

# The steep and rocky road

## Steps to successful rock climbing

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts  
photo by Tech. Sgt. Kevin Gruenwald

After hang gliding above the earth and diving through the depths of the ocean, Don Vincent was searching for something different.

He hadn't hit a brick wall yet, but he was soon climbing something similar after visiting the outdoor recreation office at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. He signed up for the beginner climbing clinic and soon found himself harnessed to a rope propelling himself up a rocky edifice inside a local climbing center.

The retired captain described the experience as exciting, challenging and physically exerting. He hopes to lure his wife, Lt. Col. Angela Vincent, into the sport so they can begin exploring numerous climbing possibilities at nearby Red Rock Canyon located about 30 miles from Nellis.

### A rocky start

Those are the emotions everyone should experience after their first time on the rocks, said Fred Frazzetta, an instructor at the Power House Rock Climbing Center in Las Vegas where Mr. Vincent and other Air Force people took that first step into rock climbing.

That feeling never left Mr. Frazzetta after his first climb 13 years ago at Red Rock. Neither will the memory of his introduction to the sport. As a novice, he scrambled onto the rocks without rope, harness or safety helmet. Nearby, a father and son had finished

their day's climb and were putting away their gear when the son pointed out to his dad how the young Mr. Frazzetta climbed without the use of gear. He overheard the father's reply: "It's a----- like him who get themselves killed."

However, the father followed his remark with an offer to Mr. Frazzetta to try the sport with the proper gear. The ropes, harness and metal clips looked convoluted to Mr. Frazzetta, but everything fit perfectly.

"It was an experience I'll never forget," he said. "That was 13 years ago, and I still enjoy it as much today as that first time."

He also enjoys teaching beginners who come in all shapes and sizes and from different backgrounds. They take up the sport for various reasons, he said, to include natural curiosity, seeking an alternative workout or attempting to overcome the fear of heights. Reasons vary as widely as the ages of his students, which have ranged from

4 to 81.

Regardless of age or background, rock climbing offers the same benefits to all while also demanding attention to detail.

"Climbing keeps you in the moment. You're not thinking about anything else," Mr. Frazzetta said. "It's also cleansing and soothing for the soul, and places you in touch with your body."

### Getting high in Colorado

Fellow rock climber Jon Spindler agrees. As the recreation specialist at the Cadet Outdoor Recreation Center at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., he routinely accompanies the beginning rock climbing class to Glen Cove at nearby Pikes Peak. He observes the same reaction in young cadets, Airmen and family members that he experienced when he took up the sport 12 years ago.

"You get a great sense of accomplishment when you make it to the top of a climb," he said. "It's

### Getting hooked up

Rock climbing doesn't mean steep prices for classes and equipment.

■ **Lessons:** The beginner climbing clinic at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., costs \$20 and includes a full day of indoor wall time, instruction, equipment and transportation. At the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., the beginner's class costs \$60 and includes a trip to Glen Cove at Pikes Peak. If the idea of ice climbing doesn't leave you cold, the academy offers a beginner's ice climbing class for \$80.

■ **Basic equipment:** harness (\$35 to \$90), shoes (\$80 to \$150), chalk bag (\$20), locking carabiner (\$10 to \$25), belaying device (\$15 to \$70), rope (\$95 to \$250) and helmet (\$50 to \$60).

— Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts

a little bit of a thrill, too." But not necessarily dangerous, even though rock climbing is a sport that can take participants hundreds of feet above the playing field.

"The most important aspect is safety," Mr. Frazzetta said. "That technique has to be flawless or someone could get hurt."

Safety is addressed in a beginner's class where basic skills are taught such as tying figure-eight knots, tying oneself to the harness and belaying — securing the safety of your fellow climber through rope control.

The first level of rock climbing is sport climbing. The climber wears a harness with a rope extending from the harness, up the route of ascent and back down again to where his climbing partner acts as the belayer. As the climber ascends, the belayer takes in the slack. If the climber were to slip and fall, the belayer can tighten the rope with a moderate pull and instantly stop the climber's fall.

After taking a class, Mr. Frazzetta recommends continuing work on climbing techniques such as traversing and bouldering. Mr. Spindler recommends taking a few classes and joining a local climbing club to provide opportunities to meet fellow climbers and join trips. Many clubs also offer classes. In Colorado, that could include ice climbing, using pick axes and wearing crampons on your feet to dig into the ice frozen on rock formations.

The second level is traditional climbing, in which a lead climber will ascend and secure the rope onto preset anchors. The second climber below is attached to the lead climber, and it's his or her job to belay the lead climber in case of a fall. The two climbers can alternate taking the lead. Progressing to this level can range from a few months to a year, and it's the level where most climbers remain, Mr. Frazzetta said.

The next level is aid climbing, which involves setting anchors into the side of the mountain and climbing at times where you're only using the rope. In extreme cases, climbers may spend the night in a special tent suspended in midair from a rope.

Regardless of the proficiency level you're seeking, it's important to get off to a fun start. "Be open, don't be afraid and be comfortable with an instructor. It should be fun," Mr. Frazzetta stressed.

That was Mr. Vincent's experience. Getting off to a good start with good instruction made him realize the sport was physically and technically easier than he had expected.

"It was a challenge, and I gained satisfaction from accomplishing the task," he said. "I would like to do it more." ☺



### Want more info?

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