots of practice you will need to only jab or flick the pick into the ice, rather than slamming it home, a sure sign of poor technique and dull picks. Next realize that your pick will slice through the ice better if you don't have any angles to slow down the penetration. Black Diamond and Petzl/Charlet picks have an angular bump on the top of their picks, which you don't need.

File down this bump so that there is a gradual curve from the top of the pick to the very point. Bevel the top of the pick so that there is a peak that will also aid in slicing through the ice. Now you have a bevel on the top, on the bottom, sharp teeth under the pick and the point is needle sharp. You are ready for action. Always keep a file with you when you go for that hard ice or mixed route. You can never have a pick, which is too sharp!