



Navy Band to rock SAGE Center/3C



Creamy frozen coffee without the cream/4C



Tuna fishing trip worth the ride/8C



For video of the obstacle course visit eastoregonian.com

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Lucas Simpson constructed an obstacle course in the front yard of his Milton-Freewater home as a way to practice for the American Ninja Warrior competition.



Photo contributed by Charles Dean

Bailey Harter scales the warped wall during a ninja warrior-style competition last August at Lucas Simpson's homemade course outside Milton-Freewater.

NINJA DREAMS

Saxophonist builds obstacle course to train for television competition



Photo contributed by Charles Dean

Daniel Eifers swings through cannonball alley during an obstacle course competition at Lucas Simpson's homemade course outside of Milton-Freewater.

By ANTONIO SIERRA
East Oregonian

Lucas Simpson conquered the cliffhanger four years ago, but he still takes a brief moment to collect himself before he hoists himself up.

He jumps and grabs a wooden ledge that ascends diagonally above him, before swinging to a higher ledge parallel to the ground.

The third stage of the cliffhanger features a pair of ledges that offer barely enough room for both hands, but Simpson is athletic enough to swing his way onto the second ledge before finishing the obstacle.

The 22-year-old's feet never touch the ground.

There are no stakes during Simpson's demonstration for a couple of reporters on a stormy Tuesday morning just north of Milton-Freewater. But the home-built course on his parents' ample front lawn isn't just for a grueling workout.

Instead, he's using it as a training center to compete on a televised competition with the same obstacles on a much larger scale — American Ninja Warrior.

The competition first caught Simpson's attention in its original Japanese iteration, Sasuke, and he and his grandfather started building the course after the show was imported to the United States in 2009.

Simpson lived in Sacramento, California, until he was 10, before moving to Milton-Freewater to be closer to his grandparents who are local orchard farmers.

Instead of basing the cliffhanger on set plans or designs, Simpson said he would pause



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Lucas Simpson hangs one of the obstacles on his homemade course he built at his home in Milton-Freewater.

the show during the broadcast, approximating the contestants' wingspan to get a sense of how it's built. He and his grandfather finished the first two obstacles five years ago. Even as Simpson left home to pursue a bachelor's degree in music at Central Washington University (Simpson is also a dedicated saxophonist), the pair continued to add onto the obstacle course.

"It's like the biggest playground for adults there is," Simpson said of American Ninja Warrior's appeal.

Simpson estimated he now has 11-12 obstacles on his course depending on how he configures some of the interchangeable

pieces. He needs each one of the obstacles if he's going to try to improve on his performance at a qualifying round last April.

The competition completed a relentless 8-day period where Simpson flew to the University of Northern Colorado to audition for a jazz studies master's program, flew back to Ellensburg for a performance with his jazz band and a long drive down to Los Angeles to compete in American Ninja Warrior's regional qualifiers.

Starting his run at 3 a.m., Simpson was able to get through the first three obstacles before faltering on the "ring toss," a

series of three diagonal rails with pegs sticking out of the side that a competitor must climb across using plastic rings.

Simpson's run was enough to get him into the top 40 of 125 competitors, but he didn't make the cut to get into the next round.

Top competitors eventually compete in Las Vegas on Mount Midoriyama, the show's ultimate course that only two people have ever completed.

Although Simpson's friends and family across Milton-Freewater and Ellensburg tuned in to see the hometown kid, the closest Simpson got to a broadcast appearance was being featured in the background taping his hands

"IT'S LIKE THE BIGGEST PLAYGROUND FOR ADULTS THERE IS."

LUCAS SIMPSON, OF MILTON-FREEWATER, ON AMERICAN NINJA WARRIOR'S APPEAL

as the cameras focused on another competitor.

An avid rock climber, a hobby not uncommon to American Ninja Warrior competitors, Simpson said he focused too much of his training on his grip strength rather than his upper body strength as a whole.

In addition to fixing that, Simpson said it was important to work on his balancing skills, an area where rock climbers traditionally struggle.

"One little slip and your entire run is done," he said.

Simpson missed some scholarship opportunities because of jazz band commitments. So he decided to take a year off before applying to graduate schools again and use time not spent on music and applications to focus on his ninja training.

While he plans to compete every year, Simpson thinks this is the year he can put the most preparation and work into succeeding at the show.

In the meantime, Simpson has invited the community to get into the ninja spirit as well, hosting a local competition and scheduling an open gym for children and adults Oct. 15 and Oct. 16.

Among them might be Eastern Oregon's next ninja warrior.

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