

RUNNING TALUS

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This article was written for the second Chouinard catalog, which appeared in 1975. Since it describes such a novel way to begin learning to rock climb, it generated quite a bit of interest and was revised and reprinted several times. I have tuned up some of these ideas while teaching climbing. On several occasions I have actually edited the initial lecture all the way down to just two words before leading off slowly into the nearest boulder field. Those words were "Follow me."

Every boulder is prepared and measured and put in its place more thoughtfully than are the stones of temples. If for a moment you are inclined to regard these taluses as mere draggling, chaotic dumps, climb to the tip of one of them, tie your mountain shoes firmly over the instep, and with braced nerves run down without any haggling, puttering hesitation, boldly jump from boulder to boulder with ever increasing speed. You will then find your feet playing a tune, and quickly discover the music and poetry of rock piles—a fine lesson, and all nature's wildness will tell the same story." — John Muir

Talus running is one of the best ways to begin mountaineering, yet it is so simple that it usually gets overlooked. In our haste to begin toying with the intriguing equipment of technical climbing, we often overlook this first exposure to the medium, to rock itself.

Simplify the learning process by going straight to the rock. Talus running—or boulder hopping—puts you in touch with a lot of rock right away, without the interference of rope and hardware. In fact, all you need is a pair of hiking boots—or better yet, your old tennis shoes. Climbing shoes are OK, as long as they're not too tight, but running shoes pad the contact too much. Hundreds of friction stances, moving by too fast for thought, will teach

your body directly. The secret is to relax and let yourself learn without thinking of what you're doing.

You could come to this novel exercise from any of several directions. It's for the mountain rambler who aspires to become a mountaineer, or the rock climber growing into alpine climbing—though he won't believe this exercise can teach him anything until he tries it. It's for the novice who is full of the spirit of mountaineering, but wary of the technical entanglements of pure rock climbing. But even if you ultimately aim to climb in technically sophisticated places like Yosemite, don't overlook talus running as a beginning. The old alpinists knew what modern rock technicians have forgotten—that scrambling leads to climbing.

The minute they step onto the rock I can spot the hikers and backpackers in any climbing class. They have learned a lot about climbing just from rambling along rocky trails. They own a sense of the friction of rock, of balance and movement, that is quite unconscious, absorbed through the feet. Fortunate is the climbing school with a long trail and a short scramble leading to its teaching rocks.

Pete Sinclair, who taught climbing for years in Wyoming, has made a worthy point about learning to climb. You don't need to learn to climb at all—you already know. You only forgot when you "grew up," when you quit climbing trees and fences. Those reflexes slumber in old nerve memory banks, just waiting to be reawakened to the new medium of stone. You just need to recall what you once knew instinctively; relax a little, and it's right there.

People don't teach you to climb—the rock teaches you. You can simplify the learning process by going directly to the source.

Talus running is as close as the nearest pile of rocks, perhaps along a local streambed. Its ultimate terrain, however, is the miles of piles of talus—rocky debris and boulders—scattered at the foot of peaks in every alpine mountain range of the world, and its joy is as much in the setting as in the action.

If you are already a serious backpacker, just loving the mountains and striding across country on and off the map, you have probably come upon talus in the course of your desire and crossed it simply because it was in your path. But if you start climbing before

you actually get into the mountains, your apprenticeship must nevertheless begin on the first rock between trail and peak—on the talus.

But beware of live moraines. They are being pushed along by moving glaciers, their rocks clink tentatively forward and rest unsteadily. They are quite unstable—better to stay off. Talus boulders, on the other hand, usually fall off of peaks with enough momentum to sort into more stable configurations below. They shift too, but less often.

Suppose that instead of choosing alpine country, you had gone for your first climbing to Yosemite Valley. The initial lesson would be quite different. The basics in either case are friction and balance, and in the Valley they are best learned, or relearned, on a slab. So you would probably truck off to the Glacier Point Apron where the climbing would be somewhat slow and exacting. It would also be rather difficult, reflecting the studied, careful, and precise way a rock climber approaches his chosen terrain. You would probably slip and come onto the protection of a friendly rope and so begin to learn not to lean into the rock but to make your feet stick by standing over them. By the end of the day you would have mastered climbing problems beyond your previous imagination.

But we are in the high mountains. The high country does not lack in slabs, and we will play on them in due time, but since our goal is mountaineering, we will make a crucial detour. We live in a world of larger scale. For years we have been covering country, large hunks of it—first on trails, later breaking out across country, sometimes going up and down peaks, running down scree and hopping from one talus block to the next. We have grown accustomed to seeing the skyline change in proportion to our effort. We are creatures of motion, and in becoming mountaineers we have high hopes of increasing our mobility, not limiting it.

