

TOTAL TIME: 55 Minutes

Reading Time: 15 Minutes

Question 1:

Provided Reading Time: 15 minutes; Provided Writing Time: 40 minutes

(This question counts for one-third of your exam score.)

On June 3, 2017, professional mountain climber, Alex Honnold, became the first person to complete a free solo climb of El Capitan, a 3,200 foot granite slab located in Yosemite National Park. Webster's dictionary defines a "free solo" as "a climb in which a climber uses no artificial aids for support and has no rope or other safety equipment for protection in case of a fall." This type of climbing is very dangerous and should only be attempted by expert climbers, but those experts are drawn to the challenge and ultimate accomplishment of attempting such a risky climb. While many celebrate Honnold's feat, and give rave reviews of the documentary, others criticize the film crew for glorifying such a reckless climb.

Carefully read the following seven sources, including the introductory information for each source. Then, synthesize material from at least three of the sources and incorporate it into a coherent, well-written essay that defends your position on the most important factors filmmakers must consider when deciding whether to film an athlete's risky attempts to accomplish almost impossible feats.

Source A (Stephens)

Source B (Corrigan)

Source C (Chin)

Source D (Poster)

Source E (Branch)

Source F (Honnold)

Source G (Wagner)

In your response you should do the following:

- Respond to the prompt with a thesis that presents a defensible position.
- Select and use evidence from at least three of the provided sources to support your line of reasoning. Indicate clearly the sources used through direct quotation, paraphrase or summary. Sources may be cited as Source A, Source B, etc., or by using the description in parentheses.
- Explain how the evidence supports your line of reasoning.
- Use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating your argument.

SOURCE A

Stephens, Bret. "Alex Honnold, a Soul Freed in 'Free Solo.'" *New York Times*, 25 Oct. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/opinion/alex-honnold-free-solo-movie.html. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

The following is an excerpt from an opinion piece in a national newspaper:

But the thrills of the movie turn out to be incidental to its real purpose, which is less about climbing than it is about living. Honnold, it turns out, isn't simply the most accomplished rock climber of our time. He also has a first-rate mind, capable of thinking through both the minute choreography of his moves across the wall as well as the basic questions of his time on earth.

Questions like: Should long life be a goal of life? What about happiness? If not happiness, what about excellence? If excellence, what (if anything) should we sacrifice in its pursuit? Love? And when does the pursuit of excellence become mere recklessness?

Honnold has plainly given the questions serious thought — appropriately, since by his own count he's climbed rope-free more than 1,000 times and free soloists have notoriously short lifespans. "Anybody could conceivably die on any given day," he says philosophically. "Soloing just makes it feel much more immediate and present."

It is that presence and immediacy that makes free soloing so appealing to Honnold and his peers — not because it brings death so much nearer, but because it makes life so much more vivid and significant. Most of us have been told, at one point or another, to work, study or perform as if our lives depended on it. There just aren't many activities where it's literally true.

Free soloing is one of them. Every move counts. Every motion is considered. No decision is inconsequential. There is no cushion, no second chance, no helping hand. The only route to safety is through the relentless disciplining of body, mind, uncertainty, and fear. In a world of B.S. artists — and in a country led by one — Honnold is modeling something else, a kind of radical truthfulness. Either he's going to get it exactly right, or he's going to die.

How Honnold gets it exactly right is the real heart of "Free Solo," and why the movie is worth studying. Honnold is not a thrill seeker. He's a perfectionist who understands that the achievement of one supreme thing depends on the mastery of a thousand small things. Much of the perfectionism seems to come from his mother, Dierdre Wolownick, a retired French professor for whom, as Honnold puts it, "good enough, isn't."

But it's his mother who also best understands why her son constantly puts his life at risk — and why she doesn't quarrel with the choice. "When he's free soloing is when he feels the most alive, the most everything," she says. "How can you even think about taking that away from somebody?"

