

Climbing rock!

Classes offer techniques to dare the rocky heights

By JEFF PETERSEN
Of the Emerald

Liz steps back over the cliff's edge allowing the yellow goldline rope to slip through her carabiner brake.

Waving at the belayer who protects her in case she falls, she drops down the rock face out of sight. She leans back until her legs are horizontal to the rock wall. When the wall ends abruptly at an overhang, Liz drops down and begins twirling weightlessly in space.

After a dizzy descent her feet touch ground. She unhooks from the rope and shouts to her partner, "I'm down, and okay!" Liz has just completed her first rappel in the University's beginning rock climbing course.

Courses in beginning and intermediate rock climbing are offered fall and spring terms. Besides teaching how to climb and rappel safely, the beginning class introduces students to others interested in climbing.

Intermediate climbing teaches the skills needed for leading climbs, especially the placement of belays, which protects climbers from falling down a rock face.

Eugene is an ideal place for rock climbing courses because of easy access to practice rocks. The classes are taught at two locations — the basalt columns on Skinner's Butte, and the Coburg Caves, 10 miles north of town.

The first session of the beginning class starts in front of an Esslinger Hall blackboard and ends in the Pioneer Cemetery west of Mac Court. Most students know little to nothing about climbing rock.

"I thought maybe they pulled you up," says Liz Firmage, sophomore psychology major. "I knew zero about it. All I knew is that it was called rock climbing."

Students set up rappels and belays and tie knots until they know them by heart. Instructor Steve Guthrie is not satisfied until he sees students tying knots — the grapevine, bowline on a coil and figure-eight — that are functional and neat.

Firmage says she likes rappelling better than climbing. "Going down you feel yourself secured in. Climbing it's all you," she says.

"The first step's the worst. You think you're going to fall. I was really scared. You walk really slow; you get more confidence as you go down."

During the second class session, held on "the Whale" at the Coburg Caves, students learn to trust their boots and balance. Although the climbs are short, they range in difficulty from beginning through expert. Climbers can rappel down easy slopes or more difficult overhangs. The Whale shakes the kinks out of

climbing techniques before students move to more difficult walls.

Beginners move to Skinner's Butte's smooth rock face for the third class session. Unexciting horizontal rappels in the cemetery become exciting vertical rappels at the columns. Students climb the maze of cracks, choosing from 75-foot-high climbs ranging from easy to difficult.

Firmage describes her first climb:

"It seemed like forever. When you reach the top you just appreciate feeling safe. It was a game I was playing against myself. It's you against the rock. You've got to do it. Before I got to the top I thought I'd never go again."

Each class session ends with students coiling the rope they have been using. Guthrie smiles when he sees a neatly coiled rope, but frowns ominously at a messy coil.

The fourth session, held at Coburg Caves, gives students the chance to test their skills at climbing rock that is free of cracks and belaying. Falls are not uncommon.

Falling is a confidence builder for the beginning climber. Climbers often overcommit themselves. Fingers and toes slip from rock nubbins. The belayer stops the climber's fall.

For a moment the climber hangs suspended in space, steps back onto the rock and continues the climb.

"It's an all out thing," says Firmage. "It's not something you can do partially. You begin to appreciate every muscle in your body. Parts of the body you never knew existed ache afterward."

"It's like when you put your toe in a crack. You have to learn to trust that toe. You learn about being friends with your body."

All climbers will experience what is called "sewing machine leg." It happens when nervous tension and fatigue combine to cause muscle spasms in climbers' legs.

"I felt like my whole body was shaking violently, but it was just my legs," says Firmage. "It takes over your whole body."

After much practice at the basic rock climbing skills, the sixth and last session rolls around. It's time for the comprehensive practical exam. An afternoon is spent at Skinner's Butte's basalt columns tying knots, fixing anchors, belaying, rappelling and coiling rope. For students to pass the course, they must show proficiency in all these skills.

When class is over students often exchange addresses and phone numbers, to plan future climbs. It seems that once introduced to the vertical world, students want to keep climbing. There's something addictive about pressing close to an abrasive rock and about struggling toward the heights.

