With no ropes or climbing equipment, Alex Honnold scales the sheer rock face of El Capitan in California’s Yosemite Valley.

WARM UP

Discuss these questions with a partner.

1. What are some sporting activities people mainly do on or near mountains?
2. Why are some of these activities difficult to do?
**BEFORE YOU READ**

**DISCUSSION**
A. Look at the photo and read the caption. What kind of physical and personal characteristics might make a person successful at this sport? Discuss with a partner.

**PREDICTING**
B. Read the first paragraph of the reading. What challenges do you think Mira Rai had to overcome in order to become a trail runner? Discuss your ideas with a partner. Then read and check your answers.

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**THE SKY RUNNER**

A. Growing up in a village in eastern Nepal’s Bhojpur Mountains, Mira Rai had dreams that went far beyond the conventional expectations for Nepali women. The eldest daughter of five children, she was expected to fetch water, tend crops and livestock, and help out at home. By age 12, she no longer regularly attended school, and instead hauled heavy bags of rice up and down steep trails—often barefoot—to trade at the market. It was hard work—but great training for a future trail runner.

“As a girl,” Rai recalls, “I would constantly be told to know my place, suppress my voice, and act in a certain manner. For me, breaking free from these traditions itself was a big dream.”

B. Several years ago, Rai’s dream became reality. She was running outside Kathmandu when two male trail runners invited her to enter her first trail race, the Kathmandu West Valley Rim 50K. She had never run 50 kilometers before, had no special gear or training for such a distance, and was also the only woman in the competition. But against all odds, she beat everyone—even the men. From there, a community of supporters came together to give her a chance to compete in international trail running competitions.

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Mira Rai—a trail and ultramarathon runner—trains on mountain paths in Nepal. Ultramarathons can be up to 160 kilometers long and are often held in remote places—such as deserts—and on tough terrain—such as steep mountains.
Today, the running world recognizes Rai as a high-elevation trail racing phenomenon. Now she is on a mission to help both women and men of Nepal through sports. Rai believes her work to empower others has just begun. “We have realized that Nepal has tremendous potential to develop competitive athletes,” she says.

Wasfia Nazreen, a mountain climber from Bangladesh, knows first-hand the impact Rai has had on the young women of Nepal. “For someone who has left school so early and missed the learning we take for granted, Mira has been able to turn back time and set a rare example by being the change herself,” she says. “It’s hard to find good role models1 for young women in our region, especially one coming from the same rural village background as most of the young generation,” Nazreen says.

“It’s hard to find good role models1 for young women in our region, especially one coming from the same rural village background as most of the young generation,” Nazreen says. Mira is blazing a trail, not just in terms of being able to speak nationally on gender equality, but also by getting young people into running through the new Kathmandu Trail Race Series. “The grit2 and joy she embodies throughout all her hardships and victories is an inspiration to all of us!”

Rai, however, remains humble. “I have been able to do the things I did because so many people believed in me and took chances, and I want to give back so others can have a chance just the way I did,” she says. “We have a saying in Nepal, ‘Khana pugyos, dina pugos,’ which means, ‘Let there be enough to eat, let there be enough to give.’”

Interviewer: Which is more difficult: running a hard, steep trail race or breaking gender stereotypes?

Mira Rai: Running is no issue, but breaking gender stereotypes is. For the society we live in, it’s difficult for women and men alike because doing anything out of convention means a lot of struggle—especially for women. As women, we are expected to help out with chores at home from childhood and then get married and raise a family, so it becomes a struggle, not merely a challenge. You get called a rebel, and for an adventure sport that involves risks, nobody encourages you. “You’ll end up breaking your bones!” they’d say. Though the mindset3 seems to be changing, it’s still at a snail’s pace and has a long way to go before women are seen as equivalent to men.

What advice do you have for someone who wants to be a stronger runner like you?

MR: It was a matter of chance and luck that I became a runner. Back in the village we had to walk hours on end—up and down grueling terrain, often barefoot, with a heavy weight on our backs—and this definitely contributed. I started running, I got professional training that taught me techniques, and gradually I became more determined, motivated, and persistent to chase my dreams. However, I’ve also learned that proper diet, enough rest, confidence, yoga, and mental well-being—as well as having good support from my mentor Richard Bull and my coach Dhruba Bikram Malla—are just as important as being in shape.

