

Today's Sportsman: Rock climbing

Learning the ropes from the experts

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MOST PEOPLE PROBABLY don't think of rock climbing as a family activity, but for Maria Carroll of Springfield, Va., rock climbing is an exciting way to spend time with her three energetic children: Jimmy, 17, Ashley, 16, and Annmarie, 12. The Carroll family took part in an introductory rock climbing class in October offered by Shenandoah Mountain Guides, also known as Teamlink, in Frederick.

I was invited to participate by Clyde Hicks, owner of the Trail House in Frederick. Hicks works cooperatively with Andy Nichols, proprietor of Shenandoah Mountain Guides (SMG) to provide opportunities for a variety of outdoor adventures, including introductory programs in rock climbing, canoeing/kayaking, rappelling, backpacking and cross-country skiing.

"The objective of this first class is to feel what it's like to climb," said Jeremy Tooley, an experienced guide and instructor. The Frederick Watershed was our classroom for the day.

Most of the participants were beginners. Some had prior climbing experience with indoor climbing walls and wanted to try the challenge of natural rock formations. A Marine Corps sergeant, who was new to the area, was simply looking for places to climb locally. The goal each of us had was to learn the correct and safe way to climb.

Each class member was given a helmet and nylon harness to use. Tooley provided the ropes, belays and anchors. A belay is a safety device that the climbing rope is wrapped around. A second person controls the ascent and descent of a climber by allowing line to slide through the belay. Tooley emphasized the proper use of the belay by keeping one hand on the climbing rope at all times and feeding the slack through that hand.

The class was evenly divided between male and female participants and Tooley commented about the difference between how they climb. "Men tend to use their



Photo by Dan Neuland Twelve-year-old Annmarie Carroll, of Springfield, Va., scales a rock wall on the Frederick Watershed during a recent rock climbing class for beginners.

arms to pull themselves more than women ... women, on the other hand, tend to use their leg muscles to push more than men, a much more efficient way to climb." Overall, I was impressed by the courage and determination that was exhibited by both the men and the women.

Rock climbing is generally thought of as an extreme sport for extreme athletes. It was very gratifying to see average people being successful at a sport that I, prior to that day, considered elitist.

"Rock climbing allows you to define your own challenge," said Tooley. The climber can select the location that best suits his or her ability.

Getting started

The class began with the proper fitting of the safety helmet and the nylon harness. Tooley explained the importance of always wearing a helmet while climbing or whenever you are in the "fall zone," the impact area below the climbers where the person operating the belay is standing. It's also important to warn others whenever a rock is dislodged by yelling "rock!" Of course, the smart thing to do when a rock is falling is to not look up, but simply hold still under the protection of the helmet. "Interestingly, most accidents happen when you are not hooked to the rope," said Tooley.

The introductory class demonstrates a top-rope climb. The class watched as Tooley went to the top of the rock formation we were about to climb to establish anchor points. He set up two ropes, each with a minimum of two anchor points. He explained the difference between natural and artificial anchors as well as passive and active anchors. Static rope was used for the anchors because it doesn't stretch. Dynamic rope is used as the main climbing rope because it's meant to stretch somewhat to absorb force in case of a fall.

The golden rule of rock climbing is to "never trust your life to a single piece of equipment," said Tooley. Throughout the day, we learned how important it is to check and double-check equipment to avoid any mishaps. This attention to detail is one of the reasons a course like this is so important for beginning rock climbers. Your life is literally in the hands of others.

Tooley taught us how to secure the climbing rope to the harness using the figure-eight knot with a backup knot. The figure-eight knot is the most common, but there are other knots that work as well. Advanced classes are offered that focus on knot tying, anchoring and advanced belaying techniques.

Rock climbing has a system of verbal commands that provide clear communication between the climber and the belayer. On-belay, belay-on, climbing, climb-on and off-belay are some commands that are crucial to the safety of the climber. Rock climbing is at least a two-person activity, with a

climber and a belayer. A third person as a backup belayer is an extra measure of safety.

Equipment

The basic rock climbing equipment will cost approximately \$250 and includes shoes, helmet, harness, belay device, carabiner, chalk and chalk bag. These are the items you'll need when climbing with another person who has the rope and anchors.

A more complete assortment of equipment for basic top-rope climbing will cost approximately \$500 and would include rope, locking and nonlocking carabiners, webbing and static rope sections, and some anchors. Advanced climbing with a full lead rack of anchors and cams will cost \$1,000-plus.

Shenandoah Mountain Guides offer affordable introductory packages for rock climbers. "The costs vary depending on the number of participants, about \$75 per day ... family activities and intro programs are priced so families can afford to participate ... private guiding at premium sites starts at \$150 per day," said Nichols.

Group rock climbing courses generally run once in spring and once in fall. To learn more advanced climbing skills, SMG offer sets of three classes designed to move someone from novice to intermediate. Classes are also offered through Hood College and Frederick Community College in Frederick, and Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, W.Va.

The challenge of rock climbing has something that appeals to almost every outdoor enthusiast. SMG does most of their climbing on Old Rag Mountain and Little Stony Man.

"Over this past year, we have guided people from, literally, around the world in Shenandoah National Park (in Virginia), families, professionals, rock stars, politicians, corporate VIPs, all-star athletes, regular folks, old folks, young folks ... you name it," said Nichols.

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