

Unit 2: Soloing Safely

Matt Maddaloni: Everything about the sport said danger.

Oh my god!

As a young guy, I was totally excited about that. If I even sneeze, I was dead. Exciting, to say the least.

Narrator: To some climbers, the act of climbing without the rope, free soloing, is reckless and irresponsible.

Matt Maddaloni: Not having a rope—any mistake at all, and it's a death fall to the ground, so even easy terrain became difficult, mentally.

Narrator: The vast majority of climbers would never seriously consider ditching the rope. The rope, clipped into successive pieces of removable gear placed in cracks, is the climber's safety net. The climber slips, the rope catches him or her. For as long as climbers have been using ropes, they've also been making the decisions to go without them. Solo climbers who push their limits—they never get a chance to learn from their mistakes.

Matt Maddaloni has been working on ways to make climbing without the rope safe. Or, at least, relatively safe.

Matt Maddaloni: I wanted to push it harder. Physically, mentally, I wanted to get that grade as difficult as it could be, so I discovered a sport called deep water soloing where you're climbing without a rope but this time over water, so if you fell off, you had that as your safety net.

Narrator: Falling became acceptable. Matt decided to take this fringe niche of the sport back to solid earth. The next test would be a feat of engineering.

Matt Maddaloni: Okay, let's try Young Blood without a rope. Oh my god, I don't know. It's a long way down. God. It's like almost too much, the adrenaline.

Narrator: Matt took a page from the circus.

Matt Maddaloni: There is no instruction booklet on how to set these things up, so all of this creates a challenge that pushed it into a realm that we had no idea what we were getting ourselves into.

Oh, so nice!

Narrator: A trapeze net would take the place of the rope.

Matt Maddaloni: If the net failed, it would be like your rope breaking.

Narrator: Out of each successful engineering project comes the idea for the next creative endeavor.

Matt Maddaloni: Learning is the most exciting thing about life, and as long as we're learning, we're living. You know, it's definitely not gum and paper clips, and jumping off a cliff and see if it all works. There is a method to my madness, for sure. Am I fringe? Do I stand out as one-and-only, doing the stuff that I do within the sport? No. But I'd say for the main group of climbers that exists, yeah, I'm definitely a bit of an oddball, for sure.