

2022 Bolt Meeting Takeaways

Brief Summary:

During the past few years, bolt-related topics have been hotly debated in the North Conway climbing community. Recent uproar over bolting in a pristine crack climbing zone at Cathedral Ledge was the catalyst for a meeting to discuss differing opinions. This document aims to summarize a complex meeting, and to share local sentiment with the broader climbing community. This summary of a single meeting should not be construed as the end of the debate or a list of rules, but rather a continuation of a generations-long discussion.

On August 31, 2022, more than 65 climbers met at Cathedral Ledge. The group was not a perfect cross-section of the climbing community; it was weighted with experienced climbers who lived nearby, since the meeting was created through text messages and word of mouth. Though some LGBTQ and BIPOC climbers were in attendance, the group skewed white and male. Attendees were both young and old, with several newer climbers present.

After hours of conversation, the group reached consensus on three topics:

1. "It is the consensus of this group that an established routes' original character and integrity be maintained." This statement/ethic, first put forward in 2003, was viewed by the group as valid and worth upholding.
2. The mental challenge presented by routes at Cathedral and Whitehorse is worth maintaining. Generally, bolts should not be added to existing climbs.
3. A broken piton should only be replaced with a bolt in rare instances when no viable alternative can be found, and only after discussion with the community.

Each of these topics is nuanced and is discussed below:

At the meeting, each attendee was asked to speak for 90 seconds on any bolt-related topic. This was followed by two hours of debate that was sometimes contentious but stayed mostly respectful.

By the end of the night, the majority of those still in attendance voted to "renew" a statement that originated with meetings on this topic 20 years ago. The statement reads, "It is the consensus of this group that an established routes' original character and integrity be maintained." Someone asked if we would vote on renewing this statement. Most voted "yes", a few abstained, and no one voted "no".

Second, many people shared the view that the character of cliffs like Cathedral, Whitehorse, Huntington Ravine, etc, was worth maintaining. Things that make these cliffs different from other crags, such as mentally taxing routes or a relative lack of bolts, were spoken of not as annoyances or inconveniences, but as positive attributes that allow one to test themselves

against nature. Several people mentioned wanting to avoid every crag "feeling the same," with more recently developed crags feeling much more "convenient" by comparison.

A common phrase was that bolting in this area requires one to exercise "restraint." Some of the newer climbers said that the mental challenges presented at crags like Cathedral and Whitehorse were actually things that attracted them to these cliffs.

Finally, many members of this group were close to agreement that pitons may sometimes be replaced with bolts, but only in rare instances and as a last resort when no clean protection can be found. The group was asked whether the same rule that is widely accepted for replacing bolts (one rusty bolt can be replaced with one stainless bolt) should also apply to pins (one rusty pin can be replaced with one stainless bolt). Many people said that this rule should not apply to pitons, and no one spoke in favor of extending the rule to pitons.

Several attendees said that more educational work must be done to empower climbers with knowledge. This could include education on the history, style, and ethics of a given area. Knowledge of the use and maintenance of pitons is also difficult to obtain.

This document attempts to reduce gatekeeping by sharing local sentiment. But it should be noted that the climbing community is not a monolith, and many climbers' opinions will vary from what this document describes. For generations, the addition or removal of almost any bolt at Cathedral or Whitehorse Ledge has been subject to heightened scrutiny and community debate. The intensity of this debate is reflective of the intense love that so many climbers feel for these crags.

- Written by N. Aiello-Popeo, with input from 18 other attendees.