

The Zen of Adrenaline

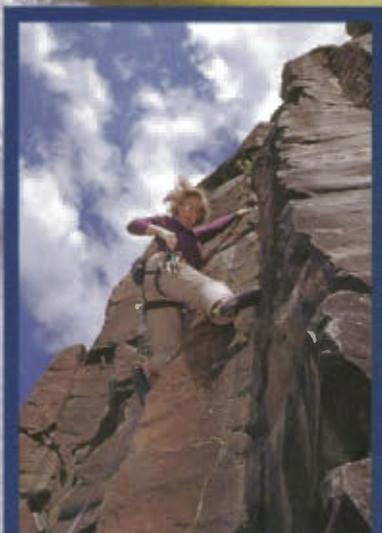
Outdoor adventure sports provide challenge, fun — and a definite rush

By Janelle Brown

Tracy Goff reaches out a chalked hand and finds salvation in a small crack, just wide enough to jam her fingers into. Her heart pounds as she slowly pulls herself up, using her feet to push out from the rock as she makes the difficult move.

If she slips now, Goff knows she'll plummet at least 15 feet through empty air before the rope attached to her harness tightens and her belayer can check her free fall.

Three hundred feet below, the Boise River lazies toward Diversion Dam. A prairie falcon soars overhead. The pungent



Tracy Goff tackles a route on the Black Cliffs east of Boise.



*John Edmiston feels the adrenaline rush
of big water.*

Glenn Oakley photo.

scent of sage fills the air. Goff reaches a narrow ledge and takes it all in. She'd rather be here, halfway up a sheer cliff, than anywhere else.

"I'm a total adrenaline junkie," says Goff, 38, a '91 Boise State graduate in psychology who works with at-risk youth, runs a local climbing gym and teaches her sport at the university. "I love doing this."

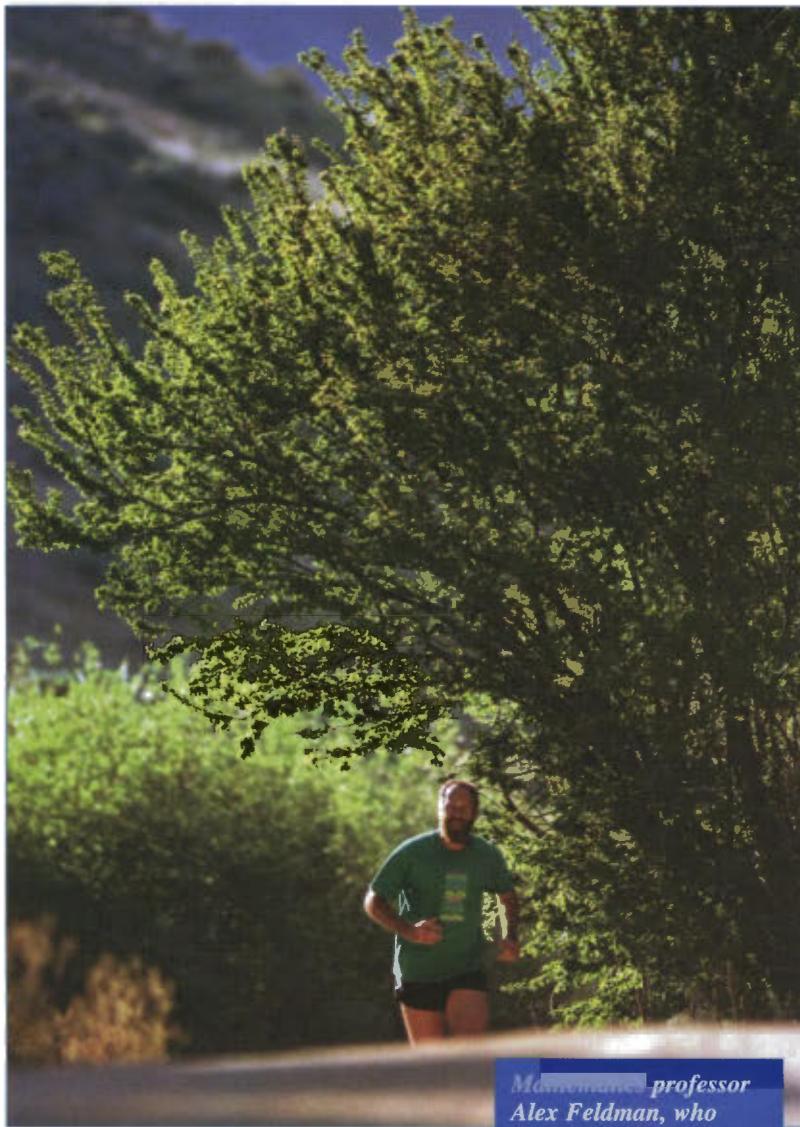
For Goff, climbing is more than recreation. It is a way to explore her life on many levels — physical, emotional and spiritual. "It's very much a mental game," she says. "You have to be very focused or you'll fall."