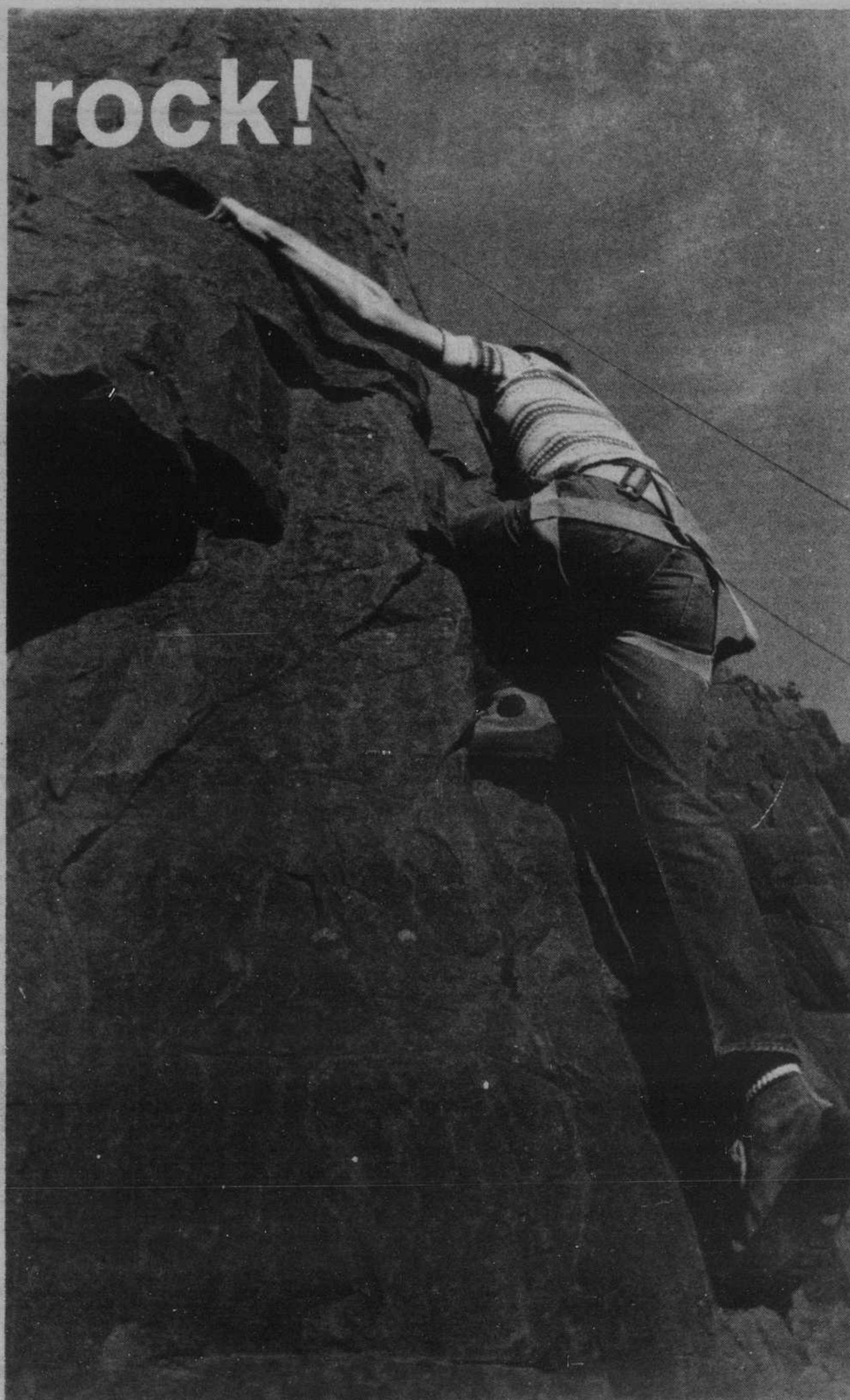
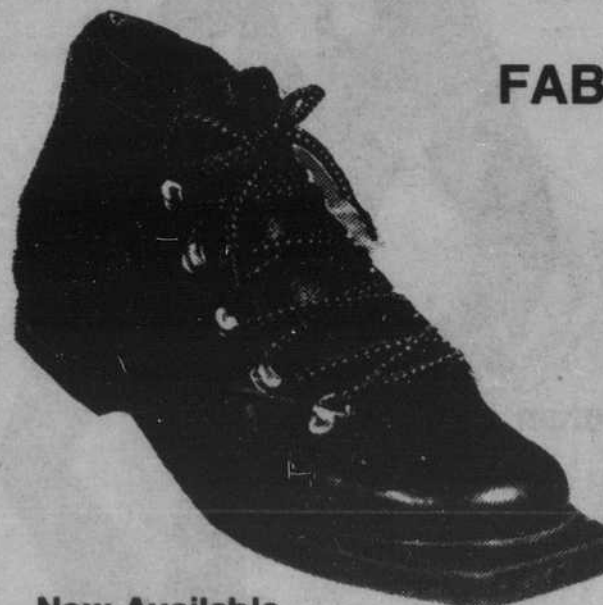


Photo by Dennis Hickok

Special boots and other climbing gear are necessary for this ascent of a challenging wall on Skinner's Butte. Some students in the University's rock climbing class find the dizzy descents more fun than the climbing.



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