I'm not sure there are many parents who would say the same thing. Why can't Honnold just be a lawyer or doctor or some other ostensibly respectable profession? Why can't he put life's normal fulfillments — his relationship with his lovely girlfriend, Sanni McCandless, for starters — ahead of his seemingly lunatic ambition to achieve something of no obvious utility? Isn't he merely selfish, and doesn't his fatalism about life make that selfishness worse?

You can't watch "Free Solo" without wondering about all this. As a father, I doubt I could muster Wolownick's apparent sang-froid were my kids to take similar risks. Perhaps it's a function of my own deep selfishness, both emotional and biological, that I want my children to bury me, not the other way around.

And yet.

On June 3, 2017, Alex Honnold free soloed the Freerider route of El Capitan in three hours and 56 minutes. It wasn't an act of recklessness but of the kind of planning worthy of a moon landing. It wasn't an act of selfishness but an extraordinary gift to everyone who believes that the limit of human achievement is far from being reached. It wasn't a useless stunt but a reminder that utility alone is a poor way to measure the grandeur of one man's spirit.

SOURCE B

Corrigan, Kevin. "Opinion: The Free Solo Documentary Addressed Some Uncomfortable Truths, But Ignored Others." *Outside*, 22 Oct. 2018, www.climbing.com/news/opinion-the-free-solo-documentary-addressed-some-uncomfortable-truths-but-ignored-others/. Accessed 28 Mar. 2023.

The following is an excerpt from an article published by a popular magazine.

What *Free Solo* does do well is shatter the image of Honnold as he's typically been portrayed in the media. Before *Free Solo*, you could view Honnold as a funny, intellectual, well-adjusted guy who just happens to take great pleasure in the occasional on-sight solo and in working big routes until he has them so dialed that they are, to some degree, "safe" pursuits to then do ropeless. *Free Solo*, on the other hand, doesn't portray Honnold as a happy guy. He places his athletic pursuits ahead of all personal relationships, he's obsessed with perfection, and while he is able to climb a 3,000-foot 5.13 without a rope, he is unable, upon completion, of surmounting the challenge of accessing his own emotions and allowing himself to cry. The film cuts away before he can answer the question, "Are you depressed?" But on a podcast interview with Tim Ferris (45:15 in the episode), he does respond, saying:

"Yes. I think I gravitate towards being a somewhat depressed person. Or—I don't know actually. I'm sort of just flat... I feel like I don't have any of the highs. I kind of go from level, to slightly below level, to back. It's all pretty flat... Sometimes you just feel useless, you know? But in some ways I embrace that as part of the process because you kind of have to feel like a worthless piece of poop in order to get motivated enough to go do something that makes you feel less useless. But then ultimately that still doesn't make you feel any less useless, so you just have to keep doing more."

For years, climbers have been talking about Honnold as though he has superpowers. Now, with a more-honest portrayal, it seems that it may be his weaknesses that both allow and drive him to put his life on the line: an inability to access emotions, struggles with self-esteem, and indifference toward his own continued existence. In the film, his biggest concern about falling is that others may have to watch. He says, "The idea of falling off is—obviously I'm trying to avoid that—but it's kind of OK if I'm just by myself. But I wouldn't want to fall off right in front of my friends because that's messed up."

Free Solo does admirably dive into an uncomfortable question: Was the film crew influencing Honnold to go through with the climb? The crew certainly seems uncomfortable. Chin shows a great wave of relief when Honnold pulls onto the summit. Mikey Schaefer proclaims that he will never work on another project like this again, and is visibly upset throughout the climb, looking away from his camera in El Cap Meadow at key moments on the solo. But Chin is quick to shirk responsibility when Honnold bails off an early attempt in autumn 2016, telling himself that it proves that the documentary is not encouraging Honnold. He says, "What made the big difference for me is that he did turn around last year. He didn't feel the pressure to have to do it because we were there. That, to me, said a lot." The film ignores two important things:

1. By allowing the crew to film him, Honnold by default is acknowledging that he wants the crew there more than he doesn't. If he did not see significant value in being filmed—fame, glory, a wide-release documentary, and the accompanying monetary incentives—he would not have agreed to it. Therefore, the film crew must provide some motivation to Honnold to go through with his free solo of El Capitan.
2. As my coworker James Lucas is quick to point out, the film crew makes the free solo more accessible to Honnold by providing him the option to bail at any time. While no one can save Honnold from a sudden foot slip or botched move, the film crew gives him the option to rappel whenever he's not feeling it, and he did take advantage of this benefit on his abortive attempt in 2016. Their presence lowers the barrier of entry to the climb.

