

THE HATERS

THE SECRET CLUB OF THE WORLD'S VERY BEST PLASTIC PULLERS

By Michael Levy

Alex Khazanov, an Israeli climber with a patchy beard and bulging biceps, and two Slovenians—Jernej Kruder and Gregor Vezonik—are shooting the breeze at the *Rock and Ice* booth at the 2018 Vail GoPro Games.

Kruder, wearing a cap emblazoned with his own name in hot pink letters, is talking a big game: “Put me on the cover of next issue, man!” Khazanov rolls his eyes with a good-grief smile, and Vezonik gives Kruder a shove. In their banter back and forth one of them says something about “the Haters.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

In quiet voices, peeking over their shoulders to make sure no one is listening, they give me the low-down: Haters United, a private Facebook chat, is the secret sauce for these guys and a handful of their international climbing friend-competitors. Before this season, some of the members—the Korean climber Jongwon Chon and the German Jan Hojer—were already top commodities, but Kruder, Khazanov, Vezonik, and the two other members, the Italians Gabriele Moroni and Michael Piccolruaz—had middling or

Jan Hojer climbing in the massive Olympiastadion in the qualifying round at the Bouldering World Cup, Munich, 2017. Hojer went on to win gold.





Above: Jernej Kruder holding the swing at the Rab CWIF competition, Sheffield, U.K. 2017. Left: Jongwon Chon has some of the strongest crimp strength of anyone on the World Cup circuit, according to his fellow Haters.



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up-and-down success on the World Cup circuit. Now? As we meet in 2018, they’re all some of the hottest properties on plastic. Between them, the group’s eight members took gold at four of the seven 2018 Bouldering World Cups, and won a complement of other medals, to boot.

Sensing my journalistic interest, Vezonik preempts me: “But don’t write anything about the Haters, man.” Other than apparently ending every sentence with “man,” it seems that Haters United is a charm: if its

existence were revealed, it could lose its inexplicable good luck.

But several months later, Khazanov agrees to divulge. He has asked everyone in the Haters United Facebook chat if they’d let me write about the group.

Everyone hit the like button. They were game.

Khazanov, Vezonik and Moroni created Haters United several years ago as a means to coordinate a bouldering trip to Red Rocks, Nevada. Khazanov, 24, and Vezonik, 24, had become friendly on the youth competition circuit years earlier. Moroni, 32, and Khazanov met on the adult World Cup circuit. The group’s original name was Legends United, but they soon changed it to the self-deprecating Haters United to accurately reflect their incessant gossiping.

Kruder later heard about the Facebook group from Vezi (aka Vezonik) and wanted in. Like “Vezi,” most of the Haters have nicknames, some more creative than others: Khazanov, being Israeli, is “the Zohan.” Moroni, being the oldest and

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Above: Alex Khazanov at the Rab CWIF competition in 2018, where he finished second. Above right: Gregor Vezonik, of Slovenia, vaulted from 50th to fifth place in the world rankings after his huge 2018 season. Bottom right: Gabriele Moroni after winning gold at the Hachioji Bouldering World Cup in 2018. It was his first World Cup medal since 2009.



therefore wisest, is the “Sensei.”

The guys began using their private virtual forum to, what else, stay in touch, send GIFs and vids, and trash-talk. Soon Hojer and Chon were members, too.

Heading into the 2018 World Cup season, the three founding members hadn’t expected banner years. Khazanov had never podiumed. Vezonik was ranked 50th in the world and had never been in a World Cup finals and Moroni hadn’t gotten a World Cup medal since his silver at Eindhoven, the Netherlands, in 2009.

But by the end of the season, each had collected a gold. Vezonik also finished third at the World Championships, catapulting his world

EDDIE FOWKE (2), VLADEK ZUMR

ranking to fifth. The other Haters also crushed. Kruder, 29, was overall champion of the Bouldering World Cup. Chon, 24, finished second at the Bouldering World Championships and won gold at the Asian Games. Hojer, 27, took bronze in the Combined event at the 2018 World Championships in Innsbruck.

“The group formed before we were really that good,” Khazanov tells me in a Skype interview after we met in Vail. Speaking from Texas—where he is training—Vezonik echoes that sentiment: “We didn’t actually start the group thinking we’d have all the top climbers in the same spot, but that’s how it’s turned out.”

None of the Haters claim to know

what’s behind their success. They just know something is working.

“If you have really good climbers from around the world all together, and if you feel like you belong to that community, it motivates you,” Vezonik says. “Having Jan Hojer or Chon or anyone from that group saying, ‘Good job, you got it next time’—that’s definitely encouraging.”

When they’re not hucking triple dynos in a World Cup final, the guys in Haters United are sophomoric and goofy. When they win, they like to celebrate.

“This year we partied a bit too much—we had a lot of wins!” Khazanov says. “When Kruder won it was a big party. Me? Big party. Gabri? Big party.