Then there's the thrill. Scale a precipice, paddle a monster rapid, survive a gnarly bicycle trail, run for 100 miles, ski an avalanche chute, or pursue any one of a limitless number of passions, and you'll discover something that at its core is indescribable, say Goff and others who have done just that. Once you feel the rush, chances are you'll come back for more.

Outdoor adventure sports were once the domain of the gonzo elite, but that's no longer the case. They're booming in Boise and across the nation. According to a recent national survey, more than 28 million Americans own mountain bikes, making it the fastest growing outdoor sport of the 1990s.

The advent of climbing gyms is drawing thousands more to go vertical, according to industry reports, while user-friendly designs for kayaks, backcountry skis and other gear are luring new customers to try these sports.

The Boise National Forest also has seen increased use by adventure seekers. While officials caution that surveys only provide rough estimates, they do show definite trends. For example, river runners jumped from 9,900 in 1991 to 35,900 in 1997, and mountain biking and backcountry skiing also have increased. Mountain bicycle use is so heavy on the Lower Halls Gulch trail north of Boise that one-way traffic and other restrictions have been proposed. And at the City of Rocks National Reserve, a popular climbing area near Burley, visits



CHUCK SCHERER PHOTO

Maintenance professor Alex Feldman, who competes in "ultra-marathons," trains on the Boise Greenbelt.

have jumped from 20,000 in 1988 to 85,000 today.

Boise's strong economy and population growth are undoubtedly contributing to the increases. But there may also be other factors at play, say some experts. As the Treasure Valley becomes more urbanized, it may become more important to find ways to escape. Our fast-paced, technology-driven lifestyles also may push us to seek recreation that is highly stimulating. And some pursuits may appear less intimidating as they become more popular, encouraging even more of us to give them a try.

"Overall, there's definitely a lack of physical challenge in everyday life," observes Ron Pfeiffer, a Boise State kinesiology professor and mountain bicyclist who has competed in national and international competitions. "These sports help fill that void."

Risk-taking is one way of dealing with the stresses of modern life, says Boise State kinesiology professor Linda Petlichkoff, who specializes in sports psychology. "It

allows you to master the unthinkable," she says.

Confront danger, and your body has a physiological response. Your overall mental awareness increases, and so does your strength. As hormones released by the adrenal glands flow through your bloodstream, you're calm, focused, ready for action. In the midst of the so-called adrenaline rush, anything seems possible.

"It's addictive," says kayaker John Edmiston, 33, a '96 Boise State graduate in accounting, of the rush he feels after he runs the North Fork of the Payette, one of the most difficult rivers in North America. "You feel as big as a mountain. You feel unstoppable."

Capsize on the North Fork, and you'll find yourself pummeled by tons of rushing water, gasping for air and fighting for your life, says Edmiston, the food and beverage controller for Bogus Basin Ski Area who also works at Idaho River Sports in the summer. He's had a few "scary swims," but they haven't kept him from pushing the limits.

"I've always wanted to do difficult things," says Edmiston. "You can find

total peace in total chaos. There's simply nothing else like it."

Edmiston has built his life around kayaking and snowboarding. But those with limited time for adventure are no less passionate about their sports. The reason we get hooked is straightforward enough, says Boise State psychology professor Rob Turrissi, himself an avid mountain bicyclist and skier.

"It's simple conditioning," Turrissi explains. "You pair an action and an emotional state. If it's positive, you'll do it again."

Turrissi, 38, loves to bomb trails on his bicycle, wearing neoprene knee guards, a helmet and a can-do attitude as protection. He finds even bigger thrills in skiing terrain so steep you fall through empty air between turns.