Direct aid climbing up a vertical and otherwise holdless wall, attached to one thin crack, is certainly challenging, but it stifles our animal joy in pure loping motion. It is not nearly kinesthetic enough to satisfy the sense we have come to feel of our-bodies-moving-in-the-mountains. Later we will, for a while, have to accept the limitations imposed by the exposure of a new and steeper environment—to slow down and sweat and hold the rock tight and think; to rope up and secure each other by belaying the rope; to lug the rope, coil and uncoil it, and constantly, ceaselessly, untangle it. But this, we hope, will be just a stage, for our hearts are set on more freedom in the mountains, on being free in even

wilder places. So we do not start with the steep rock and the rope, but on familiar, gently sloping ground—in a talus field.

The experienced backpacker is snickering a little here, thinking this a bit foolish. He is recalling memories of past miseries on talus, doubtless aggravated by his strapped-on, aluminum-framed equilibrium destroyer. That backpacker would benefit from personal application of the recent proliferation of lightly internal-framed, body-contoured packs.

To the new talus runner, a boulderfield will seem at first to be a sea of holes, which must be avoided by means of a deliberate technique. Just walking over the field will be a handful: need I say be careful? Literally running is, after all, the advanced course.

There are but two essentials, friction and balance—the staying power of a foot resting on the rock, and the dynamic of moving the body to the next foothold. The motion is like walking, of course, only more broken and much more studied. This combination of balance and friction is the basis of all climbing. The application of these two essentials will be added to, refined, extrapolated; both will be pushed to unexpected limits, in awkward and improbable combinations. But the basic requirement, friction and balance working in harmony, is always there.

Moving over the talus, we begin to see that coordinating the step from one point of balance to the next implies another quality—rhythm. A good dancer becomes a good climber; the mere weight lifter is helpless. We build up momentum. Each step becomes less of a stance, more of a brief way-station to the next step. The dynamic overcomes the static.

Momentum will keep you going past the sum of your stances, just as it holds the bicyclist on his line over the succession of pavement under his tires. You may begin by stepping into the notch formed by two blocks coming together, but by the time you actually start running, speed and confidence will accelerate you like a hydrofoil coming up on the wing, until you're running along the tops of the blocks. Or, in really big talus—car-sized-blocks—you can end up ricocheting off a sequence of facing friction slabs in a sinuous dynamic, scribing an energy arc that is always leaning forward by tilting sideways.

Upon that ricocheted balancing act and it becomes stemming—one of the most elegant of climbing maneuvers, but often the last learned. Likewise, planting a foot securely in

the notch where two boulders meet anticipates jamming, the art of wedging hands and feet into cracks splitting steeper rock. Jamming technique does not come as easily as face climbing, so it helps to start getting a feel for it now.

You will occasionally miss a step, which can of course be dangerous. But instead of reverting to caution, think recovery. With good momentum, you are already halfway into the next step anyway. Hesitation can land you instead in one of the holes between the boulders.

One advantage of starting to learn climbing technique on the talus is that you won't have to try to put a lot of little pieces together later—talus running is not balance + adhesion + rhythm + looking ahead; it is one integrated motion right from the beginning. Any of its parts might be isolated as you look for their limits, but each remains part of a fluid whole, which progresses to greater speed before going on to harder problems—from talus to blocky ridges, which steepen to buttresses and then smooth out to walls. Rhythm and fast, safe alpine climbing don't grow from practicing isolated parts, but from the whole context of talus running.

Having come through the preliminary talus, we find ourselves at the base of a blocky ridge, which we clamber up as if it were a sort of uphill talus. It may be at first, but it soon becomes steeper. We begin to use our hands occasionally for stabilization or pull, yet we are still moving swiftly, covering terrain. This ridge running will take us safely and quickly up and down a good many peaks, with no more added assistance than some bread and cheese for the summits. During this phase of developing skill you will notice that there are ridges and ridges. In the second case, the walls on either side are steep, so if the ridge suddenly knife-edges in front of you or if the way is barred by a blocky spire, you become exposed.

Exposure is the climber's euphemism for air beneath his feet. To continue in this circumstance may not be any more difficult, but it is more dangerous; the consequences of a fall are potentially more serious. So, discretion being the better part of safety, we have now come to the point at which technical mountaineering begins to lead beyond the scope of talus running. From here I can only recommend this: while you can—and no doubt will—read about ropework, the safest way to really learn it is from a guide.

Talus running is the bouldering of the mountaineer. Just as bouldering emerged from rock climbing as a form of practice but then began to show some independent life of its own, talus running began as a necessary evil, something to be endured between the lake and the peak. It is viewed now as a nursery for the more compact rocks above; it may yet aspire to the status of an independent sport.

But the most far-reaching effects of talus running do not lead in the direction of the competition that characterizes bouldering today. Escalating from walking to loping, to a quickstep, to a gracefully dancing run, already anticipates a personal and noncompetitive kind of mountaineering. Its concentration accelerates attention closer to the present moment, where clinging to a stray thought in the instant between perception and motion can lose the climber his finely tuned edge and send him crashing. Staying on that edge, however, breeds mindfulness.