You stopped going to school regularly when you were 12. Do you wish you’d had more school?

MR: I feel that if I’d finished more school, I would have been able to communicate with more confidence and have a better insight into world affairs. In many cases when I first started racing abroad, I couldn’t even be a part of conversations because of my poor English skills. I used to just sit there and listen, but I didn’t feel uncomfortable being there as everybody was very supportive. However, with media and sponsors, it would’ve definitely been more helpful had I obtained more education back home. Even today when I try to read newspapers, I fail to understand quite a few words, so I am taking English classes these days, and it’s certainly helping.

Eastern Nepal is home to several different Nepali ethnic groups, many living in isolated villages.
Running has helped you see the world. What is it like to return to your village now that you have been to Hong Kong, Italy, and other places?

MR: I return once a year during the Dashain, the largest festival of the year, and the people there are living the same sort of lives as I saw when I was a kid. We used to have kerosene lanterns, but now there are bulbs that run on solar power. The village had no access by road back in the day; now there are dirt tracks that connect to big towns. But the mud houses are the same. There’s phone connection, but it doesn’t work well. When I go back, I meet a lot of youngsters that ask me how they can live differently. They definitely seem motivated, but sadly their folks do not agree with such ambition. While the physical infrastructure in my village has improved, the mindset has not. I remain hopeful that the future generation will break the mold.

What work are you doing now with communities in Nepal?

MR: While recovering from knee surgery, I have been providing guidance to men and women alike in running and encouraging them to pursue a career as professional athletes. Every so often, I visit schools and children’s homes to share my knowledge about running, particularly training, diet, and more importantly, an active lifestyle.

We have realized that Nepal has tremendous potential to develop competitive athletes, so we’re organizing a series of trail races in Kathmandu. These are short races aimed for both beginners and experienced runners. I also organized a small race back in my hometown of Sano Dumma last October, to introduce the sport to the young crowd and get them interested in running. In the coming days, I plan to organize races that aim to identify and promote promising runners.

Is there a personal challenge that you still want to achieve?

MR: I have always dreamed of running in the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc in France. It’s a challenging race for elite runners from all over the world—166 kilometers! I would love to see where I stand in this race.

The word grueling in paragraph I is closest in meaning to

a. unknown
b. risky
c. endless
d. tiring

Where would be the best place in paragraph I to insert this sentence?

It wasn’t much fun, but it definitely helped me develop my stamina.

a. after the first sentence
b. after the second sentence
c. before the last sentence
d. after the last sentence

Which of these questions about Rai’s home village cannot be answered by information in the passage?

a. How did people light their homes there in the past?
b. When does Mira Rai make her annual visit there?
c. Has education in the village improved?
d. How can people living there now get to other towns?
B. Complete the summary of paragraphs A–G. Use no more than three words from the reading passage for each answer.

Born and raised in Nepal, Mira Rai was expected to be a 1. Nepalese woman. As a child, she had to fetch water for her family and carry large 2. to market. But these challenging tasks provided good 3. for her future career.

Rai got her big break when she participated in her 4. —the Kathmandu West Valley Rim 50K. Incredibly, she beat everyone. Her victory propelled her to international fame.

One of Rai’s goals is to help both male and female athletes in her native country. She believes that Nepal has a lot of 5. to produce world-class athletes. A famous climber from Bangladesh said that Rai has had a very positive influence on young female athletes. She said that it was not easy for young women from the countryside to find good 6. . She said that Rai also gives talks to promote 7. in her home country.

