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Hanging on the rocks

Climbers reach for hand-holds on way to top (with aid of classes)

It was hot. The sun shone mercilessly hot on the sheer rock as he made his way slowly up the mountain's face. Sweat flowed from his forehead as he strained to reach the next hand-hold. The summit was only a few feet away.

Why bother, people ask?

"Because it's a challenge," says rock-climbing enthusiast Jeff Hartley. "The exhilaration one achieves while hanging on the face of a cliff is awe-inspiring."

"It provides an opportunity to get away from city life and be in the outdoors," says Keith Nelson of the Outdoor Program. "It can also be a chance to share with friends and meet new friends."

Whatever the motivation, the opportunities for rock climbers in the Eugene area are excellent. Numerous programs exist to aid everyone from the rookie to the seasoned climber. One program for University students involves the Outdoor Pursuits classes offered by the P.E. department.

"You really have to learn some basic backpacking skills and navigation skills before you're going to be able to get into mountaineering, per se," cautions Jim Blanchard, coordinator of the University's Adventure-Pursuits program. "We encourage that here, and in fact require that students take one of our generalized courses before they take rock climbing."

The prerequisite to all Outdoor Pursuits classes is the Wilderness/Ethics/Safety class. The University also offers preparatory backpacking and mountaineering classes that lead to the more advanced courses.

"We have a complete set of classes that assume nothing at the start and work you all the way through the progression to very advanced levels of mountaineering," Blanchard says. "There are, of course, less structured opportunities available through the Outdoor Program."

The Outdoor Program uses an informal, cooperative format to assist in planning outdoor activities. By simply signing a trip sheet at the program's office in the EMU basement, anyone can use the Outdoor Program to organize an outing, usually in a matter of days.

"A lot of people new to the area come in," Nelson says. "They have a chance to meet people with common interests."

Another program is offered through the Eugene Parks and Recreation Department. According to its outdoor program supervisor, Chuck Solin, the department offers several courses dealing with rock and mountain climbing, especially during the summer.

"We have beginning rock climbing classes, plus some three- and four-day schools," Solin says. "One example is Memorial Mountaineering, which will happen over Memorial Day weekend."

"Then this summer we'll do a whole series, starting from the complete entry-level-type programs, which would be beginning backpacking classes, clear through climbing the North Sister, and intermediate rock climbing classes."

Those classes will include three local beginning rock climbing courses and two at Smith Rock State Park, as well as ice and snow climbing and instructional workshops.

Other programs include those offered by the Obsidians, a local mountaineering club, and by Pacific Northwest Outward Bound, based in Portland.

The costs for programs like these are not



Diane Lainzis, a participant in the University outdoor program, scales a nearby precipice.

prohibitive.

The P.E. department charges a \$13-15 fee for mountaineering courses, which include transportation and some equipment. For rock climbers, a \$5 fee will provide most of the needed equipment. Rentals usually make up the difference.

"Even if someone has to rent ice axes and crampons, the total cost shouldn't exceed about \$25," Blanchard says.

The Parks and Recreation Department offers a similar picture. Although a four-day climb may run in the \$50 range, most costs run "anywhere from \$1 for the big wall-climbing slide show to \$34 for an intermediate rock climbing class," Solin says.

The Outdoor Program does not rent its own equipment, but with intelligent shopping, climbers are often able to get what they need at a reasonable cost.

"Equipment is important," Nelson says. "It takes time to find what's good for you. Start slow, buy as you need and make sure it will fit your needs."

Along with the large number of programs available to climbing enthusiasts, Eugene is close to several good climbing prospects.

"The columns at Skinner's Butte are probably one of the best training areas for rock climbers on the West Coast, as far as being right in the middle of the city," says Solin. "And Smith Rock State Park (near Redmond in the Crooked River Gorge) is probably the premier rock climbing area in all of Oregon. It's real popular."

The popularity of rock climbing and mountaineering has leveled off slightly since its peak in the early 1970s, but interest remains high. According to Blanchard, the key is quality, not quantity.

"I personally think I've got the best bunch of students on campus," Blanchard says. "For mountaineering classes in particular, you tend to get bright, aggressive, inner-directed, self-motivated students."

By Jim Lund
Photo by Jim Blanchard