"I'm an extremely competitive person. I work hard, and I play hard. I get a thrill in doing it right," he says. Tackling new chal-

Nature's Freedom Comes With a Price

By Chris Bouneff

I'm standing chest deep in the YMCA pool. It's hot outside, but the water is cold. And a woman nicknamed Smiley, without a smile on her face and warm in a wet suit, tells me to get into the kayak. The problem, at least from my perspective, is that the boat is upside-down in the pool.

After taxing Smiley's patience, I decipher her instructions on entering the boat. I sink into the water facing the back of the kayak, somersault and slide my legs in. Once seated, I tap the bottom of the boat, the signal for Smiley to flip the kayak and expose my lungs to air.

I've taken an important first step, she says, because if I know how to get into the kayak, I can exit when it rolls. This wet introduction also is important because it gives me, a beginner whose idea of the great outdoors is my lawn after two weeks without a mow, a taste of the sport before I commit my time and energy.

And my money. Yes, it takes greenbacks before you can enjoy nature's greenery, especially with two of today's more popular outdoor activities — kayaking and mountain biking.

Experts in each sport advise novices to test the waters and climb the hills before loosening purse strings. K.C. Smith, who works at Idaho River Sports, often recommends that beginners try a Y session or pay for formal lessons to learn whether kayaking, and buying a kayak, is for them.

"Some people find out it's not what they expected," Smith says. "Others try it and want to drop a lot of money right away because they know they want to do it."

And drop a lot of money isn't an exaggeration, especially if you buy new equipment. Smith runs through just the basic supplies: new boat \$900 or so, spray skirt \$100, paddle between \$100 and \$200, helmet \$100, float bags \$54, life jacket \$75. By the time she finishes with the essential supplies, the tally stands at about \$1,400. And that's without comfort items such as a dry top, skull cap or wet suit that pushes the total to about \$1,800.

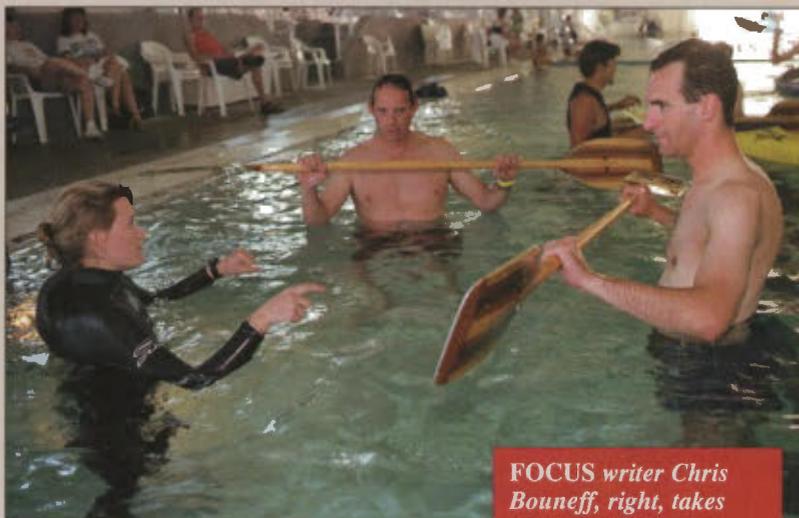
Then you need lessons, an essential, that cost around \$175 for two days of introductory schooling, says Kenneth Long, an instructor with Cascade Kayak School and a Boise State student during lulls between clinics and kayak competitions.

Because, in the pool it's OK to possess little control of your boat. But on the open water, even in calm river water, you need to know certain paddle strokes, Long says, and moves with insider names such as ferrying, eddy turns and peel outs.

Mountain biking is on a different plane in one way — you don't need expert instruction to tackle the sport. I didn't need anyone to tell me how to get on a bike for my only off-road excursion two years ago when several more experienced riders took me on a short jaunt, although I did learn one unique element of mountain biking.

We hit a major hill and had to carry our bikes as we climbed. I figured that something was wrong with the path we took because I assumed the bike was supposed to carry me. But, as I discovered, sometimes you have to climb a hill on foot before you barrel down it faster than your life can flash before you.