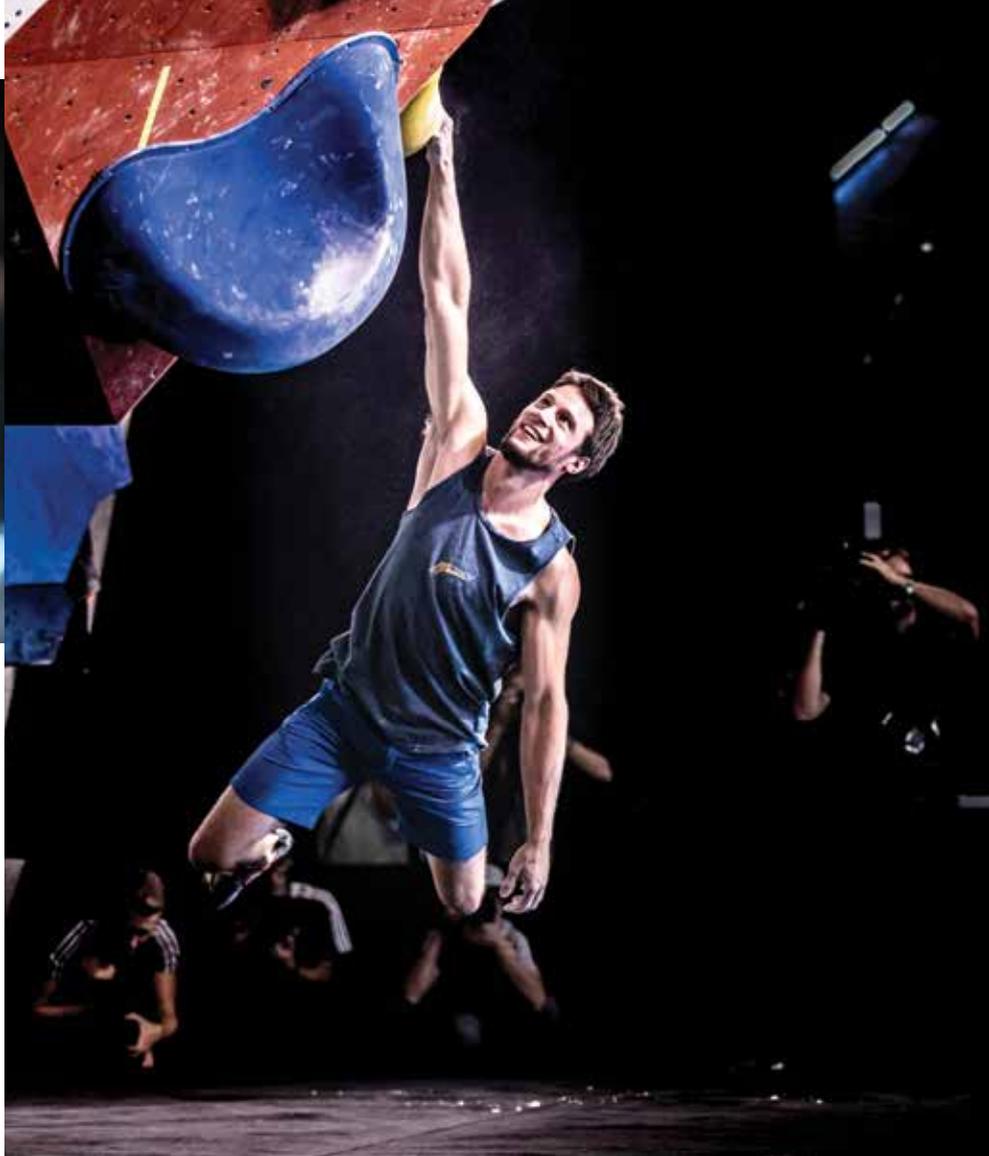
"I THINK IT'S GETTING LESS AND LESS COMMON ON THE CIRCUIT TO HAVE THESE KIND OF FRIENDSHIPS," KHAZANOV SAYS. "BECAUSE OF THE OLYMPICS THERE IS MORE FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR SOME TEAMS, AND I THINK THAT THAT AFFECTS IT"

Gregor doesn't really party, so we partied for him. At Adidas Rockstars last year, Chon drank with us, and he hadn't really drunk much before. In the morning when we texted him to see how he was, he just wrote, 'I'm gonna die.' He almost missed his plane."

But it's more than partying. It's about being comfortable on the big stage. Knowing each other is critical to that.

"If I go to a semi-final, and half of the field is my friends and we're joking backstage, it's easier to have fun," Khazanov says. Haters United was essential in creating a fun and supportive environment, which allowed the climbers to focus on doing their best ... and not just try to outdo one another.

At the World Cup in May 2018, in Tai'an, China, four—count 'em *four*—of



Left: Jernej Kruder hamming it up for the camera at the 2018 Adidas Rockstars competition. Right: Kruder and fellow Hater Jongwon Chon went head-to-head in a Superfinal at Adidas Rockstars. Kruder beat Chon by a nose.

the six finalists were Haters: Vezonik, Chon, Kruder and Khazanov. During previews, they speculated together about potential sequences from mats below. One of the problems looked downright impossible. Kruder turned to the others and said, "Ah, sorry guys. None of you will be able to climb this one, so guess I'm going to win again. Better luck next time." Chon shot right back: "No way, I'll do it." In the end, Khazanov was the only one in the group to top the boulder—which earned him his first-ever World Cup medal, a gold. The rest of the guys were ecstatic for him.

"Our biggest dream is that one day a final will be made up of just Haters," the Zohan—er, Khazanov—tells me.

Ahead of the Olympics, as climbers spend more time training with their national teams, the kind of comraderie the

Haters enjoy could become more rare.

"I think it's getting less and less common on the circuit to have these kinds of friendships," Khazanov says. "Because of the Olympics there is more financial support for some teams, and I think that that affects it"—i.e., when the prizes get bigger, everything could get more serious.

But the Haters remain and it could be the thing that keeps them atop the podium. While the group is highly exclusive, membership is not based on ability or nationality or any particular criteria. For the time being, it does seem to be a boys-only club, but nobody has ever said girls aren't allowed.

In fact, Haters United is still growing. At the end of 2018, someone suggests adding Japanese climber Tomoaki Takata to the group.

They all hit the like button.