REVIEWING READING SKILL

A. Find the expressions in bold in the reading passage. Choose the correct meaning.

1. breaking free (paragraph B)  
   a. escaping  
   b. learning

2. against all odds (paragraph C)  
   a. in opposition to others  
   b. despite the challenges

3. take for granted (paragraph E)  
   a. need to work hard for  
   b. fail to properly appreciate

4. blazing a trail (paragraph F)  
   a. running at a very fast speed  
   b. being the first to do something new

5. break the mold (paragraph K)  
   a. follow old traditions  
   b. do something in a new way

INFERRING MEANING

B. Find and note expressions in the reading passage that have the same meaning as the definitions below.

1. accept one’s position in society (paragraph B)  
2. involved in an important task (paragraph D)  
3. extremely slowly (paragraph H)

INFERRING MEANING

C. Choose three of the expressions in Activity A or B. Write sentences about yourself or people you know using each one.

1. 
2. 
3. 

RELATING

A trail runner in Chugach State Park, Alaska, United States

CRITICAL THINKING

Think of someone who, like Mira Rai, became successful after overcoming hardships in their life. Note your ideas below, then describe the person to your partner.
A. Complete the information using the correct form of the words in the box. Five words are extra.

The Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc isn’t 1 ______ a trail race through a pretty part of the Alps: It’s also a grueling test of endurance. Each summer around 10,000 athletes run through 2 ______ countryside, up steep hills, and down deep valleys.

Some ultramarathons are broken up into stages, allowing runners to take rests 3 ______ the race. But the Ultra-Trail du Mont Blanc is non-stop—and lasts through the night. Runners are required to bring appropriate 4 ______ for such a long race, including flashlights and a security blanket. The best runners aim to keep a steady 5 ______ in order to finish the race in 20 to 24 hours. In recent years, more than a third of participants did not cross the finish line.

B. Complete the definitions using the unused words from the box in Activity A.

1. If you are ______, you are quiet about your accomplishments.
2. If you ______ something, you try and get it.
3. The ______ of something happening refers to how likely it is.
4. A ______ is a fixed, but often mistaken, idea about what a group of people are typically like.
5. If you are ______ at something, you continue to do it.

C. The adverb merely can be used to emphasize that you mean exactly what you are saying and nothing more. Mark where it should be placed in each sentence.

1. He didn’t quit the ultramarathon; he stopped to take a rest.
2. They didn’t mean to cause a problem—they were trying to help.
3. He didn’t talk much about his motivation, mentioning that he did it for his family.
If someone has poise, they have calm self-confidence.

In June 2017, Alex Honnold completed a stunning scramble up El Capitan, a 3,000-foot granite wall in Yosemite National Park. Mark Synnott recounts how Honnold's meticulous planning and training prepared him for "the ultimate climb"—a four-hour vertical ascent without a rope.

It’s 4:54 a.m. on a chilly November morning in 2016 in Yosemite National Park. A full moon casts an eerie glow onto the southwest face of El Capitan, where Alex Honnold clings to the side of the granite wall with nothing more than the tips of his fingers and two thin edges of shoe rubber. He’s attempting to do something that professional rock climbers have long thought impossible—a free solo ascent of the world’s most famous cliff. That means he is alone and climbing without a rope as he inches his way up more than half a mile of vertical rock.

A light breeze rustles his hair as he shines his headlamp on the cold, smooth patch of granite where he must next place his foot. Above him, the stone is blank for several feet, devoid of any holds. Unlike parts of the climb higher up, which feature shallow divots, pebble-size nubs, and tiny cracks that Alex can cling onto with his amazingly strong fingers, this part—a barely less than vertical slab on a section called the Freeblast—must be mastered with a delicate balance of fine skills and poise. Climbers call it friction climbing. “It’s like walking up glass,” Alex once said.

He wiggles his toes; they’re numb. His right ankle is stiff and swollen from a severe sprain he sustained two months earlier when he fell while practicing this part of the route. That time he was attached to a rope, but now, falling isn’t an option. Free soloing isn’t like other dangerous sports. There is no “maybe” when you’re 60 stories up without a rope: If you make a mistake, you die.

Alex Honnold used ropes to research many routes up El Capitan before attempting his incredible free solo ascent.
Six hundred feet below, I sit on a fallen tree watching the tiny circle of Alex’s light. It hasn’t moved in what feels like an eternity, but is probably less than a minute. And I know why: he’s facing the move that has haunted him ever since he first dreamt up this scheme seven years ago. I’ve climbed this slab myself, and the thought of doing it free solo makes me nauseated. The log on which I’m sitting lies less than a hundred yards from where Alex will land if he slips.

