

Women ascend in the world of climbing

By Heather Somerville hsomerville@mercurynews.com

Updated: 10/20/2014 11:26:52 AM PDT

MercuryNews.com

Ask most any woman why she rock climbs, and you'll get some version of the same answer -- it's raw, empowering freedom.

When she climbs, she's acutely aware of her body and its strength; she's outside in the silent back country, with only the rock and a harness full of gear; she's reaching into crevices and swinging her heel over ledges as she works her way to the top to take a gratifying look below her, breathing a sigh of relief.

"The way that our society and economy is set up. We have to work really hard and don't have enough time to be free. And that's what climbing is -- it's freedom," Lynn Hill, a legendary rock climber from Orange County who now lives in Colorado, said in an interview. "That's why I need to do this."



Climbing instructor Nissa Guerrero, of SheClimbs, center, and her students watch a fellow climber during an intro to climbing course through REI at

Today, from local rock climbing gyms to state parks such as Castle Rock and the steep crags of Peru, more women and young girls are climbing than ever before, those who follow the sport say. Despite reports of lingering sexism in the sport, climbers say women are taking a leading role -- guiding expeditions, teaching climbing camps and schools, performing rescues and completing first ascents up untouched rock.

In a nod to their growing role in the sport, a weekend-long festival that began Friday in Oakdale, a small Central Valley town near the edge of the Sierra foothills, will celebrate

women's contributions to climbing and several generations of pioneers responsible for the surge of women climbers today. They include Joshua Tree and Yosemite climbing master Mari Gingery and legendary Bay Area mountaineers Arlene Blum and Irene Beardsley, who will share their stories, which will be recorded and archived in the North American Climbing History Archives.

"There's always been women climbers, from the dawn of climbing," said Nicole Belle Isle, 42, a climbing instructor from Sunnyvale and leader of a local women's group SheClimbs Bay Area. "The women who climbed early on were the more adventurous ones for their times. I definitely admire what they've done."

And what they've done is open up rock faces, ice walls and caves for more women to join and excel in climbing, building a community that embraces women and has bred some of the world's strongest extreme-sports athletes.

"The sport has just exploded exponentially," said Alycia Cavadi, 42, a two-decade climber from North Conway, N.H., one of the country's oldest climbing grounds. "Women have a natural aptitude toward the sport. We just realized that we didn't need men to guide us."

Their predecessors include Hill, who in 1993 was the first person to free climb up The Nose, a difficult sheer rock face on El Capitan in Yosemite Valley, and Beverly Johnson, the first woman to solo climb the Dihedral Wall of El Capitan in 1978. They climbed when social norms told them not to and when the sport was "all about guys being guys," but often outclimbed the men around them, said Joseph Taylor III, a longtime rock climber and history professor at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia.

Climbing "was very much bound up with gender and with young men who were very insecure for a variety of reasons and constantly measuring themselves against other men," Taylor said. "These women began to undermine the conceit that men are better than women. Once a woman starts climbing 5.13s and 5.14s, no one has any room for attitude anymore," he said, referring to extraordinarily difficult grades for climbing routes.

Women, in fact, have been climbing -- or more precisely trekking and mountaineering, which laid the groundwork for modern-day rock climbing -- since the 1920s, but they're not household names like Sir Edmund Hillary, the first person to summit Mount Everest, and their feats are missing from history books.

"History tends to be written by men, and women are left out of it," said Steve Grossman, a longtime rock climber in Seattle who directs the festival and is curating the climbing archives. "This is my attempt to correct that. Climbing is very different now. Climbing is pretty much half men and half women, so it's worth backing up and taking a look at how things have changed."

And how things have changed: In 1960, Beardsley was kicked off a nine-month expedition led by Hillary to study the effect of long stays in high altitude. Beardsley, now 79 and living in Palo Alto, joined her then-husband, Leigh Ortenburger, on the trip but "Hillary made all the wives leave," she said. "I had probably as much high-altitude climbing experience as the physiologists on the expedition," but that didn't matter to them.

Hillary later invited Beardsley to return, and she stayed 18 days at 19,000 feet in the Himalayas.

A half-century later, Majka Burhardt, a professional climber, writer and speaker living in North Conway, in May did a successful first ascent up the second-highest peak in Mozambique. She guided scientists to study the ecosystem and launch a conservation plan for the mountain.

"I didn't have to apply to Sir Edmund Hillary," said Burhardt, 38, who is producing a video of the climb. "People understood I was the big boss."

But despite easier access to climbing, several women climbers expressed concern that the sport is still highly sexist.

"Climbing is definitely still a man's sport," said Georgie Abel, of Moraga, who has been climbing for nine years. "Sometimes people also automatically assume that I am not a strong climber because I am a woman, saying things like, 'Don't worry, there are easier routes down the hill,' before ever having seen me climb or knowing of my ability level."

Women who are climbing guides report having clients who question their capabilities because of their gender. Other women say their successes on the rock are undermined -- she only finished that route because her fingers are smaller, her hands are thinner or she's shorter, critics say.

But women are combating that small but persistent group of naysayers by forming girls' climbing camps and all-women climbing groups, teaching each other the skills to climb safely and smartly. Among the fastest-growing groups is SheClimbs Bay Area, a group with more than 360 members that first formed in 2000 and was resurrected in 2013 on Meetup.com by Belle Isle and 26-year-old Emily Aygun, of Mountain View.

"It's easy for women to disagree with each other, but there have been mounds and mounds of friendships that have been born out of this group," said Aygun. "Just climbing with other women alone, it's something special. Women climb so much differently than men -- not just mentally, but how we move. Our tactics, our

http://www.mercurynews.com/health/ci_26755187/women-ascend-world-climbing

balance, the way we approach problems -- we're pretty badass."

Contact Heather Somerville at 510-208-6413. Follow her at [Twitter.com/heathersomervil](https://twitter.com/heathersomervil).