But if I'm going to cite the filmmakers as accomplices, then the other uncomfortable truth is that we, the viewers, are equally culpable. By watching *Free Solo*, by clicking Alex Honnold YouTube videos, by reading news stories, by going to

his book signings, we create the market for the free-soloing content that gives Honnold sponsors and opportunities in the first place. Consider this: When's the last time you've seen a photo of Honnold climbing with a rope? His sponsors may stick with him if he quit free soloing today, but none of us would know his name had he not exploded onto the scene with ropeless ascents of the Rostrum and Astroman in-a-day back in 2007 then Moonlight Buttress and Half Dome in 2008. His value as an athlete is wrapped up in his willingness to climb difficult routes unroped.

So will the movie encourage more people to free solo? Probably a couple. But at the same time, did we all encourage Honnold to free solo El Cap by lavishing praise upon his previous big solos and, later, by lining up at the box office for this documentary? I think we did.

SOURCE C

Chin, Jimmy. Maine native Clair Popkin films pro climber Alex Honnold clambering to the top of El Capitan using no ropes or other protective equipment. 11 Mar. 2019. *Portland Press Herald*, www.pressherald.com/2019/03/10/maine-natives-career-reaches-new-heights-filming-free-solo/. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.



SOURCE D

Free Solo Movie Poster. *National Geographic*,

2018. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.



SOURCE E

Branch, John. "A Sponsor Steps Away From the Edge." *The New York Times*, 14 Nov. 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/sports/clif-bar-drops-sponsorship-of-5-climbers-citing-risks-they-take.html. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

The following is an excerpt from a news article published by a national newspaper.

Moments before the San Francisco premiere of *Valley Uprising*, a documentary about the evolution of rock climbing in Yosemite National Park, Gary Erickson, the Clif Bar founder, was asked to stand and be acknowledged. He waved to the crowd inside a packed theater and received a warm ovation.

Clif Bar, a maker of nutrition bars with long ties to the climbing community, and with a climber on its logo, was a major sponsor of the film. Other executives attended a showing of the movie the next night in Berkeley, Calif., not far from Clif Bar headquarters.

Two months later, Clif Bar has withdrawn its sponsorship of five top professional climbers featured in the film, some with a year or more left on their contracts, saying the climbers take risks that make the company too uncomfortable to continue financial support. It has stirred debate in the outdoors community, creating rare introspection about how much risk should be rewarded.

"They're on a really slippery slope," said Cedar Wright, one of the five whose sponsorship deal was cut. "Where do you draw the line?"

Among those whose contracts were withdrawn were Alex Honnold and Dean Potter, each widely credited with pushing the boundaries of the sport in recent years. They had large roles in the film, mainly showing them climbing precarious routes barehanded and without ropes, a technique called free soloing. Potter also was shown highlining, walking across a rope suspended between towering rock formations.

Other climbers who lost their Clif Bar contracts were Timmy O'Neill and Steph Davis, who spends much of her time BASE jumping (parachuting from a fixed object, like a building, an antenna, a span or earth) and wing-suit flying. Last year, her husband, Mario Richard, was killed when he crashed in a wing suit.

"We concluded that these forms of the sport are pushing boundaries and taking the element of risk to a place where we as a company are no longer willing to go," Clif Bar wrote in an open letter to the climbing community. "We understand that some climbers feel these forms of climbing are pushing the sport to new frontiers. But we no longer feel good about benefiting from the amount of risk certain athletes are taking in areas of the sport where there is no margin for error; where there is no safety net."