A sudden noise jolts me back to the present; my heart skips. A camarader, part of the crew recording the feat, hustles up the trail toward the base of the wall. I can hear the static of his walkie-talkie. “Alex is bailing,” he says. Thank God, I think, Alex will live.

Some in the climbing world view free soloing as something that isn’t meant to be. Critics regard it as reckless showmanship that gives the sport a bad name, noting the long list of those who’ve died attempting it. Others, myself included, recognize it as the sport’s purest expression. Such was the attitude of Austrian alpinist Paul Preuss, considered by many the sport’s most important figure. Preuss was to master a mountain with superior physical and mental skill—not artificial aid.” By age 27, Preuss had made some 150 ropeless first ascents, and was hailed his achievements, Alex was secretly contemplating a much bigger goal.

It’s important to note that Alex’s quest to free solo El Capitan wasn’t some adrenaline-fueled stunt that he’d come up with on a whim. In 2009, during our first climbing expedition together, he had mentioned the idea to me. There was something about his supreme confidence, though, and the way he effortlessly moved up incredibly difficult rock faces that made the comment seem like more than just an idle boast.

But Preuss’s ideas would live on, influencing successive generations of climbers and inspiring the “free climbing” movement of the 1960s and ’70s, which espoused using ropes and other gear only as safety devices, never to assist a climber’s upward progress. The next serious free soloist of note appeared in 1973, when “Hot” Henry Barber shocked the climbing community by scaling the 1,500-foot north face of Yosemite’s Sentinel Rock without a rope. In 1987, Canadian Peter Croft free soloed two of Yosemite’s most celebrated routes—Astroman and Rostrum—back-to-back in the same day.

Croft’s achievement stood until 2007, when Alex Honnold, a shy 22-year-old from Sacramento, showed up in Yosemite Valley. He stunned the climbing world by repeating Croft’s Astroman-Rostrum masterpiece. The next year he free soloed two famously tough routes—Zion National Park’s Moonlight Buttress and the Regular Northwest Face of Yosemite’s Half Dome—climbs so long and technically difficult that no serious climber had imagined they could be scaled without a rope. As sponsorship offers poured in and journalists and fans hailed his achievements, Alex was secretly contemplating a much bigger goal.

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Alex researched several El Capitan routes, finally settling on Freerider, a popular test piece for veteran climbers and one that usually requires multiple days to ascend. Its 30 or so pitches—or rope lengths—challenge a climber in practically every possible way: the strength of fingers, forearms, shoulders, calves, toes, back, and abdomen, not to mention balance, flexibility, problem solving, and emotional stamina. Certain times of the day the sun heats the rock so much that it burns to touch it; hours later the temperature can plummet.
below freezing. Storms blow in, powerful winds lash the wall, water leaks out of cracks. Bees, frogs, and birds can burst from crevices during crucial moves. Rocks of all sizes can suddenly give way and tumble down.

The Freeblast may be the scariest part, but more physically demanding sections await higher up: a chimney-like crack he’ll have to climb through; a wide gap where he’ll have to perform almost a full split, pressing the rock with his feet and hands to inch his way up. And then 2,300 feet above the valley floor is the Boulder Problem—a blank face that requires some of the most technically challenging moves of the climb.

But before he could tackle the Boulder Problem, he would have to get over the Freeblast. In 2016, the vertical slab proved to be an insurmountable3 obstacle and he was forced to give up his attempt. But Alex knew he would try again.

3 If something is insurmountable, it is a problem too great to be overcome.

Saturday morning, June 3, 2017. Seven months after Alex’s failed attempt, I am in a meadow near the foot of El Capitan. The tall grass is covered with dew, and the sky is gray, as it always is just before dawn. I squint through a telescope, and there is Alex, 600 feet above the valley floor, moving up onto the Freeblast, the glassy slab that has frustrated him for nearly a decade.

