



THIS ROCK was meant to be CLIMBED

Paige Claassen discusses her journey to becoming a pro rock climber, and her foundation on the Rock that makes her fearless. ■ **by Aliese Willard**



This is the story of a little girl, big rocks, and Namibian table grapes.

The little girl was Paige Claassen, who at age nine moved with her family to Estes Park, Colorado, eighteen years ago.

Hoping to build her confidence and lessen her shyness, her parents encouraged her to try a broad range of classic after-school activities. None of them worked out.

"We put her in the swimming program," Anna Claassen, Paige's mother said in Episode 3 of the Lead Now Tour video series. "At the first swim meet, it was absolutely the most painful thing I think I had ever seen in my life, because she was the worst one there. And we left thinking, that was just terrible, we have to find something else for her to do!"

Soccer went just as badly, and her lessons on the saxophone and piano proved dissonant. The turning point came when her parents saw an ad in the local paper about an after school rock climbing program. As soon as she entered the climbing gym, the little girl had found her place.

"I just loved it. It clicked right away," Paige said. "I wasn't afraid, and it was just my zone from the very beginning. Climbing is a very independent sport. Your own success or struggles are a direct result of how hard you work. I loved that I could go into the gym—which is basically a giant playground—use all of [my] energy and get super tired and just play."

As Paige grew and continued to train at the gym, she entered indoor climbing competitions, and racked up experience, awards, and increased notoriety. Sponsorships from top outdoor brands Marmot and La Sportiva followed as Paige progressed in the competitive scene and began excelling outdoors.

By age 19, she transitioned fully to climbing outdoors, ascending some of the most difficult, rarely completed routes in the world as she worked toward obtaining a marketing degree at the University of Colorado. Upon graduating college in 2012, she was considered one of the best female sport climbers in the world.

Determined to use her climbing abilities to make a difference, Paige embarked on the nine month Lead Now Tour in 2013, a Marmot-sponsored climbing tour that sent her to nine different countries to climb challenging routes, and raise awareness and funds for non-profit organizations around the world. By the end of the tour, Paige had raised over \$20,000 and completed seven 5.14 graded routes.

Now living part-time in South Africa with her husband, Arjan de Kock, we caught up with Paige to hear about her latest endeavors, connecting with God outdoors, and how farming table grapes in Namibia led to her forming her own non-profit.

ALIESE: First things first: I saw that you were recently injured while bouldering. How did that happen?

PAIGE: We were bouldering in Fontainebleau (France), and I was way too high. Normally I'm the person who bails because I get scared, but I was like, 'For once I'm going to build confidence and go for it, even though I'm going to fall off the top of this really high boulder.' And I fell. I fell straight down, and my ankle rolled a bit, and it tore the ligaments. And it's ended up being a much longer recovery than I expected. Which is frustrating when you're used to being active, but I'm just taking it day by day and trying to be patient, because I know it could have been a lot worse. I probably fell from about 20 feet. I don't think I'll be bouldering anything high for a long time!



Paige Claassen climbing at Waterval Boven in South Africa.

ALIESE: Once you're healed, how do you decide what's going to be the next climbing objective?

PAIGE: I have a list in my head at this point in my career of objectives that I'd still like to tick off of my list, and places I'd like to go. There's the exploring side of it where you go check out new places and new zones, and sample what's there. And after you do some of that, you have unfinished projects that you want to go back to. And that's where I'm at. I have a few new places that I'd like to go, but several existing projects that I'd like to go back and clean up. Stay tuned!

ALIESE: Pro climbing is a demanding lifestyle; between the planning, training, and actual sending of routes, you're a busy girl. What in your opinion is the most challenging aspect of being a professional rock climber?

PAIGE: The hardest thing is that you're expected to be motivated and at your best 100 percent of the time, and that's just not how it works for anyone. If you look at most professional athletes, you'll read about highlights, and then they'll kind of disappear for a couple of months, and then come back and do a bunch of cool stuff and then disappear again.

That's because life goes in waves, no matter what level you're on, and that's important to remember. You'll have these moments of really cool achievements, but they're followed by plateaus, or just feeling not at the top of your game, and that's OK. We all go through that. Your body and mind just need a break to recover after you really push yourself in that way. The mental balance, I think, is the most difficult and the most important as well.

ALIESE: Good point. How do you stay mentally tough on a difficult route?

