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Could He Ascend Farther?

What will Alex Honnold reach for after his free solo of El Capitan?

Sarah Ruth Bates



ALEX HONNOLD LEANS BACK. HIS HANDS WRAP AROUND A SEAM in the massive granite face of El Capitan. He walks his feet up the pitch, relying on friction to make his rubber climbing shoes stick.

The word *pitch* doesn't actually apply to this climb. Honnold doesn't need to divide the route into rope-lengths because he's climbing without a rope. No one has ever free-solo climbed El Capitan before. A camera crew tracks him, filming for the movie *Free Solo*.

Honnold climbs steadily. This section isn't technically hard, compared with the rest of the route, but it's physically demanding. He has to expend strength just to stay on the wall. Too little pull with his arms, and his feet will lose traction. Too much pull, and he'll tire and won't be able to hold on. If he makes either mistake, he'll fall. Survival requires a balance of energy expended and conserved. I want to know how Honnold thinks about that balance—and if he thinks about it, or about the risks he takes, at all.

WATCHING *FREE SOLO*, I CHEWED UP A PEN. I KNEW HONNOLD would survive the climb up Yosemite National Park's famous 7,569-foot rock formation because I was going to talk to him after the credits. He'd come to Boston for the premiere in October 2018, on tour with the film. He would answer questions and take photos with fans, and then I'd have a brief window of time to interview him. I knew he was alive, somewhere in this building—but, watching him climb, I still cringed.

Climbing El Cap without a rope is a crazy thing to do. It's tempting to think that, because Honnold didn't die, it wasn't so crazy. But he so easily could have. One sneeze, slip, cramp, or bird flying out of a crack in the cliff, and he could, to use his own word, explode on the rocks below.

Pros speculate that no other climber, living or dead, could replicate his feat. He has pushed climbing beyond its frontier, past what people thought was the edge of innovation. He has survived so far, but no one's invincible. Tommy Caldwell, Honnold's friend and fellow pro climber, points out that most people who have made soloing a big part of their lives have died.

If Honnold pushes climbing this far, how can future climbers move the sport forward without risking their own lives? Will the frontier of climbing require courting death? I wanted to ask Honnold about that precedent and the example he set for young kids. How would he feel about children

Showing raw enthusiasm for his sport, Alex Honnold answers questions from a Boston audience, with filmmaker Elizabeth "Chai" Vasarhelyi. SARAH RUTH BATES

watching his movie if they decided to follow him up El Cap without a rope? Did he actively encourage other climbers to solo? In an interview, Caldwell remembers Honnold asking why Caldwell didn't solo. "You know you won't fall on 5.12," Honnold said.¹

It's outrageous to encourage other people to free solo—but it's outrageous to free solo El Cap. Who knew where Honnold would draw the line? If he'd do one crazy, inadvisable thing, who's to say he wouldn't do others?

I didn't know Alex Honnold that well.

EARLY IN THE DOCUMENTARY, HONNOLD WALKS AROUND YOSEMITE. He squints up at the massive fact of El Cap. "Maybe it's not for me," he says. "Maybe it's future generations." He adds, "Or maybe just someone who's got nothing to live for." The convergence of those groups on the same objectives can't be good.

One morning, he decides to try the solo. He walks up to the base of El Cap, starts climbing—but stops. Something feels off, and he doesn't want to push through it. The cameramen, who are also Honnold's friends and fellow climbers, mutter to each other, spooked. They've depended on Honnold's confidence as proof that he would be OK.

The incident knocks Honnold off center, too. He talks about giving up. He considers sneaking off and doing the solo early one morning without telling anyone—which would dissipate the pressure of watching cameras but frustrate friends who'd spent years working on the film.

Honnold thinks through the dilemma aloud. The cameras unnerve him. But they're needed for the movie project. The directors can adjust to keep the cameras and crew out of Honnold's sightline, but some intrusion is inevitable.

