

FIRST-TIMERS

8 tips for your first day out with a newbie

MARLA IS YOUR BEST FRIEND—you go way back. She runs marathons and could dust you on foot, but you're a climber, and thus Marla is one of your "other" friends. That is, until she expresses an interest in climbing. However, before you bestow your vertical knowledge on a flatlander, consider a few basic strategies for that first day out together. Presented here are eight ways to manage expectations (Marla's *and* your own), have fun, and stay safe. (Note: the controlled atmosphere of the gym can make a good intro venue during Marla's learning process.)



The 20-Foot Zone

Marla's first climb should stop at 20 feet—even if the anchors are at 70—so you can focus on safety and relay key info without shouting. Teach Marla to tie in (and have her successfully complete the knot several times without help), put her on belay, practice belay commands, and explain that you'll lower her when she reaches the "top." Then have her climb the 20-foot mock pitch while you further practice commands and go over basic movement principles. When lowering, I often tell first-descentionists to sit back like they're in a La-Z-Boy and walk their feet down the rock; if Marla wants to hold something on the way down, have her grasp her tie-in knot.



A Better Tomorrow

Don't expect to climb much (or at all) that first teaching day. Better to write it off as a community-service outing, lest you end up in the hospital after Marla reveals that no, she did not fully grasp the meaning of "Take!" The best way to ensure you get your climbing fix? Call a climbing buddy and set a cragging date for the day *after* you climb with Marla.



Belay School

Once Marla has climbed and is comfortable with safety systems, teach her to belay. Start with "ground school": safely on terra firma, pull 20 feet of slack on the climber side of the cord and have Marla practice taking in rope and locking off, reinforcing the importance of brake-hand control. Once confident in her skills, start climbing, looking down every few moves to make sure Marla's on the ball. Lastly, stay low—no higher than you're comfortable falling or downclimbing—so you can supervise the lowering sequence. As a precaution, I often hold the belayer's side of the rope—creating a hand-belay backup—while I watch my newbie switch to a lower.



The Right Stuff

Marla won't know what to pack. Tell her, in addition to the climbing gear (harness, shoes, chalk) you'll likely lend her, she also needs sunscreen, water, food, sturdy yet comfy shoes for the approach, and temp-appropriate clothes. Set aside a loaner backpack for her, too.



Take It from the Top

Topping, versus leading or multi-pitching, is the safest, easiest way to introduce Marla to climbing. Sure, you *know* she could make it up a 5.10, but start instead with a 5.5—the mellow grade will allow Marla to enjoy herself while learning basic skills. Finally, because you can't yet count on Marla safely to belay or lower you, visit an area with anchors accessible from above, so you can be self-sufficient while rigging.



Heightened Awareness

As a new belayer, Marla should learn to scan her surroundings for potential hazards. She should choose her belay stance carefully, finding a stable, level area so a climber fall won't yank her into a rock or off a ledge. Encourage her to look up, too, to beware falling objects and ensure the ropes aren't twisted, caught up, or running poorly. Finally, as you inspect Marla's equipment setup, tell her what you're looking for (e.g., harness buckle doubled, biner gate locked, knot finished, belay device properly threaded) so she memorizes and internalizes the preflight checklist, too.



Knowledge = Power

Before you or Marla touch rock, take time to explain the basics. You needn't explain fall factors, load forces, or physics—just roll out a few simple explanations: "Belaying lets us keep a climber safe by maintaining a snug rope as he climbs." "Falling is a part of climbing." "These ropes are dynamic, meaning they stretch when weighted, to absorb the shock," etc.

Hooked for Life

Once Marla's mastered the basics, gradually add climbing difficulty. If you do it right, Marla will be excited about another day out and ready to learn more. You'll also have created a safer beginning climber—something we'll all thank you for down the road. 

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