In the sports world, companies often end contracts with athletes over issues of behavior, usually when athletes run afoul of the law. But these athletes are sponsored precisely because of their willingness to take risks that most could not imagine. Companies like Clif Bar reward them for their adventures.

But, as Clif Bar's sudden stance publicly declares, there is responsibility in balancing the conflicting notions of comfort and risk.

"We have and always will support athletes in many adventure-based sports, including climbing," the company said. "And inherent in the idea of adventure is risk. We appreciate that assessing risk is a very personal decision. This isn't about drawing a line for the sport or limiting athletes from pursuing their passions. We're drawing a line for ourselves. We understand that this is a gray area, but we felt a need to start somewhere and start now."

Clif Bar declined to comment further on Friday.

The athletes, who get most of their income from a web of sponsorship deals, greeted the news with surprise and a range of emotion.

“It’s a general reflection on risk,” Honnold said. “The risk decision that Clif is making is the same kind of decision that we all make as athletes. I think it’s completely fair for them to draw a line. It’s a very personal decision. If Clif thought about it and said that that’s the line that they want to take, I can’t begrudge that. That’s the same kind of line I draw with risk.”

SOURCE F

Honnold, Alex. "The Calculus of Climbing at the Edge." *The New York Times*, 4 Nov. 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/11/20/opinion/the-calculus-of-climbing-at-the-edge.html. Accessed 27 Mar. 2023.

The following is an excerpt of an opinion piece published in a national newspaper.

Of course, I was disappointed to be dropped by a sponsor, especially since I've always liked Clif Bar's product and really respect the company's environmental activism. And it did seem odd that after years of support, someone at Clif Bar seemed to have awakened suddenly and realized that climbing without a rope on vertical walls as high as 2,000 feet is dangerous.

Still, I couldn't help but understand their point of view.

"We have and always will support athletes in many adventure-based sports, including climbing," Clif Bar said in a statement after the furor erupted. "And inherent in the idea of adventure is risk. We appreciate that assessing risk is a very personal decision. This isn't about drawing a line for the sport or limiting athletes from pursuing their passions. We're drawing the line for ourselves."

In essence, that's the same way I feel when free soloing. I draw the lines for myself; sponsors don't have any bearing on my choices or my analysis of risk. Soloing appeals to me for a variety of reasons: the feeling of mastery that comes from taking on a big challenge, the sheer simplicity of the movement, the experience of being in such an exposed position. Those reasons are a powerful enough motivation for me to take certain risks. But it's a personal decision, and one that I consider carefully before any serious ascent.

In climbing, sponsors typically support an athlete but provide very little direction, giving the climber free rein to follow his or her passion toward whatever is inspiring. It's a wonderful freedom, in many ways similar to that of an artist who simply lives his life and creates whatever moves him. Clif Bar's decision to fire the five of us may limit that freedom.

In an interview on the website of the magazine *Rock and Ice*, Dean Potter said: "My fear is with the onset of mainstream interest in extreme sports that diversity will be subdued and eventually snubbed out within our great outdoor community. Shouldn't we question when the leaders of our community try to manipulate our culture into a mono crop?"

If sponsors back away from risky behaviors, it may well slowly mold climbing into a safer, more sterile version of what it is today. But I tend to think that whether sponsors support such behavior or not shouldn't really have any bearing on our motivations. I know that when I'm standing alone below a thousand-foot wall, looking up and considering a climb, my sponsors are the furthest thing from my mind. If I'm going to take risks they are going to be for myself — not for any company.

Free soloing is almost as old as climbing itself, with roots in the 19th century. Climbers are continuing to push the boundaries. There are certainly better technical climbers than me. But if I have a particular gift, it's a mental one — the ability to keep it together where others might freak out.

Everyone needs to find his or her own limits for risk, and if Clif Bar wants to back away from the cutting edge, that's certainly a fair decision. But we will all continue climbing in the ways that we find most inspiring, with a rope, a parachute or nothing at all. Whether or not we're sponsored, the mountains are calling, and we must go.