He says he'll get used to it. He'll make himself comfortable enough with climbing in front of an audience that he'd be able to execute the moves even if a stadium of people watched him. Then he won't actually have to deal with a crowd, just a few friends with cameras. He'll overprepare, and then the task he'll actually have to do will be well within his abilities. He'll execute it on autopilot.

¹That is, a very difficult climb. Most technical climbs are rated 5.0 through 5.15. See "The Strange Science of Grading Climbs" by Steven Jervis, in the *Alpina* section of *Appalachia* Summer/Fall 2018, 69 no. 2.

The autopilot part is key. Honnold overprepares for the climb, so that he can do it easily, automatically, without having to think or worry, the way you or I would climb out of bed. He explains that at another question-and-answer session, with Tommy Caldwell at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Someone asks Honnold what he did the morning of his El Cap ascent. He jokes that he ritually slaughtered a goat and roasted it over a fire, adding, “Did that scene get cut?” In fact, he had no rituals. He’d prepared to the point where he didn’t need to do anything special.

In the movie, Honnold and his girlfriend shop for a refrigerator. Honnold finds a small one. “This is so adequate,” he says, pleased. The fridge goes into its nook with feet of empty space above it. That’s how Honnold climbs: with plenty of room to spare. He builds in a margin.

That preparation undergirds what Honnold calls “mental armor”: the mindset that allows him to solo. For more than a decade, people have been asking Honnold if he’s going to cause his own death. An edge creeps into his voice when he talks about it—not from self-doubt, but because he’s had to explain it so, so many times. To him, it’s simple.

Here’s what happens when you talk to Honnold about death. You say, “What you’re doing is dangerous.” He says, “It’s low risk, though it’s high consequence.” Let’s get the consequence out of the way first: He could fall and die. Honnold has a comfort level in talking about death that I’ve seen only in clinicians who specialize in end-of-life care. He knows it’s inevitable, and he accepts that. He would prefer it not come soon, though, which is why he says he keeps the risk of falling low.

How can he possibly say he’s at a low risk of falling? Freerider, the route he took up El Cap, is more than 3,000 feet of 5.13a; even a roped professional climber can fall off it. Training with a rope in the movie, Honnold falls, numerous times. And even ignoring the difficulty of the route, a freak accident could knock him off the wall. In the question-and-answer session after the film, Elizabeth “Chai” Vasarhelyi, who made the movie with Jimmy Chin, confesses a fear that bees would sting both of Honnold’s eyes.

Honnold’s answer: He trains, both body and mind. He practiced the route countless times, rappelling down to difficult sections and climbing them again and again, until he knew the difficult sequences by heart. At the MIT event—over a year after the solo—an audience member asks if he can still remember the moves. He laughs, excited to have a use for the memory, and

mimes the beginning of the sequence. It's not about remembering the moves, he says, but about executing them.

Honnold performs a certain amount of bluster, a little bit of fake-it-'til-you-make-it. He psyches himself up, like a high school senior getting ready to ask a date to the prom—he has to believe he'll get a “yes,” or he'll almost certainly get a “no.”

LOGIC CONTROLS HONNOLD'S LIFE, AND NOT JUST WHEN HE'S ON the wall. The result: a rare, and unusual, kind of greatness.

Contrast Honnold with his friend Tommy Caldwell. Caldwell's also a great climber, but in a comprehensible way. He's a regular, bills-paying person, the same kind of thing as you or me, if one of us were really, really, really good at a sport. His logic, his thought process, sounds like the way most people think. He balances the passion for climbing with his family.

Honnold is different: He doesn't weigh. He gives up—or maybe he never considered wanting—multiple goals. His single-mindedness grates on his relationships, especially with his girlfriend. Caldwell posits that it's not possible to have a family and climb the way that Honnold does. In the movie, Honnold tells his girlfriend that he puts climbing first. In another shot, he says, “If you're seeking perfection, free soloing is as close as you can get.” It's a very particular vision of perfection. Most people opt for proficiency in many areas, not excellence in one.

