

ASHIMA SHIRAISHI

# A MIRACLE MADE IN NEW YORK

Every sport, including bouldering, has its prodigies. For the American Ashima Shiraishi (b. Apr. 3, 2001), however, even this appellation does not go far enough.

While strolling through Central Park in New York with her father back in 2007, a six-year-old Ashima saw a group of climbers at the so-called Rat Rock for the first time. To Ashima, who naturally had no idea about bouldering, it looked like these brightly dressed people with white fingers were doing a strange dance—a bit like what she had often seen her father, an experimental dancer, do. The whole thing was funny, with people talking and laughing a lot. Little Ashima was fascinated and ran over to try it out herself. But she slipped and fell on her first try. She didn't cry, but instead sat down on the grass and watched the climbers attentively. Her next climbing attempt would be completely different from the first one: Ashima climbed a boulder without any difficulty. Not just once, but 10 times in a row.

Mount Hiei, Japan, 2016: Nine years after her first climbing attempts, the 15-year-old Ashima was sitting under a granite roof that was several meters wide and split down the middle. The climbing opportunities that this rock surface afforded were few and far between. Ashima dipped her hands into a chalk bag and blew onto her slightly opened fists, and before the white magnesium cloud had floated to the ground, she was already hanging laterally off two small crimps. Her feet moved quickly from one miniature hold to the next. When Ashima placed her fingers on one of the small holds and gripped them as hard as possible, you could hear her knuckles cracking as she dug her hands into the rock without any concern about scraping off her skin. After 90 seconds of precision acrobatics, Ashima stood at the top of *Horizon* (8C).

With a delicate frame and under five feet tall, she had just climbed one of the world's most difficult boulders and broken two records: She was the first female to climb a grade 8C problem<sup>1</sup> and simultaneously the youngest to have succeeded in climbing a boulder of this difficulty. With *Sleepy Rave*, in the Grampians in Australia, she climbed her second 8C boulder later that same year.

If you take a quick look at Ashima's ticklist over the last few years, you will see that these ascents are not startling achievements. On the contrary: In Ashima's case, they are entirely logical.

When she was eight years old, barely two years after she started climbing, she had sent *Power of Silence* (7C+) in Hueco Tanks, Texas. One year later, she sent her first 8A boulder there: *Chablanke*. Shortly after her 12th birthday, she broke the 8B barrier with *Crown of Aragon*.

Not only did she turn the world of climbing upside down, Ashima also attracted the attention of the mainstream and kept boosting the Shiraishi phenomenon with new superlatives such as "The World's Best Female Climber," "The New Face of Climbing," and "The Future of Climbing." Ashima made talk show appearances and was named "Adventurer of the Year" by the well-known *Outside Magazine*, and *Time* magazine also wrote about the "New York Prodigy."

Just 13 years old, Ashima prefers to climb in colorful trousers sewn by her mother. Unfazed by all the

<sup>1</sup> With her ascent of *Kryptos* in Bahlstal, Switzerland, Kaddi Lehmann of Germany was the second woman to climb an 8C boulder.

accolades she has received, she has worked her way through different levels of difficulty with ease, as if ratings were nothing more than smoke and mirrors. In 2014, she climbed her first 8B+ boulder with *Golden Shadow* in the Rocklands in South Africa (she was only the second female climber to do so, after Tomoko Ogawa from Japan). In 2015, showing an increasing interest in sport climbing, she climbed the route *Open Your Mind Direct* in Santa Linya (Spain). Once again, she became the youngest and first to climb a 9A+ route.<sup>2</sup> Nothing rocky could hold her back for longer than a few attempts, and it even seemed possible that a female would soon be the strongest climber to turn the male-dominated hard-mover world upside down.

Sitting opposite young Ashima, I see a regular teenager from New York with bangs, platform shoes and a colorful down jacket. Her iPhone beeps manically in her jacket pocket with constant notifications. There is nothing to suggest that this young woman, who speaks softly and with reserve, is always one step ahead of her female bouldering colleagues in terms of difficulty ratings.

In the 2017 Junior World Championship at Innsbruck, Ashima won the preliminaries and the bouldering competition. At the time of writing, she was mainly focusing on getting her high school diploma and on the 2020 Olympic Games (since postponed). She doesn't have much free time for rock climbing. When the "Olympics thing" is over, Ashima wants to "devote herself fully to boulders again" and "write their history." In other words: just pick up where she left off.

<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, *Open Your Mind* has been downgraded to 9A/+. With her ascent of *La Rambla* (9A+) in Siurana, Spain, the American Margo Hayes is considered the first woman to have climbed this grade.



After bouldering on Fifth Avenue, it's a stroll down Madison Square Garden and time to cheer on the New York Knicks—for New Yorker Ashima, this is a normal day in the Big Apple.