

Paraplegic Mountain Climber

Mark Wellman — No Limits!

Mark Wellman has achieved some incredible feats in his life. Perhaps among the greatest was in July of 1989 when he became the first paraplegic person to climb El Capitan, the largest unbroken granite cliff in North America — that's three times the size of the Empire State Building, to put it in perspective. It took him seven and a half days. He repeated this feat in 1999.

"I was hurt in a climbing accident so I was a climber before I was disabled," said Wellman. "It was a mountaineering accident. I fell 100 feet and broke my lower back. When I got out of rehab, I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do. So I went back to school and got a degree in Park Management and became a ranger naturalist in Yosemite Valley. Yosemite is known as the Mecca of big wall climbing in this country. All of a sudden, I was back working in an environment where I was seeing the rocks again. I met a guy named Mike Corbett who had at that time climbed El Capitan 42 times. He was looking for a different way to climb El Capitan, and a partner who was a paraplegic was going to be his way of climbing it differently. We climbed to the crest with the use of four arms and two legs and developed the adaptive equipment to be able to do this."

That adaptive equipment is available at the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. One side of the 25-foot climbing wall has special adaptations with harnesses and extra handholds for people needing some extra help. For anyone thinking they may run out of gas en route, there are areas to rest if needed. Climbers include veterans with spinal cord injuries, amputations, visual impairments and other disabilities. When reaching the top, all climbers grin as they ring a large bell, signaling loud cheers and applause from those down below.

Wellman used this same rope ascending technique to climb the Olympic torch tower at the 1996 Paralympic Games in Atlanta. "I almost caught on fire!" he said. "Climbing the 150 foot rope was not such a big deal, but how to carry the torch with me was a problem. One of my sponsors, North Face, developed a special harness for my legs that the torch would fit into. Originally, I thought I would do this Robin Hood-style with a quiver on my back, and I would reach out and pull the torch out — but I found out it would be too close to my head. I had a stunt coordinator who coordinated the whole thing. So we used this flame retardant jelly so I wasn't really in danger."

The visually impaired and paraplegic climbers, who have more upper body strength climb the other side of the wall, pull themselves to the top, "pull-up after pull-up." Wellman believes the visually impaired are some of the fastest climbers. "They feel the wall once, and then make a mental picture of what they're going to do. They can't see the top of it; they just know they're going up." There isn't any kind of event like this Clinic in the whole world," said Wellman. "It allows people with disabilities to be exposed to a lot of different things — Alpine and Nordic skiing, dog sledding, snowmobiling, mountain climbing — the whole gamut."