Though you don't need an expert to risk injury in this manner, an expert does help when buying equipment, which, like kayaking, also is expensive.



CHUCK SCHERER PHOTO

FOCUS writer Chris Bouneff, right, takes kayak lessons before pulling out his checkbook to buy equipment.

So it's best to turn to someone such as Chris Haunold, who co-owns Idaho Mountain Touring with his wife, Jill, a Boise State graduate enrolled in the doctorate of curriculum and instruction program.

If you're a cheapskate, like myself, your eye goes directly to the \$300 bikes. But Haunold will give you the standard advice: "You have to buy a bicycle for the hardest use that you anticipate for it."

Even if you ride the Greenbelt 95 percent of the time, if you take your cheap bike down a rutted hill just once, you'll damage

the bike, he says. With that in mind, expect to spend about \$600 or more for the right bike. Add the necessary equipment — helmet, gloves, emergency repair supplies and special shorts that ensure blister-free thighs — and you'll be out about \$750 or more.

For the more adventurous of wallet, you can buy a bike with front and rear suspension with a lighter frame and better components for around \$1,500. And for the person who wants everything, Haunold shows me a titanium frame with top-of-the-line components that will only set you back \$4,000 — more than four times the cost of my first car.

Comfort and quality components are the most important factors, Haunold says, and cheap bikes aren't comfortable and don't have quality parts.

But if you're willing to spend a bit more, you can have a bike that will do the job. Biking should be fun, he says, and with a quality bike "it will be fun. It's a toy. It should be fun, and it should give you pleasure."

As for novices taking up either sport, you probably won't find me among them.

I'm a city kid, and if it doesn't involve a surface covered in cement, it's not my kind of sport. And if I ever need a jolt of adrenaline, I'll turn to an activity other than rolling in whitewater or tumbling from a bicycle.

I'll head to the basketball courts in my hometown of Portland. I know several parks where games occasionally end in an argument and someone saying, "I'm going to get my cousin," after which everyone scatters before we find out what this cousin will do. Now, that's my kind of rush. □

lenges also makes you a more interesting individual, Turrisi believes. "It allows you to be good at more than one thing."

The high-octane activities have other carryovers, too. Boise State chemistry professor Dale Russell, 52, says that climbing mountains has given her insights into how to deal with the stress of multiple projects and looming deadlines.

"In climbing you learn to move one step at a time. You don't stress over every detail, you ask, 'Am I OK where I'm at?' And then you make the next logical move," says Russell, who has bagged peaks in the North Cascades, the Canadian Rockies and the Tetons.

Russell says climbing has taught her that what you see from the ground isn't always there when you get closer. "You need the wisdom to know when to back off and change plans," she says.

Fear has also been a teacher. "I've been so scared I've wanted to crumple, to just wait for the helicopter to come and rescue me," Russell says. "It's mental discipline. You take a deep breath, and then you make the next move."

Adventure sports can also be a path to making life changes, from losing weight to overcoming phobias, say others. When Boise State mathematics professor Alex Feldman, now 42, took up running about six years ago, he was 50 pounds overweight. He shed the excess pounds and now enters ultramarathons, grueling races of 50 to 100 miles that can take 24 hours or more to complete.

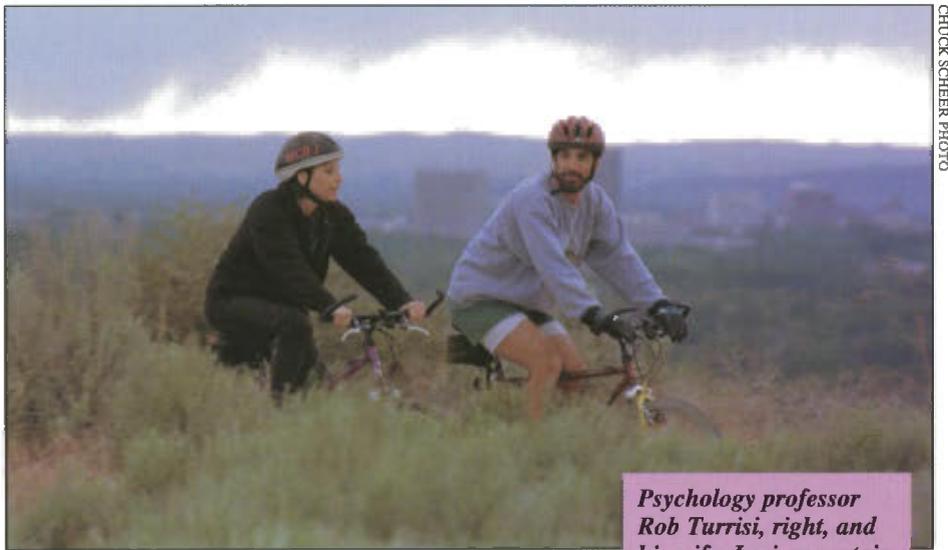
Feldman says he didn't take up running with the goal of entering ultra races, but he got hooked after competing in shorter races that seemed to end too soon. He says he enjoys the scenery of long-distance races and the physical and mental challenges they provide.

