

Unit 1: Sport Climbing

Narrator: Sport climbing is more popular than ever before. And its origins can be traced back to the walls of the Verdon Gorge in France 40 years ago.

Emily Harrington: Modern day climbing and mountaineering began in the European Alps. Climbers during that time considered the outlying cliffs to be more like training grounds for the bigger objectives in the mountains. The Verdon Gorge was actually big enough and inspiring enough to become an objective in its own. Matt and I have known each other since we were kids, growing up, climbing in the gym, doing competitions. It's sort of fitting that we would come back and explore the origins of sport climbing together.

Matt Segal: On Verdon! It's pretty good here. It's absolutely an amazing limestone canyon. It's kind of equated to the Grand Canyon of France, but in climbing terms, I would consider it more of, like, the Yosemite Valley of Europe.

Emily Harrington: The early climbers, the early mountaineers in the 1960s actually thought that the Verdon Gorge was impossible to climb. It was too big; it was too blank, and it was too difficult.

Francois Guillot: Our objective was to, in the summer, go in the Alps and do big ascents as alpinists. So, at that time, the Verdon was not even considered as a place climbable. But I decided to have a double-check.

Alan Carne: The Verdon in the late 70s—it wasn't really a climbing destination. There were relatively few routes here, just these big crack systems.

Narrator: Until the early 1980s, the only way to climb Verdon was using anchors along cracks in the rock. The huge blank walls were too challenging. But then new technology introduced a new era in the history of climbing. For climbers like Francois Guillot, the hilti—a new type of power drill—began a climbing revolution, allowing climbers to try much more challenging routes. They could just focus specifically on pure difficulty. Pichenibule was one of the first routes where climbers began to climb out onto the flat rock faces rather than using cracks in the rock.

Emily Harrington: You can't just be strong. You have to be a rock-climber.

Narrator: One of the pioneers in tackling these overhanging rocks was J.B. Tribout. In the mid-1980s, he developed a new route called The Specialist, which was much more demanding than any previous routes.

Alan Carne: This vision really set the pace for the direction that sport climbing would go over the next several decades. We're still just beginning to realize how hard we can climb. And that passion for pushing limits that's started here in the Verdon continues around the world today.

Francois Guillot: The concept of hard depends on how strong you are.

Alan Carne: Sport climbing is evolving faster and stronger than it ever has. And it's inspiring to think that it all began almost 40 years ago within the walls of the Verdon Gorge.