Alex’s movements, normally so smooth, are worryingly jerky. His foot tap-tap-taps against the wall as if he’s feeling his way tentatively into the slab. And then, just like that, he’s standing on a ledge several feet above the move that has been hanging over his head for years.

I realize I’ve been holding my breath, so I consciously exhale. Thousands of moves are still to come, and the Boulder Problem looms far above, but he won’t be turning back this time. Alex Honnold is on his way to completing the greatest rock climb in history.

A. Choose the best answer for each question.

1. The divots, nubs, and cracks mentioned in paragraph C _____.
   a. are dangerous features of the mountain
   b. occur in all parts of the mountain
   c. occur only in the lowest part of the mountain
   d. are helpful to a free solo climber

2. In paragraph E, the author’s tone is _____.
   a. optimistic
   b. technical
   c. anxious
   d. humorous

3. When the cameraman says, “Alex is bailing” in paragraph F, he means that Honnold _____.
   a. nearly fell
   b. is climbing slowly
   c. has reached the summit
   d. is giving up for now

4. According to the information in paragraph G, the author _____.
   a. feels free soloing is too dangerous
   b. agrees with the ideas of Paul Preuss
   c. believes climbers need artificial aids
   d. disapproves of Honnold’s plans

5. Who was the second free soloist to become well known?
   a. Paul Preuss
   b. Henry Barber
   c. Peter Croft
   d. Alex Honnold

6. Where would be the best place in paragraph J to insert this sentence?
   At first, I thought he was totally crazy.
   a. before the first sentence
   b. after the first sentence
   c. after the second sentence
   d. after the last sentence

7. Which of the following was NOT given as one of the challenges involved in climbing the Freerider route?
   a. ice
   b. heat
   c. animals
   d. wind
A. What is the main purpose of the passage?
   a. to persuade the reader to take up rock climbing
   b. to describe Alex Honnold's personality
   c. to give an account of Honnold's most difficult climb
   d. to give an overview of the sport of free soloing

B. Why does the author mention that Honnold completed his climb successfully in the first paragraph rather than leaving this for the final paragraph? Discuss your ideas with a partner.

C. Find and underline the words or phrases in the reading passage that mean the same as the definitions below.
   1. to praise and show approval (paragraph I)
   2. to hit with a lot of force (paragraph K)
   3. to partly close eyes when looking (paragraph N)
   4. quick and sudden (paragraph O)

INFERRING MEANING

B. Scan the reading passage for the words in bold below. Study the context around each word or phrase and then match it to its definition.
   1. meticulous (paragraph A) a. feeling sick
   2. cling (paragraph B) b. based on a sudden decision
   3. slab (paragraph C) c. a large flat piece of stone
   4. eternity (paragraph E) d. adopted or supported
   5. nauseated (paragraph E) e. infinite or never ending time
   6. reckless (paragraph G) f. to hold on tightly to
g. careless of risks or consequences
   7. espoused (paragraph H) h. careful and detailed
   8. on a whim (paragraph J)

INFERRING MEANING

C. What do you think Honnold’s main motivation was for doing the climb? Is it an example of “reckless showmanship” or could there be other reasons? Note your ideas below, then discuss with a partner.

CRITICAL THINKING Inferring Reasons

Understanding Rhetorical Purpose

An author's rhetorical purpose refers to either their overall reason for writing a text, or their reason for including certain information in it. Identifying an author's purpose is a key part of engaging critically with any reading passage. It is also an important skill for taking exams. Examples of this type of question might include:

What is the author's purpose in mentioning …?
Why does the author mention/include …?
The author includes the information … in order to …
The author uses … as an example of …
The author mentions … for which of the following reasons?

