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# life on the rocks

a passionate climber discovers his greatest challenge isn't a mountain—it's his own body. read how pilates has helped him regain the summit

BY KRISTIAN SOLEM

**O**ddly enough, I owe my climbing career to my friend Jean's brother Paul's decision to move out of New York City in 1973. If he had stuck around, Jean never would have drafted me as his new climbing partner. Soon after Paul's departure, I found myself headed upstate in an old VW to some spectacular cliffs called the Shawangunks in the Hudson Valley. Jean was a strong climber and a good teacher, but he had a serious approach to the sport. The way he explained it, climbing seemed technical and difficult, a contest between man and rock.



The next morning, my senses were on edge as we walked through the woods along the base of the towering cliffs. I was surprised to see a small group preparing to climb. They were a motley crew, tattered and dirty. One of the men tied a rope to his waist and turned to face the rock. I didn't know what to expect, so I was stunned when he stepped onto the vertical cliff and began to "dance" his way upward. In my mind's eye he was transformed into a climbing version of Rudolf Nureyev, moving with the kind of precision, power, flow and grace I had seen only at the ballet. But it was more than physical prowess.

He transcended the world of movement and had edged into the world of art. He expressed joy in his moves and a delight in simply being able to do it. I was 20 years old, and that was the precise moment that I became obsessed with climbing.

What I didn't realize then was that climbing isn't just a sport—it's a lifestyle—and that my passion for it would totally shape my life. I gave up a promising career as a trumpet player in New York to move to Los Angeles, where I was surrounded by terrific climbing. L.A. was also a great place to pursue a new livelihood as a recording engineer.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RANDY WENZEL

**Left: Having fun on the rocks in Indian Cove, Joshua Tree National Park, Jan. '09. Right: Making the first ascent of the Gold Standard, Courtright Reservoir, CA, Sept. '90.**

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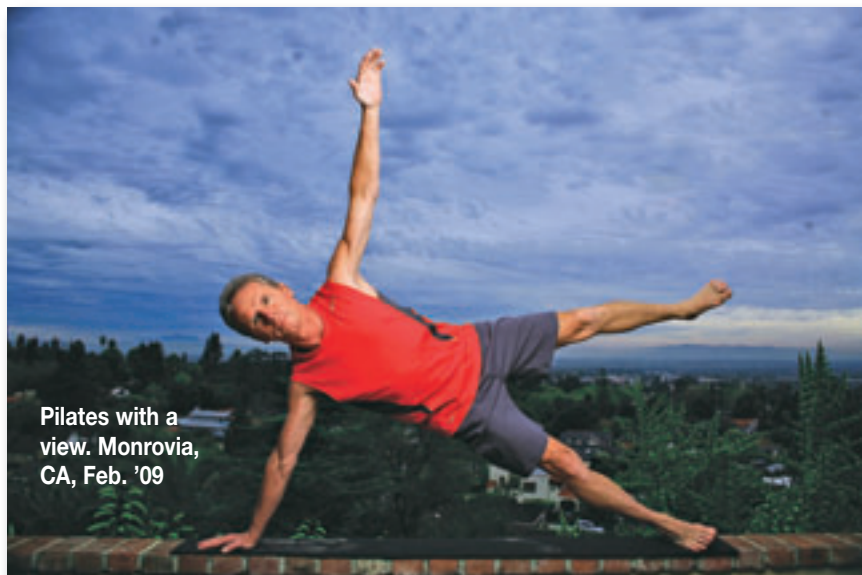
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## the way up

Over the years I completed some of the most challenging climbs in the country: El Capitan and Astroman in the “Granite Crucible” of Yosemite; Castle Rock Spire in Sequoia; and hundreds of others in California, Colorado, Nevada, Wyoming and Arizona. I did many difficult “first ascents,” meaning I was the first person to climb a particular route, in Joshua Tree and the Sierra Nevada.

I earned recognition in the sport, getting my routes and pictures in guidebooks, climbing magazines and newspapers. And over the years, like most serious climbers, I had my share of injuries: broken ankles, wrists, fingers and ribs. Fortunately I always healed well. Until September 2004, that is, when I was rock climbing on Dike Wall in the Mammoth Lakes region of California. I was clinging to a vertical rock in a difficult position, with my right arm way out to my side. Suddenly my balance shifted by just a few ounces, but it was enough to amplify the load on my extended arm. I heard a loud crunching noise right next to my ear—so loud peo-



Pilates with a view. Monrovia, CA, Feb. '09

MIKE ALLEN

ple on the ground heard it—so loud people on the ground heard it—and felt a searing pain in my shoulder. The next thing I knew I was falling—and then dangling from my rope.