His single-mindedness has a charmingly childish quality. Growing up requires us to weigh conflicting desires and compromise. Honnold doesn't do that. Before Adam and Eve ate the apple, sin didn't occur to them. They lived, simply, automatically, without worry or concern. Honnold climbs—and lives—that way. He has the earnest sweetness of a kid who never pretended to be tough to become popular—he still uses words like “grand.”

Free Solo shows Honnold in his van, making dinner. He loads a skillet with vegetables, which he says he introduced himself to “systematically.” He pours in canned chili: “It really adds a spice.” He eats straight from the pan, using his spatula as a fork. The audience laughs. Honnold says, “I've outdone myself.” Later, he washes his clothes in the shower by sudsing them under his feet.

Most people wouldn't choose the life that follows from making climbing their single priority—eating dinner off a spatula out of a skillet, living in a van, washing clothes with their feet in a public shower. Free soloing El

Capitan. It's the kind of life that elementary schoolers dream up, but most kids temper their dreams as they age. Not Honnold.

HONNOLD FLOWS UP THE LAST PITCH. THE OTHER MOVIEGOERS unknot themselves, relaxing out of whatever poses their bodies had contorted into while watching. I'm the only one getting more nervous as Honnold comes closer to topping out, because that means I'm nearing the moment of interviewing him. Honnold doesn't like the press. He's said as much to interviewers.

The credits roll. Honnold and Vasarhelyi walk down the theater aisles, to applause. Honnold reaches the stage, which has no steps up to it. He doesn't pause, just hops up. They take questions then go outside to pose for selfies with fans. Everyone wants a photo with Honnold. The agreed-upon time for our interview comes, then passes. Finally, the crowd thins. A North Face staffer corrals Honnold and walks him over to me.

Hi, I'm Sarah.

"Alex."

We walk into the recesses of the dim lobby. Two stools are tucked under a staircase. "This is perfect," Honnold says. *So adequate.* We sit.

It's too dim to see Honnold's expression clearly. To read the questions I've printed out, I have to hold the sheet close to my face. But, for Honnold, adequacy is perfection.

"All right, hit me," he says.

Did you ever come close to falling?

"Basically, no. I just prepared to the point where it all felt fine. There was one move down low that's kind of scary, this step down to a foothold, and when I got there I was like, this is a scary move, and then I did it, and I was all tense. There are a couple things like that, where you're like, *eugh!* and you hold on—but I wasn't close to falling. I was just like, I never like this move, but that's fine, because I've done it the exact same way many times."

So, you didn't love it, but you weren't afraid?

"Yeah, I wouldn't say—I mean, I experienced the same sensations as like, I'm afraid, but it was planned, which is a lot different than suddenly being like, oh my god, I'm so scared. You know, if you're like, this is the moment where I'm gonna feel fear, then you do it, and you're like, yup, exactly as planned, no problem. It's part of the plan, and you're just like, fine. You just execute it anyway."

He'd prepared for that fear the same way he prepared for a stadium of people. It made sense. I squinted at my questions, written before I'd watched the movie, and realized I'd thought of questions for a devil-may-care Alex. This logical Alex would disagree with the premises behind them.

What do you think about while you're climbing? I can guess the answer. *Probably nothing?*

"Yeah, exactly, mostly just empty. Just executing, performing, whatever."

That might not be most people's ideal emotional state, but Honnold isn't most people. He refers to himself in the film as "a bottomless pit of self-loathing." Just talking about climbing, though, his face lights up in a little-boy-on-Christmas-morning smile. People close to him, including his mom, say that soloing makes him so happy they won't try to stop him.

There's a Zen quality to his happiness, to the "emptiness" he feels. A Zen proverb says: Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. Near the end of the movie, after the solo, someone offscreen asks Honnold what he's going to do now. He says, I think I'll hangboard. His fingers grip the familiar wood slats in the back-seat doorway of his truck. He leans forward, grinning, and lets his legs dangle above the ground.

