

When I was younger, say in my teens, I was captivated by just about any form of pastime. I frequently played basketball and football, as well as occasionally taking part in tennis, soccer and softball. I also had an array of different hobbies, such as building model airplanes and other crafts. But today, as I am a whole 23 years of age, I am faced with the growing dilemma of limiting my activities. I have been forced to narrow my options to a few--perhaps even one-- serious form of recreation. But deciding on where and how to focus my attention has proved difficult. What I need is an activity that is both athletically and mentally challenging; I need something I can do now as well as when I'm forty-five; and I need something that is affordable, yet somewhat exclusive (the last thing I want is hoards of people forming single file lines in search of their faddishly recreational destinies). And in case bowling comes to mind, I should mention that I also want my hobby of choice to be outdoors. Passing all of the requisites would, indeed, prove tough, as only one option rose out of the vestiges of rejection to become my new-found passion: rock climbing.

Although my love for nature and landscape scenery is constantly pulling me in the direction of kayaking or mountain biking, they both require considerably more money than I am capable of investing. For this reason, my new avocation is the perfect choice, for I am closely associated with one of the leading names in the rock-climbing industry. Put another way: free stuff! For almost my entire existence I have been good friends with the family of *Roca Cordes de Muntanya*. Based out of Barcelona, Spain, Roca has been manufacturing ropes and harnesses for mountaineers and climbers since 1892. In the summer of 1997, while visiting the Rocas in Barcelona, they surprised me with all the equipment I would need to take up the sport. Adding to the material gratuity, they

proceeded to swell my ego by informing me that their generosity was not solely based on our friendship; rather, they were convinced that I had what it took to become a good climber. However, as they warned me that many people have been fatally injured without the proper training and guidance, they made me pledge that I would not only take professional classes, but climb only with skilled *leaders*<sup>1</sup>. Armed with my duffel bag of gear, a book titled *How to Rock Climb*<sup>2</sup>, some basic information on the fundamentals of the sport, and a payload of enthusiasm, I embarked on a mission to learn the sport. All mountains beware; I was to educate myself on the taming of *El Capitan* and the like.

***Plan of Attack , Self-education, Search and Resources:***

As is usually the case with any endeavor I decide to launch into, I never envision myself as a mere partaker, but instead a master in the making--of course, I seldom meet my own expectations. In fact, I can still catch myself thinking of football in terms of my professional potential: "I could still go pro," I oftentimes recite in my head. Never mind that this is both foolish and dangerous, the point is that when I decided to take up rock scaling I meant business. I want to know what it will take for me to become the guy on the cover of *How to Rock Climb*. I want to know terminology, technique, strategy, proximity to the nearest walls, and most importantly, what I should expect of myself. My search for these answers lead me to an indoor rock climbing wall, locally known as Gallyan's.

***First Hand Experience:***

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<sup>1</sup> *Leader* is the term given to the climber who either heads an expedition or ascends first. They will find the safest --not necessarily the easiest --route for ascending a wall. In general, leaders are very experienced and are trained in not only climbing, but also teaching others to climb.

<sup>2</sup> Long, John. *How to Rock Climb, 2nd edition*. Chockstone; Evergreen. 1993.

Following the advice of my classmates and several natives of the Columbus area, I decided that the best place to start my search was where people were actually climbing, *Gallyan's Sporting Goods*. Even before I went to this "wall", I contemplated my method of operation. I wondered how I could ask the experts (those working at the store) questions, without coming across as just another person reporting on this growing phenomenon. It was especially important for me to make a good impression, since I hoped to gain genuine entrance into the culture of rock climbers--I had to look confident and personify the meaning of "potential". At the same time, I didn't want to give the appearance that I was an experienced climber, thus embarrassing myself when I floundered in the ropes and pounded my body helplessly on the fiberglass surface--OK, maybe that's a little dramatic, but it was something to think about. As it turned out, I must have made the impression of the latter case, for as soon as I walked in, I hadn't even finished gazing at the colossal challenge that lay before me, when both of the attendants began to communicate with me in what was obviously climber lingo. "Hey how ya doin? We got some five-nines and five-tens here--I think you'll enjoy it". I just nodded my head and responded with a convincing, "wow, all right". Clearly aware that I would be unable to avoid future encounters with terminology, I quickly identified myself as an amateur.