On the Rincon Kern River Canyon, CA, Dec. '08

MICHAEL YBARRA

Back in L.A., I went to see Neal ElAttrache, MD, a well-known orthopedic surgeon. As he was looking at my MRI, he said with a tongue-in-cheek grin to a postgraduate fellow he was

working with, “This guy tried to tear his arm off, but the skin held it on.” It turned out that a previous shoulder injury hadn’t been rehabbed properly, and my still-weak subscapularis muscle had given way while I was climbing. As it did, I tore three of my four rotator-cuff tendons and detached my outer bicep. Dr. ElAttrache told me that my only

option was arthroscopic rotator-cuff surgery and that he would do a “super-strong” version of the procedure that would allow me to climb again.

When I started my postoperative physical therapy, I couldn’t move my arm at all. Though the process was brutally painful, my physical therapist

was a genius at helping me restore movement. Within four weeks I had recovered a good range of motion. When it was time to work on regaining my strength, however, I quickly hit the wall and made little progress. Months later I was still as weak as a kitten.

My wife, Barbara, a serious athlete, had been doing Pilates for several years

as part of her overall fitness routine. One day, when I was voicing frustration at my lack of progress, she said, “Why don’t you take my place at my Pilates session?” So I went to see Marion Wright, in her private Pilates studio, Fitness Finesse, in Toluca Lake. I was afraid of reinjuring myself, but Marion carefully assessed what I could safely do. Toward the end of the session, she had me kneel on the Reformer, doing internal and external shoulder rotations.

At that moment, I had that classic Pilates epiphany: “Oh! My shoulder is connected to the middle of my body!” I understood that if I had initiated movement from the center of my body, my shoulder injury wouldn’t have happened. Instantly it was apparent that this was what I needed to rehab my arm. I signed up for private weekly sessions with Marion and also began doing matwork on my own. Three months later I was back on the rocks.

Pilates helped me become a better climber overall, and exceptional in my age group (I was 51 at the time). Newly aware of my core, I had a whole different concept of how to reach for holds and keep my weight balanced on my feet on dime-thin edges of rock.

In 2005 the music business was in turmoil, and I was looking for a new



direction. One day, as I was waiting for my session in Marion's studio, I noticed her Pilates certificate on the wall. Suddenly it was clear what I wanted to do next. "How do I get Pilates teaching certification?" I asked her. She suggested I talk to the people at Core Conditioning, a Pilates training center in L.A. owned by three physical therapists. I was accepted into the program and started training in the fall of 2006. After I passed the written test in January 2007, I began working at Core Conditioning as a physical therapy aide, doing Pilates with patients under the direction of therapists and teaching at Marion's studio. Life was good.

## freefall

Four months into my new career, things took an unexpected turn. In May 2007 I was on a climbing trip high in the peaks of the Sierra Nevada. I hiked ahead of my friends, up to where we were going to climb, and gazed out at the stunning scenery. When I looked down, I realized that my left hand was twitching. I concentrated as hard as I could to control the spasms, but they only got stronger; soon my whole left arm was trembling. I struggled to stop them, but the convulsions kept getting worse until my whole left side was shaking so intensively that it felt like my left shoulder was going to separate from my body. I was sure I was dying. After a few minutes the shaking was replaced with numbness, and gradually, after 10 minutes, it subsided altogether.

I felt well enough to make my way back down the mountain, but I was freaked out. Nothing had ever gone seriously wrong with my body like that before. When I got home, I went to see Dr. William Lang, my primary-care physician. The first thing he had me do was to squeeze a dynamometer, which measures hand strength, with my right hand. It registered 125 pounds of pressure. When I squeezed it with my left, it only registered 40 pounds, though



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GREG EPPERSON

### Climbing the Davy Jones Locker, the Needles, Giant Sequoia National Monument, CA, July '92

both sides felt the same to me. Dr. Lang turned to his nurse and said, "Call down to Imaging and tell them this guy needs an MRI of the brain now. Get him to the front of the line!" Apparently they thought I might be having a stroke.

After the MRI, they sent me home and said they'd call soon with the results. Sure enough, the phone was ringing as I walked through my front door. The doctor told me, "We have a diagnosis. You have an AVM."