I ASK HONNOLD ABOUT THE FUTURE OF CLIMBING. I WONDER IF HE'LL name a route he expects someone to solo. Instead, he brings up the Olympics, which will include climbing in two years.

"Maybe the future of climbing is more in difficulty and the athletic side of it, with indoor competition. Maybe that will change what people do in the outdoors. I don't know. Honestly, my vision is sort of limited about whatever's coming next. I grew up in a particular time, and certain things represented the cutting edge. We've gotten there, and I don't know what's next."

So you feel like, for the sport, we're in a moment of who knows what's going to happen?

"Well, maybe not for the sport, but for me personally. I'm sure there are 16-year-olds growing up in the gym right now that have big dreams, aspirations, but that's just not me anymore."

You're still young!

"Well, yeah, but I'm 20 years past that. I don't have the same hunger, the same limitless ambition. I've also worked really hard and gotten much closer to my potential. I know how much work it would take to do more, or harder. Whereas with a kid, they have the limitless ambition of, I can do anything. I



Honnold concentrates with single-minded focus as he works his way up El Capitan unroped. JIMMY CHIN/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

know I can't be that much better. Obviously, I can still improve as a climber, but I'm never going to be way, way better."

He'd written "EC," for "El Capitan," in his journal years before he finished the climb. I asked him what else was written there that he hadn't done yet.

"No, that was the end of it. For many years, it was four things: Sendero Luminoso, Romantic Warrior, the University Wall in Squamish, and El Cap. It kind of felt like those three led up to El Cap. That was always the big goal."²

Congratulations.

"Yeah, thanks, thanks. I need a new list."

Honnold found the edge, but not the way people feared, by falling off it. Maybe he's secretly planning another big-wall solo—but I don't think so.

How would you feel if a little kid saw this movie and decided to solo El Cap?

"I would tell them to be careful, and be prepared—but the thing is, is like—the first 50 feet of El Cap are relatively easy, and so, I mean, anybody can start up, and be like, oh . . . you know?" He mimes balking, eyes wide.

It's a built-in moment where, if you need to bail, you can?

"Yeah. Yeah. Basically, you can't really do it unless you're prepared, and if you're prepared to the point where you feel comfortable walking up to El Cap without a rope, you know, power to you. It's a really long journey to get to the point where you feel even remotely comfortable, and so, if somebody wants to follow that whole journey, then, power to them."

It makes sense, in Honnold logic. He makes soloing El Cap sound like a test in a fairy tale: If you're not pure of heart, doing the climb for the right reasons, then you won't even try it. And if you do try, and you pass that point of no return, you've proven yourself, and no one has the right to stop you.

No, not the right, exactly—it's more that, in Honnold's frame of reference, it's not actually possible for one person to persuade another to solo, or not to. "Typically, people only discourage you from soloing. Your friends and peers will always be like, that's a bad idea, don't do that. It has to come from within."

² Honnold free soloed El Sendero Luminoso (rated 5.14d) in Mexico in January 2014; University Wall (5.12) on Stawamus Chief Mountain in Squamish, British Columbia, in late August 2014; and Romantic Warrior (5.12b) in the Needles in California's Sierra Nevada in September 2014.

There's a "but." I asked Honnold if anyone encouraged him to solo. He said, "No, I just read stories, things like that. I was inspired by it." Movies—like this one.

The movie won't do the work of training, though. The movie won't build mental armor. It won't get anyone through that first pitch of El Cap without a rope. And now that I've seen the movie, and talked to Honnold, I wouldn't want to tell him not to solo.

It seems like a beautiful way to exist.

"Yeah. In the moment, it's amazing." We're both briefly silent. Then he adds, "As long as you don't fall off."

SARAH RUTH BATES is a writer based in Boston. See her story about waiting on a ledge on page 24. Visit her at sarahruthbates.com.