

Climbing Time

by Gary P. Joyce

If you think for a minute that one column can teach you to climb, you're out of your mind. Get some lessons from a professional. Call the American Mountain Guide Association (303/271-0984) for a listing of guides in your area. Failing that, go to your local shop and ask for a referral. Don't figure you can do this by yourself unless you've got a death wish. That said, here's what you can expect if you decide to get involved in climbing. . .

Equipment

Start up costs aren't terrible; it's more a choice of what you want versus what you need. Essentials are: shoes, harness, locking carabiner, figure eight, belay device and chalk bag. This is assuming you'll find a partner (and finding a partner is one of the most difficult aspects of climbing) who has more cash than you and has already sprung for the rest of the gear.

If you've got a buddy who is also starting out, duplicate the above and add a rope, hardware, slings and more. Rock shoes have a sticky but smooth sole and rand and cost in the \$100-\$150 range; a harness should go about \$40-\$50; a locking biner about \$10-\$15, ditto with the figure eight, belay device and chalk bag (this holds gymnastic chalk).

The rope you use is specifically made for climbing- it has stretch in it, so when you fall (and you will fall) it'll give some. This type of rope is called a kernmantle rope; it has a braided outer sheath to protect the inner workings from abuse. Take care of your rope; don't step on it, don't tie the dog up with it, don't pull your car with it. Keep it out of the sun, don't store it in your trunk. Figure about \$150 for a 50-meter dry (treated with water repellent) line.

Hardware is way too involved to go into here, but will cost you the biggest portion of cash. There're carabiners, camming devices, rocks, hexes and a zillion other combos. Budget about \$500 for this for starters and figure on spending more as fast as you get better.

Ice gear is another story money-wise. If you purchased a fairly adjustable harness, you'll be able to use tha. Your rope will be fine, and so will your biners, belay devices and figure eight. Then tack on: two ice axes \$350; plastic double boots \$200-\$400; crampons \$150; helmet \$50; hardware (ice screws, deadmen, etc.) \$250; clothing \$500 -\$1200 depending on what you buy. (I swear by Gore-Tex and that ain't cheap. Don't forget, it's gonna be cold- and it can be wet.)

I have purchased climbing gear off the Internet at a substantial savings. I wouldn't buy a used rope or

carabiners, but just about anything else is a safe bet.

Terminology

Here are some words that'll make you sound like you know what you're talking about. . .

Free climbing - climbing with hands and feet; the rope is used only to hold a fall.

Solo climbing - climbing without a rope.

Bouldering - climbing, well, boulders. Usually unroped.

YDS - the Yosemite Decimal System. A rating system for climbs. It starts at 5.0 and goes to 5.14d. The letters come into play above 5.10. Climbing starts to get reeeal hard above 5.9.

Lead climber - the climber going first.

Belay or belayer - The person holding the other end of the rope for the lead.

Second - the belayer and/or second climber up a route.

Top roping - how you'll learn to climb. The rope goes from a belayer on the ground up to an anchor and down to the climber. Routes are usually no more than 70 feet high.

Anchor - a fixed point above the climber the rope will run to and through.

Placement - where/how your hardware or protection (pro) is put into the rock on a free climb (non-top rope).

Rappelling - sliding down the ropes to return to where you started. More people get hurt doing this than in climbing. Pay mucho attention.

Pitch - the distance between belay points on any given climb. Limited to the length of your rope.

Carabiner or biner (beaner) -a oval or D-shaped piece of metal with a gate.

Getting Ready

At the lower levels of the rating system, and in your beginning days as a climber, you'll be able to overcome most difficulties with arm strength. This is a game in which legs are every bit as important as arms, though it will help if you have really strong forearms and fingers. I have one of those spring grips hanging from my rearview mirror and work out in sets of 50; I average about 200 per hand per day when I'm driving around.

Calf muscles are also important: do a lot of toe raises. Stand up on your toes and lower. No bouncing. To make it harder, do it on a raised platform so your heels can drop lower than your toes.

Eventually just about every other muscle in your body will come into play. You won't see any muscle-bound rock jocks, but you won't see any flab on any of them either. They're all cord, sinew and zero body fat. (I'm old, got a belly, shut up. I still climb.)

If your hands aren't rough, they'll rip, and even rough hands tear on granite. They'll get used to it.

Moving

There are methods and means of foot and hand placement that vary according to medium (ice or rock) and what the rock (or ice) will give you. These are the things you'll learn from an instructor, so I won't go into it here. Here are some things to think about, however.

There's no room for ego when learning. Listen, do what you're told, ask questions, but keep your opinions to yourself; you're there to learn, and this is a serious game.

This is a thinking sport as well as a physical one. Use your mind when confronted with the "impossible."

Trust your foot gear. Rock shoes will stick if you use them right, as will crampons. Believe in your shoes.

Remember to make a concentrated effort to use your legs. You'll be surprised at what they'll do if you focus your power there.

When you "come off" (fall), try to come off in a controlled manner. You'll usually know it's going to happen and have time to say (yell?) to the belayer "falling" (honest). When you do come off, don't figure there's nothing else to do. You'll be going back into the face pretty much right away and you should be ready to absorb it. Slamming into things ain't fun.

Don't be afraid to improvise. When I was learning, I sort of shot it all about midway up the third pitch of a climb. There was a huge crack about shoulder level, so I jammed my arm in there elbow first and found I could rest almost all my weight on that arm. My instructor allowed how she'd never seen that maneuver before. It may not have been great form, but it worked.

Pro placement is a learned skill achieved by watching those more experienced than you, knowing the rock and knowing the limits of your hardware. Remember, if your placement fails you're now skydiving without a chute.

A word on helmets. When you're taking lessons, you'll have to wear one. Generally speaking, I rarely wear one when I climb rock (especially if I "know" the area). I always wear one on the ice, however. That said, a little piece of rock can attain a speed of 40-50 mph in about two seconds-think about getting conked with it.

Where To Go

Fortunately the Northeast is blessed with some great climbing areas. In New York you've got the famed Shawangunk Mountains (The Gunks) with zillions of routes, the Adirondacks for real wilderness/expedition-feeling climbing [article on the Gunks and the Dacks], the Delaware Water Gap area and more. Connecticut has the Traprock area, New Hampshire the White Mountains and Maine has Acadia National Park.

Then there are the climbing gyms which are springing up everywhere. These are great places to learn, work out and perfect technique, aren't weather dependent and provide a reasonable facsimile of real rock. There is a difference, however. You can perfect technique in a gym, but applying it to real-world rock starts another learning curve. The chances of getting hurt or killed in a gym are minimal to zero. The chances of getting hurt or killed on the rock aren't. They are two different mediums-as different as rock and ice. Don't think expertise in one, means expertise on the other. Yes, it takes some work and takes some learning... but nothing beats sitting at the top of climb and looking down to the tops of trees as hawks and airplanes fly below you.

And to think, you got there all by yourself.

[Return to Last Page](#)