"It's not as difficult as you might think," says Feldman. "You walk up hills. You talk to other people along the way."

A sign on Feldman's office door at Boise State reads: "The pain is inevitable, the suffering is optional," a sentiment that could apply as easily to learning math as running ultramarathons. Feldman says he doesn't suffer in a race because he knows what to expect and works through the pain.

"There's an aspect of gratification here you don't get with math research, where you can go for months without a breakthrough," says Feldman, who runs about 120 miles each week. "Running gives me more energy to go about the day's work."

A fear of heights drove David Duro, 36, an '86 Boise State graduate in economics, to take up climbing. "You gain inner strength when you face an obstacle and overcome it," says Duro, executive director



CHUCK SCHEER PHOTO

Psychology professor Rob Turrisi, right, and his wife, Lori, mountain bike in the Foothills near Boise.

of the downtown family YMCA. "It's a sense of accomplishment."

Duro says he hasn't completely lost his fear of heights, but he doesn't let it stop him. And he sees similar life-skill lessons being learned by at-risk youth who tackle the Y's climbing wall. "These kids are pumped when they achieve their goal," says Duro. "The experience is transferrable to other areas of their lives."

Many studies have documented the links between sports, including adventure sports, and positive attitudes. We perform our best, says Petlichkoff, when we have sufficient challenge to feel motivated but not so

'You can find total peace in total chaos. There's simply nothing else like it.'

much that we're panicked.

But the amount of challenge individuals thrive on varies widely, adds Werner Hoeger, a Boise State kinesiology professor, fitness author and lifelong athlete. "I personally think there are inherited characteristics that make some people inclined to seek thrills," he says.

Hoeger, 45, says he definitely puts himself, and his family, in the thrill-seeking category. A former gymnast and marathon runner, Hoeger and his son Christopher, 14, are now training for the luge, traveling to Park City, Utah, and other locations for clinics and races. Hoeger's goal is to be associated in an official capacity with luge in the 2002 Winter Olympic Games. While it's still too early for definite plans, he dreams of competing for his native Venezuela in the event.

"I like the speed. It is definitely an adrenaline rush. You're going 60-70 mph. It's the greatest feeling to cross the finish line," says Hoeger.

Hoeger smashed an ankle early on when he slammed into a wall at a training clinic. He was back on the ice as soon as he got the doctor's OK, and 10 days later he placed 13th in the U.S. Masters Nationals in luge.

"I enjoy the challenge. I've competed my whole life, and I hope to continue until I'm 80 or 90," Hoeger says.

But to spend a lifetime pursuing adventure sports may require some flexibility – and constraint. The line between a positive and negative addiction to an adrenaline rush can be razor thin.

"If you couldn't do this sport for 24-36 hours, how would you feel?" Petlichkoff asks. "If you're unnerved, jittery, not focused, you're probably on the road to a negative addiction."

Chronic injuries, the inability to maintain a job or a household or a loss of relationships may also signal that the pursuit of an adventure sport has gotten out of hand. So is losing interest in everything else but finding the next big rush.

Goff's academic background also has given her some insights into why adventure sports are so alluring. "In psychology we talk about 'peak experiences.' I've had a couple of them looking back down a climb and going, 'Wow, I did that,'" she says.

Still, Goff says she strives to keep her passion in perspective. She can get as much thrill out of teaching others to climb as doing it herself. "At one point in my life I was depressed. Rock climbing got me out of it," she says. "I'll never get tired of doing this." □