RHETORICAL PURPOSE

A. 1. What is the main purpose of the passage?
   a. to persuade the reader to take up rock climbing
   b. to describe Alex Honnold's personality
   c. to give an account of Honnold's most difficult climb
   d. to give an overview of the sport of free soloing

2. Why does the author include the quote “It's like walking up glass” in paragraph C?
   a. to help the reader visualize how shiny the wall is
   b. to show how confident Honnold was in this part of the climb
   c. to emphasize how challenging this part of the climb was
   d. to explain why this part of the climb was relatively easy

3. Why does the author mention Paul Preuss's exploits in paragraph G?
   a. to explain why he was a better climber than Honnold
   b. to warn of the dangers of climbing for the untrained
   c. to refute the idea that climbing is still dangerous
   d. to show how influential his free solo climbs were

4. Why does the author include information about the temperature, weather, and animals in paragraph K?
   a. to illustrate how challenging this climbing route is
   b. to explain why Honnold nearly ended his climb there
   c. to show how dangerous a climb can be if you are unprepared
   d. to support the idea that free solo climbing is the purest form

B. Why do you think the author mentions that Honnold completed his climb successfully in the first paragraph rather than leaving this for the final paragraph? Discuss your ideas with a partner.
**COMPLETION**

A. Complete the information using the correct form of the words in the box. Four words are extra.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>artificial</th>
<th>ascend</th>
<th>contemplate</th>
<th>delicate</th>
<th>devoid of</th>
<th>plummet</th>
<th>scheme</th>
<th>stamina</th>
<th>successive</th>
<th>tackle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

When Honnold first began to seriously 1 _________ a free solo climb of El Capitan, he spoke with friend and fellow climber Jimmy Chin to discuss filming the event. This eventually resulted in the movie _Free Solo_—which won the 2018 Academy Award for best documentary film.

To film the event, Chin hired a team of climbers who would climb an easy route up El Capitan ahead of Honnold, lugging up cameras, ropes, and supplies. Then they’d rappel down on ropes to keep pace with Honnold as he 2 _________ the near vertical cliff. Honnold of course used no 3 _________ aids.

Filming was 4 _________ work. No one was allowed to make any noise that might distract Honnold—distractions that could cause him to 5 _________ to his death.

Chin wanted his film to be about Honnold’s process. The final movie showcases Honnold’s incredible focus, 6 _________, and determination. “Whether it ended with him summiting El Cap or deciding not to go for it didn’t matter,” Chin says.

**DEFINITIONS**

B. Match each unused word from the box in Activity A with its definition.

1. _________: an organized plan for doing something
2. _________: entirely lacking or free from
3. _________: happening one after another
4. _________: to try and deal with something or someone

**COLLOCATIONS**

C. The nouns in the box are frequently used with the word _plummet_. Complete the sentences with the correct words.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>popularity</th>
<th>price</th>
<th>temperatures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1. The _________ of oil plummets when there’s too much supply.
2. Typically, a politician’s _________ plummets after a scandal.
3. In the middle of winter, _________ can plummet to record lows at night.

**DISCUSSION**

B. How can free solo climbers make rope-free climbing safer? Note your ideas below, then discuss with a partner.
WHILE YOU WATCH

GIST  A. Watch the video. What are two ways Matt Maddaloni uses to make free soloing safer?

DETAILS  B. Watch the video. Note answers to the questions.

1. Why does Maddaloni mention sneezing?

2. What does grade mean when Maddaloni says, “I wanted to get that grade as difficult as it could be”?

3. How does Maddaloni take “a page from the circus”?

4. What does Maddaloni mean when he says he’s “a bit of an oddball”?

CRITICAL THINKING  Reflecting  Free soloing has become more popular following the 2018 documentary Free Solo. Note answers to the questions below, then discuss with a partner.

Do you think such documentaries or films encourage more climbers to free solo? What might be some positive and negative consequences of this?

Are there any ethical issues with promoting extreme sports like free soloing?

VOCABULARY REVIEW

Do you remember the meanings of these words? Check (✓) the ones you know. Look back at the unit and review any words you’re not sure of.

Reading A

☐ gear  ☐ humble  ☐ merely  ☐ odds*  ☐ pace

☐ persistent*  ☐ pursue*  ☐ rural  ☐ stereotype  ☐ throughout

Reading B

☐ artificial  ☐ ascend  ☐ contemplate  ☐ delicate  ☐ devoid of

☐ plummet  ☐ scheme*  ☐ stamina  ☐ successive*  ☐ tackle

*Academic Word List