PAIGE: That's always been my favorite part of climbing, is choosing (to climb) something that feels totally impossible, and that you can't necessarily do most of the moves on when you first walk up (to the route). Once I say out loud that I'm going to do it, then I know that I'm not giving up. And I'll keep trying until I finish it. Normally that's a few weeks, maybe a few months. But at times it's been a few years. I think my longest project was about five years. Climbing is one of those things where if you invest enough time in something it just pulls you in and you can't give it up.

ALIESE: I don't think many people would have the patience to climb the same route for five years! What draws you to climbing, and what do you love most about it?

PAIGE: Being outside with the people you love. Climbing takes you to really unique places that you probably wouldn't go see without climbing objectives, and you meet really cool people. You're out in God's creation, and it puts you in the moment where you enjoy what you have there. You're not looking to the future, or what happened in the day before. It's a great lesson for me because I always like to have a plan and look ahead and think of what's next.

ALIESE: You've been candid in discussing your Christian beliefs with the media; can you tell me about your faith story?

PAIGE: I was fortunate to grow up in a home where my parents were both Christians themselves and took my brother and I to church. It was always a positive experience; it was

never like being harped on and forced into something that I didn't understand. I got to ask questions and learn and be around people who are supportive.

ALIESE: What was your journey in accepting Christ?

PAIGE: I definitely went through a phase where I had to find Christ for myself, rather than just being told that's what I should believe. I did go through that period of doubt of "Is that what I believe for myself rather than just what my parents told me?" I came out on the end where this is what I believe and this is my faith, and it's my own. I can share that with my family and the people around me, and my husband, and it's a really important part of my life, and I think that God has guided me everywhere I am and has brought me to where I am today.

ALIESE: Do you ever feel that you connect with God more when you're outside?

PAIGE: Yeah definitely! I think it's easier to connect with God when you're outside rather than under a roof. Everyone has their different approach, but to stand in these places where you're like, "Oh my gosh, how does this exist? Even this rock looks like it was meant to be climbed!" I think that ties into my life in climbing; when you're outdoors in these amazing places, to know Who created all of it has always been a big thing for me. God isn't just in church; He's everywhere.

ALIESE: Can you think of ways that God has made Himself evident in your life?

PAIGE: To me, looking back, it seems like a really clear path of God putting different obstacles but also opportunities in my life that have led me to where I am now. I know He put climbing in my life for many reasons, so one of them that's pretty obvious right now is that I was able to meet my husband through rock climbing.

Through a series of trips and occurrences and opportunities, I was led to meet someone on the totally opposite side of the world who shares the sport that I love but also shares my faith, and that's something that's not so common in the climbing world. It couldn't have come from anywhere but God. There isn't any other explanation than that for me.

ALIESE: How does your faith and sharing it intersect with climbing?

PAIGE: People always ask if I was judged or put down a lot because of my faith, but that's one of the things I have to appreciate about climbing: Climbers are very open and accepting, and it's a very eclectic bunch of people from all different walks of life and beliefs. Although only a few people I see in the pro climbing community share my faith, I've never been ridiculed—at least not to my face—about it. People can ask questions if they want, but I don't want to push it in anyone's face. And that's my personal approach. I like to lead by example, and to seek out whenever God gives me



Climbing at age 9.

the opportunity (to share), and it enables people to ask questions.

ALIESE: I understand you formed a non-profit organization in 2016. Can you tell me how that came about?

PAIGE: My husband manages and farms table grapes in Namibia. My first few seasons working with him I just saw the unmet need, and how hard life is up there. It's very remote, and there are not very many resources. People are living in reed shacks in 120 degree heat with dust storms. It's rough. There's not a lot of government support, so private support is really all they get.

I wanted to start my own organization to get funding over there for education specifically. I really believe that's the only way out of poverty. We work to give kids access to education, so they can lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Some projects have been remodeling schools, providing school supplies and food and teacher salaries, and just trying to uplift both existing institutions and create new ones. The kids need a safe, productive environment where they can chase after opportunities other than manual labor, which is one of the only existing opportunities that they have.

There are faith aspects (to the nonprofit) and that's key for me. God is definitely guiding the work we do and that's the only place I can look to for guidance, because I'm learning as I go.

ALIESE: How would you encourage people who are interested in climbing, or just starting out?