Incognito in the form of small talk, I informed the attendants of my unusual connection to the sport and began to conduct a passive inquisition. I questioned them on where one could go to practice the sport, where the best climbs within Ohio were, and a host of other questions. Much to my delight, they not only participated in my interrogation, but invited me to go with them on the next climb. Even going as far as giving me their personal phone numbers, they informed me of a competition that was taking place in the

upcoming week . Also, they turned me on to a gym that was specifically designed for rock climbers, called *Vertical Adventures*.. Needless to say, I had hit the jackpot in terms of resources.

### *The Wall:*

Even all the information in the world, however, was moot if I could not scale the beast that lay before me. As I waited for my turn, curiously watching others fail and succeed, I considered which route to take up the wall. The left and right sides tended to be the easiest, while the center was filled with the most challenging *holds*<sup>3</sup> and *grades*<sup>4</sup>. I was determined to go for the gusto and climb up the middle. As I was being strapped in to my harness, the instructor, Jaime, decided that he would teach me how to tie a *figure-eight follow-through knot* (this was contrary to normal procedure, where he would simply fasten the participant in himself). After several practice ties, where I managed to confuse myself more than anything, I felt pretty confident that the finished product would keep me secure. An impressive knot indeed, I was delighted to take part in such a fundamental and integral part of my first climbing experience.

Buckled and ready to go, I got about half way up the wall when I realized why everyone before me was falling down: I was dead tired. My extremities were about to explode and every part of my upper body told me that the next hold was much too far away. Although I thought about letting go, this was not an option; after all, I was the chosen one-- or something like that. Never giving myself away, I continued only because I managed to

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<sup>3</sup> *Holds* are the indentations and textures of a rock the climber uses to pull oneself up. They are considered natural or unnatural, with the former being the hardest to grab on to. A natural hold may be as fine as a slight groove in the face of the wall. Typically, the more unnatural holds a route has, the easier the climb.

<sup>4</sup> *Grade* is the term used for difficulty levels within a particular climb. Grades range between 1 and 6, with 6 being the hardest.

ad-lib a resting technique on a particularly huge unnatural hold. Once again lunging upward, I was faced with another predicament: Almost out of energy and on the brink of sloppiness, I was forced to make a multiple-move maneuver with no room for error. My destination was a small crevice about the size of an earhole and a couple of grooves for my feet; I would have to land almost simultaneously on all parts. The moment of truth had arrived: If the Rocas were right I would make the move successfully and continue to the top unscathed; if I missed, I would realize my fear of floundering and bruise my infantile confidence. There was little choice but to act as if my life depended on it: Envisioning that the rope was not holding me, I successfully stretched myself to the upper part of the wall without incident. I subdued the forty foot creature and returned to the ground victorious.

*Media Resources: Internet, Books, etc.*

After my first climbing experience, I was more enthusiastic than ever. Wondering how I could get more involved in groups or perhaps just gain valuable knowledge, I decided to roam the internet for various sites. After a brief search I landed on what was probably the most popular of the rock climbing cyber-stations<sup>5</sup>. Without a doubt the most comprehensive and up-to-date webpage, it was complete with information on where to climb in your area, advice on purchasing equipment, where to get useful guides, and where to find clubs. Keying in my search on the state of Ohio, the webpage informed me of several mountains within the immediate area. Complete logistics, including height, type of rock, who owned the land, and even directions on how to get there were given. Also, I was pleased to find that my school, The Ohio State University, had a mountaineering club, although it appeared to be in a moratorium.

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<sup>5</sup> Rock and Road webpage: [www.rock&road.com](http://www.rock&road.com)

Concerning my handbook, *How to Rock Climb*, I consider it to be more of a reference source than anything. That is, although I attempted to read it in complete form several times, the nature of the material makes it very difficult to enjoy. Reading about all the various climbing styles one could impart, for example, is unnecessary, since on most occasions a climb will only call for a particular method; likewise, concerning equipment, the book deals exhaustively with every aspect of the climbing industry. The same goes for the major journal on the sport, *Climbing Magazine*. Most of the information here tends to be of advanced nature, and the advertising is too tempting for a fanatic like myself--I just assume not purchase the magazine for fear of buying more than I need. Both pieces of literature, however, are great resources as my skills begin to develop: the book may be used as a means for examining particular aspects, while the journals will provide me with cultural ties and the latest outfit information.

