

University students reach peak with careful preparation

Outdoor Program helps 17 students achieve new heights



Randy Bridges (with ice ax) and Steve Mertz reach the top of the Middle Sister peak in Eastern Oregon as part of an Outdoor Program expedition.

People tend to think the stress involved in calculus and chemistry finals will kill them.

On Sunday, 17 University students and seven leaders took a different kind of final for Jim Blanchard's mountaineering outing class by climbing the 10,000-foot Middle Sister peak in Eastern Oregon.

Story and Photos by Peter Mason

If a one-credit physical education class sounds easy, ask a student who climbed Middle Sister how much preparation for an expedition to a peak takes, and appreciation for the task swells.

Students first must take a preparation class and a co-requisite wilderness survival class dealing with general outdoor activities. They also read outlined procedures in case of an emergency and are required to pack a necessary amount of clothing, food, first aid and climbing gear for the most extreme conditions.

Because of warm weather, many students were disgruntled at the extra clothing and gear added to their packs. But Blanchard, the Outdoor Program director and leader of the expedition, said planning is key to safety.

Much of the preparation centers around the weather because it is the largest variable. When people backpack, ski or participate in other outdoor activities, they understand what the environment can dish out, and there is a larger degree of safety.

Mountaineering trips generally take place in bad-weather areas. Many times people are exposed to and should be prepared for 10-degree weather, said Lance Christensen, a group leader on last weekend's outing.

For this trip, the skies were clear and sunny except for a brief thunder, lightning and hail shower Friday afternoon when the group reached their 6,800-foot base camp.

The expedition began 6 a.m. Friday when the vans pulled out — five hours later students were on the first leg of the journey.

The following morning began at 4:30 when leaders woke students to clear skies. They later began to practice the skills needed to traverse Hayden

Glacier and climb the ice and snow peak.

The skills included walking through snow, arresting a fall, traveling in a group roped together, using crampons, glissading (skiing on your feet or backside) and using an ice ax. In class, students already had learned several knots, avalanches, outdoor ethics and survival in the environment.

"The best learning is done directly from experiencing the consequences of your actions," Blanchard said, commenting on the amount of knowledge learned in a short period of time for this expedition. He added it is important to balance safety with a "learning by scaring yourself" approach.

The group had trudged to the middle of the glacier by 5:30 as the sun rose. At 6:30 the group arrived at the saddle between North Sister and South Sister, nearly three miles away from base camp and 2,000 feet higher in elevation.

The final leg up the mountain began at 7, and by 9:30 the entire group had arrived at the summit to enjoy a few moments of rest before climbing down the mountain to base camp, breaking down their gear and hiking five miles out with full packs to the trail head.

For student Steve Mertz, the benefits include mountaineering know-how and the enjoyment of the wilderness. One

'The best learning is done directly from experiencing the consequences of your actions.'

— Jim Blanchard

That balance was in evidence last year when a group of climbers was lost on Mount Hood. Blanchard and his mountaineering outing class were on Mount Hood the same weekend and attempted to reach the summit on Sunday but were turned back by weather.

The trek to the top of the Sister began very early. By midnight the students were up, preparing their packs and eating a cold breakfast by headlamps in balmy 45-degree weather. By 1:15 they had reached the practice slope of the previous day.

At 2 a.m., the beginning mountaineers began climbing a scree-covered slope below Hayden Glacier — scree is loose, gravelly rock fragments — and an hour later they began to rope up for safer travel.

person felt ill and stayed with a leader at the saddle.

Others enjoy the accomplishment upon reaching the summit and seeing for miles in every direction.

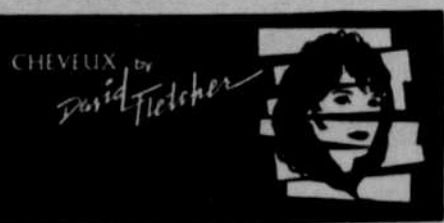
A common link between them is a fascination with telling stories about their adventures in the high country. If adventurous outings sound good, the Outdoor Program offers a wide range of land- and water-based activities year round, and fees are generally not too high.

The stories, of course, are free.

(Editor's note: Peter Mason is an Oregon Daily Emerald freelance reporter who took part in the class and the trip up Middle Sister.)



Students in an Outdoor Program mountaineering outing class celebrate their ascension to the peak of Eastern Oregon's Middle Sister.



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