*Huh?!*

I quickly learned that AVM stands for arteriovenous malformation, a birth defect in the vascular structure of the brain. In this condition, simply put, an artery turns directly into a vein, failing to deliver oxygen and nutrient-rich blood to the surrounding cells. Over time the malformation grows into a tangled cluster of blood vessels. My AVM had grown to 3.5 cm, about the

size of a walnut, when it caused my first seizure. The neurosurgeon described its location as "exquisite," meaning invasive surgery was out of the question. I was lucky, though: A majority of AVMs bleed, resulting in disability or death. Mine appeared to be stable in this regard.

I was referred to Dr. Neil Martin, chief of neurosurgery at UCLA and an AVM specialist. He recommended zapping the AVM with a single high dose of precisely focused radiation which he predicted would destroy it

within about two years. Dr. Antonio De Salles, a specialist at UCLA, performed the procedure, called stereotactic radiosurgery, in August 2007. I was wiped out afterward, but I pushed myself to get back to doing Pilates at Core as fast as I could, about three weeks later. The positive atmosphere at Core was perfect for recovering from such a profound physical episode. My Pilates trainer, Roger Gonzalez-Hibner, whom I worked with at Core and at Winsor Pilates, focused on strengthening my left side, which was weakened from the AVM, and constantly pushed me to match my right side.

I kept working, both as a student and a teacher, and in July 2008, I earned my Pilates teacher certification. My strength had returned, and by fall I was back to teaching, training hard and climbing. Life was good again.

## one step at a time

By December I was in great shape and climbing well, though I was keeping my "risk profile" in control—I knew I was not yet 100 percent. Sure enough, in January 2009 I started experiencing weakness in my left hand again. An MRI showed inflammation around the treated area in my brain. The doctors assured me that this was a common side effect, that it would cause no permanent harm, and that my AVM was going away nicely. So I was caught totally off-guard one bright day in March, in between sessions at Core, when I had another seizure. The shaking and spasms were much more intense than the first one. I felt like my left arm was spinning in enormous circles so powerful that my arm was going to be torn out of my shoulder socket. After a few minutes I passed out, moving into another phase of seizure, where I went kind of comatose. When I came to, about 10 minutes later, paramedics were taking me to UCLA. The doctors found that the swelling in my brain had gotten much worse, but they felt confident that a course of steroids would reduce the inflammation. With a known cause and a solution, I wasn't too worried.

But a month later, when I was home alone, I had another seizure. I managed to back myself against a locker so my shoulder wouldn't be dislocated from the convulsive movements of my arm. When I came out of it, I called Barbara, who rushed home and drove me to the hospital.

This was a major setback for me, and I felt cheated. All the work I had done didn't seem to be getting me anywhere. And I went from being a little scared to being a whole lot scared. But the doctors gave me another course of steroids, which seemed to work, and my anxiety continued to lessen as more time passed without further seizures.

I was told I couldn't drive for several months, but by then I had set up a small home studio, equipped with a Gratz Reformer and Pedipole (great for shoulders) and props like the Bosu,



**"I felt cheated.**

All the work I had done didn't seem to be getting me anywhere.

**And I went from being a little scared to being a whole lot scared."**

foam rollers, Magic Circle, etc. I've built a variety of climbing-specific apparatus. I do Pilates every day and I have started to teach some private clients. My goal is to build a practice focusing on athletic training, something I call Sports-Specific Training for Grown-ups.

Tests show that my AVM is shrinking and will soon be gone. The doctors assure me that I can expect a complete recovery. I am climbing again, most recently at the City of Rocks National Reserve in Idaho. I've also started work on a climber's guidebook for The Needles, a gorgeous area of granite spires in Sequoia National Monument, which will require months of fieldwork to complete. Publication is set for summer 2010 by K. Daniels & Associates.

## live and learn

When things go wrong on a big climb, we call it an epic. And when an epic is over, hopefully with a safe outcome, climbers will try to learn from what happened, will strive to be better next time and will share their experience with others. In a manner of speaking, my AVM has been an epic. The past two years have been full of extreme ups and downs—times when I thought I was nearly recovered and times when I had to deal with serious setbacks. But even when I could not get out and do the sport I love, I could always fall back on Pilates, and that has helped me get through the worst of it.

I've come to believe that the union of mind and body is an essential element of all healing and wellness. And more than anything I've ever done, Pilates has helped me forge this connection and enabled me to keep a solid baseline, mentally and physically, throughout what has been the most challenging ordeal of my life. ☺

Kristian Solem welcomes questions and inquiries at his website at [kristiansolem.com](http://kristiansolem.com).

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