SOURCE G

Wagner, Rod. "The Seven Lessons From 'Free Solo' On Working Without A Rope." *Forbes*, 1 Mar. 2019, www.forbes.com/sites/roddwagner/2019/03/01/the-seven-lessons-from-free-solo-on-working-without-a-rope/?sh=61f1cfbb1c0a. Accessed 28 Mar. 2023.

The following is an excerpt from a review published in a popular magazine.

What lessons from Honnold's ascent can we apply to ground-level pursuits? These seven emerge most forcefully from the film and the climber's interviews since he summited.

The accomplishment is more preparation than performance. Honnold climbed El Capitan roughly 50 times in the decade before his free soloing of the rock formation on July 3, 2017. While he is famous for the ridiculously fast 3-hour, 56-minute ascent, 99% of Honnold's time on the wall was spent roped up, practicing the route. Knowing where and how to move was the culmination of hundreds of hours on that granite in advance.

Know the terrain. Having spent that much time on El Capitan, Honnold became intimately familiar with its features, especially the small cracks, nubs, indentations and edges he used to maintain a hold on the rock.

After a day spent working through a particular difficult area named the Boulder Problem, Honnold described the sequence to a friend: "Left foot into the little thumb sprag crack thing. Right foot into this little dimple that you can toe in on pretty aggressively so it's opposing the left hand, then you can, like, zag over across to this flat, down-pulling crimp that's small but you can bite it pretty aggressively. I palm the wall a little bit so I can pop my foot up and then reach up to this upside-down thumb sprag crimp thing."

After it rained in the days before the ascent, Honnold rappelled down the rock face to ensure chalk marks he placed to guide his feet were still there and no wet spots would threaten his grip or footing. How many of us map the details of our future challenges that well?

Control the risks you can; anticipate the risks you can't. It seems counterintuitive that a guy whose most famous climbs have been with no protective gear has something to teach about reducing the risks. But because Honnold did not want to die, everything else about the ascent is a study in minimizing the hazards that can be controlled, from the climber's mental and physical conditioning to the choice of day and weather. For example, before the solo attempt, Honnold and fellow climber Conrad Anker ascended 1,500 feet up El Capitan with backpacks to remove from a crack rocks that could come loose during the solo attempt.

The film crew took pains to ensure their presence did not increase the dangers. At the Boulder Problem, they set up remote cameras to give Honnold more space. "I'm aware that a camera changes the dynamic in some small way, and when the margins of success and failure are very, very thin, you just don't know what it's going to be that might tip the scales," said climber and film co-director Jimmy Chin. "Part of being a professional climber is identifying and acknowledging the risks, assessing them, minimizing them and then moving on."

Turn around when it's not right. Honnold did not make it to the top on his first try. As shown in the film, he set out on an early morning in November 2016 to conquer the rock face. He only got a few hundred feet into the climb before he turned back, using a series of fixed ropes to return to the valley floor. We'll never know whether he simply delayed his accomplishment by seven months or preserved his life.

Seek mastery, not luck. Honnold free soloed Yosemite's Half Dome in September 2008 with nothing like the preparations he made for El Capitan. "I didn't really know how to prepare for a potential free solo, so I decided to skip the preparations and just go up there and have an adventure. I figured I would rise to the occasion, which, unsurprisingly, was not the best strategy," Honnold said in an April 2018 TED Talk.

On a giant, slightly-less-than-vertical slab near the summit, he came close to falling. Although he completed the climb, it was not the experience he wanted. "I was disappointed in my performance because I'd gotten away with something," he said. "I didn't want to be a lucky climber. I wanted to be a great climber."

Practice creates confidence. Honnold said he memorized the route and his moves so methodically as to "remove all doubt," making "everything feel automatic" and ensuring "no possibility of error."

There's a chunk of hindsight bias and selection bias in those kinds of statements. Free soloists who have fallen - of which there are quite a few - don't give interviews. There is nonetheless a universal truth in how the climber's belief in himself was grounded in his obsessive rehearsals.