

Go climb a rock

Bill Ramsey climbs the 35-foot face of Skinner's Butte in less than 45 seconds — with no safety ropes.

Ramsey, a 22-year-old philosophy major, is considered one of the leading climbers in the Northwest, and to keep that standing, he climbs the butte an average of four times a week.

"It's so localized and unique," says Ramsey. "The local climbers around Eugene are really nice — it's just a super place to practice."

His father got him interested in this dangerous sport when he was 16. After his first climb, he says he was hooked. "I was totally obsessed with climbing," he remembers. "I ate, drank and slept it."

To work his way up to the most difficult climbs, Ramsey spends hours doing pull-ups and other strengthening exercises.

"It's very important to be in good shape and to have strong fingers," he explains. "Sometimes you can only jam the tips of your fingers in the cracks, and they have to support your whole body." He adds that finesse and technique also are necessary for some routes.

Climbing is a mental, as well as a physical, strain, Ramsey says.

"When you do a wall, it's really easy to psyche yourself out," he says. "The concentration level is so high that at the end of the day you're not thinking clearly and you have to check and re-check things."

The biggest strain, however, is fear.

"It's not bad to be afraid," says Ramsey. "In fact, I don't think I want to climb with someone who isn't afraid. It's really important to go with people you can trust because they are literally holding your life in their hands."

"What is important is how you control your fear," he says. "After a while you learn how to use it to your advantage."

Despite the fear and stress that climbers experience, Ramsey says he enjoys scaling up nearly vertical cliffs.

"You really feel like you have accomplished something after you make it to the top."

Because Ramsey is limited to the Eugene area during the school year, the summer months are when he does most of his dangerous climbing.

Two summers ago he climbed "El Capitan" in the Yosemite Valley. The 3,000-foot monolith has a vertical climb that tapers into an overhang. At

some points, Ramsey says he was climbing with his back toward the ground.

"It just blows you away," he says. "So many things can go wrong."

The trip up "El Capitan" took three days, and Ramsey was exhausted and dehydrated by the time he reached the top.

"The feeling I got from doing that climb was comparable to nothing I have ever felt before in my life," he says. "It was just a fantastic experience."

For Ramsey, rock climbing is an escape from the pressures of monotonous, everyday happenings.

The total concentration it takes to reach the top of a rock puts him in his own separate world: It's just him, the rock and the thousands of feet of space below.

"Being afraid can keep you alive."

**Story by
Steve Friedman**

**Photos by
Mark Johnson**



Rock climber Bill Ramsey demonstrates various climbing techniques on one of his frequent ascents to the top of Skinner's Butte.





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