PAIGE: Rock climbing is so diverse—you can climb outside, inside, in many different styles, and competitively or non-competitively. Don't feel like you have to chase after a specific aspect of climbing. Just go out there and do what you enjoy. Find people who are supportive and fun to be with who can push you and you can push them.

I think one of the coolest things about climbing is that you don't have to climb with someone who is at your level. There's so much to learn from people who are both above and at lower levels than you. That's definitely something I appreciate. [S](#)

Climbing in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.

Rock Climbing Primer

Interested in rock climbing? Here's what you need to know, from types of rock climbing to the necessary gear.

TYPES OF CLIMBING

BOULDERING:

Rock climbing on shorter routes (typically less than 20 feet tall) without a rope, and with a crash pad beneath the climber to cushion falls. Practiced both in the gym, and on low features outdoors.

TOP ROPE CLIMBING:

Practiced in both indoor and outdoor climbing, top rope involves climbers tied into a rope that's anchored at the top of a route. A belayer tightens or loosens the rope as the climber scales the wall.

SPORT CLIMBING:

Outdoor rock climbing where climbers clip the rope as they climb to fixed anchors and bolts that are permanently attached to the rock, and serve as protection from falls. Paige Claassen's favorite type of climbing.

TRAD CLIMBING:

Outdoor climbing with no fixed route, where climbers place gear into natural features of the rock, like cracks, as they climb.

AID CLIMBING:

A style of climbing where the climber's weight primarily rests on gear the whole way up, rather than trying to grab the rock.

FREE SOLOING:

Climbing without any sort of rope or protection. One fall, and you're toast. We wouldn't recommend this.



Helen H. Richardson / Getty Images

GEAR LIST

If you haven't climbed before, it's usually best to start in a climbing gym. Much of the equipment, such as shoes and harnesses, can also be rented at the gym. For Indoor Climbing at a Gym, you'll need:

SHOES:

Special snug-fitting shoes are mandatory for the sport. Climbing shoes start at about \$40 for a basic pair, and can go up to \$200 for the fancy ones.



CHALK BAG:

Chalk helps dry moisture on the hands and improve grip on the rock. Powdered chalk and a bag ranges from \$10-\$40.



HARNESS WITH BELAY DEVICE:

A good harness ranges from \$40-\$150, and a belay device starts at \$20 and can go up to \$150. Yes, they're a little pricey, but we're talking about equipment that's suspending you above ground and preventing falls. Worth the investment.



SHORT NAILS:

Trim your talons! Long nails will interfere with your grip on the rock, and are likely to get broken (ouch).

LONG(ISH) PANTS:

There's a reason you don't see elite climbers wearing shorts—your knees will get torn up. You also won't see them wearing nice clothing. Now is the time to pull out the old athletic capris or pants with holes in them. They'll get roughed up on the rock anyway.

A BUDDY WHO'S EXPERIENCED:

One of the best ways to learn how to climb is to make friends with more mature climbers. They'll have advice on different moves and navigating routes, along with a bunch of that expensive gear. When you're on belay, your life is literally in their hands; they'd better know what they're doing!

FOR OUTDOOR CLIMBING, you'll need all of the indoor equipment listed above, and:

HELMET:

Between falling rocks and the potential for short falls while on belay, you'll want one to protect your noggin. Helmet prices range between \$40-\$200.



ROPE:

The length of rope will depend on what type of climbing you're doing. They're some of the priciest climbing equipment, and with good reason: a well-made rope needs to be able to safely hold all of your body weight, and catch you in a fall. Ropes start at \$80, and top \$700 on the high-end.



VARIED GEAR:

this will depend on the type of climbing (see Sport and Trad in "Types of Climbing"). In general, carabiners ("CARE-a-bee-ners") and quickdraws are necessary for almost all outdoor climbing. Carabiners range in price from \$3-\$60, and quickdraws start at \$10 and can go up to \$100 for a pack of 6. Trad climbing requires more equipment and a greater variety: Cams, nuts, and mountaineering equipment in addition to everything else. Consult an expert on this stuff.

MISCELLANEOUS

CRASH PAD:

A thick pad designed to cushion a climber from short falls while bouldering. If you plan on bouldering outdoors, you'll need one.



CLIMBING GUIDEBOOKS,

RESEARCH: Most outdoor climbing crags have pre-determined routes with ratings of difficulty. Consult a guidebook or research online before you head out.



Warring Abbott / Getty Images



Christof Koepsel / Getty Images