***Expert Interview:***

After completing the climb at Gallyan's wall, and subsequently befriending the attendants who manned it, I decided that I should dig deeper into their knowledge and thus subject Jaime to a formal interview. After all, if I was worthy enough to learn the figure-eight knot, I was worthy of asking a few questions. Much less subtle than my previous inquisition, I overtly played the role of the nosy reporter<sup>6</sup>. When I asked Jaime what important advice he had for a new climber, as well as what he recommended as the best avenue for getting involved, he noted firmly that the key to success was to climb

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<sup>6</sup> A full dialogue of my interview is attached in the appendix.

consistently, never allowing yourself to remain at the same level for long. “Don’t be afraid to fall”, he noted. He went on to state that it was important to participate with more advanced climbers whenever possible. And when asked about what resources he recommended, he simply reiterated that there was no substitute for practice.; he, himself, had taken a class and read several books, but they were minuscule in their respective importance to actually attending the gyms, which he did religiously about three times per week.

As for the different levels of climbers and what it would take to get to my desired level of performance--that being the scaling of El Capitan, to name one monstrosity--I was in for a rude awakening. Almost as if I had mentioned some kind of geologic messiah, Jaime quickly recoiled into a ball of terrified ineptitude when I mentioned the great “El Cap’”. This was not the first time this had happened. Even when the Rocas mentioned the spectacular mountain, the word “elite” was usually involved in the description of those who dared to confront it. Jaime quickly enlightened me to why climbing the great wall of Yosemite was such a task. At this level, he mentioned, one had to be an absolute master of all aspects of climbing, including meticulous preparation, endurance, technique, controlling fear, and a heap of other intimidating things I lacked. Jaime noted that “sometimes a guy will be on the face for a couple of weeks, dealing with storms and winds while he is trying to sleep on a *port-a-ledge*.” Adding to the mental and physical demands, a climb like El Cap’ also requires a considerable fiscal investment. Jaime mentioned one example: “To Climb El Cap’ you would need a bunch of *spring-loaded coming devices*..I have been climbing for two years and have only one. They cost about sixty dollars a piece--and that’s a cheap one.” Somewhat discouraged, it was obvious I would have to modify my goals.

***Final Results: My Experience Revisited***

My original desire in this search for knowledge was to determine where I lay in the realm of this great sport. Without any doubt, I succeeded in this regard. And although my vision of becoming an elite climber was considerably more doubtful than before, I was nonetheless determined to pursue my dream of climbing the great vertical slab, El Capitan. If nothing else, all of the sources have combined to give me a firm understanding of what is involved. After all, this is my chosen form of recreation, and I am the chosen one.

Abbreviated Dialogue of Interview

**Q: What important advice do you have for someone attempting to take up the sport?**

A: "Climb a lot". "Always push yourself to the next level...don't be afraid to fall".

**Q: How does one get into the sport? How did you get into it?**

A: "You go to gyms and climb with experienced climbers"

**Q: How did you learn? Did you take any classes, read books?**

A: "I took one class at Ohio State--Marion campus." "I have read some books, but mostly they are on specific information".

**Q: Can anyone do this sport? Are there certain requisites that will limit one's success?**

A: "Anyone can climb..it's just a matter of what level...walking up a steep hill is technically considered climbing". "If someone wants to be at the higher level then physical things come into consideration".

**Q: What different levels of climbing are there?**

A: Levels range from 1 to 6, but we usually just say 5-easy, 5-fun, and 5-hard...Anything where you need a rope is at the 5 level; Anything where you actually use the rope to climb--as an *aid*-- is six-level”.

**Q: What about something like *El Capitan*?**

A: “El Cap’..jeezzz!” “Everything on El cap’ is 5.12 or above...I’ve been climbing for two years and am nowhere near that caliber--those guys are masters. It’s like comparing apples and oranges: You gotta have a bunch of equipment, like *spring-loaded coming devices*, you have to bore your own holes..you have to have *trad gear* [traditional gear]”. “I’m a sport climber; that’s a whole different deal..it’s like comparing apples and oranges”.

**Q: How do you get to the point of being the elite climber?**

A: “You live by big walls and hang out with big time climbers”.

**Q: Is rock climbing a current fad?**

A: “No, it’s just a growing sport.” “Now we have gyms, so the image of the burly mountain guy with a beard is disappearing...Now you have a business guy getting off work and going to the gym to climb and let out some steam.” “Climbing has been around for a long time”.