

As women reach new heights in one of the UK's fastest growing sports, could it be your time to climb?

Thought pulling yourself over rocks and hiking up mountains was a man's sport? Think again. Thanks to a strong GB women's team, climbing has been shortlisted to be included in the next Olympics and is gaining female followers by the day. We spoke to two inspiring women for the lowdown on getting high.



VANESSA O'BRIEN

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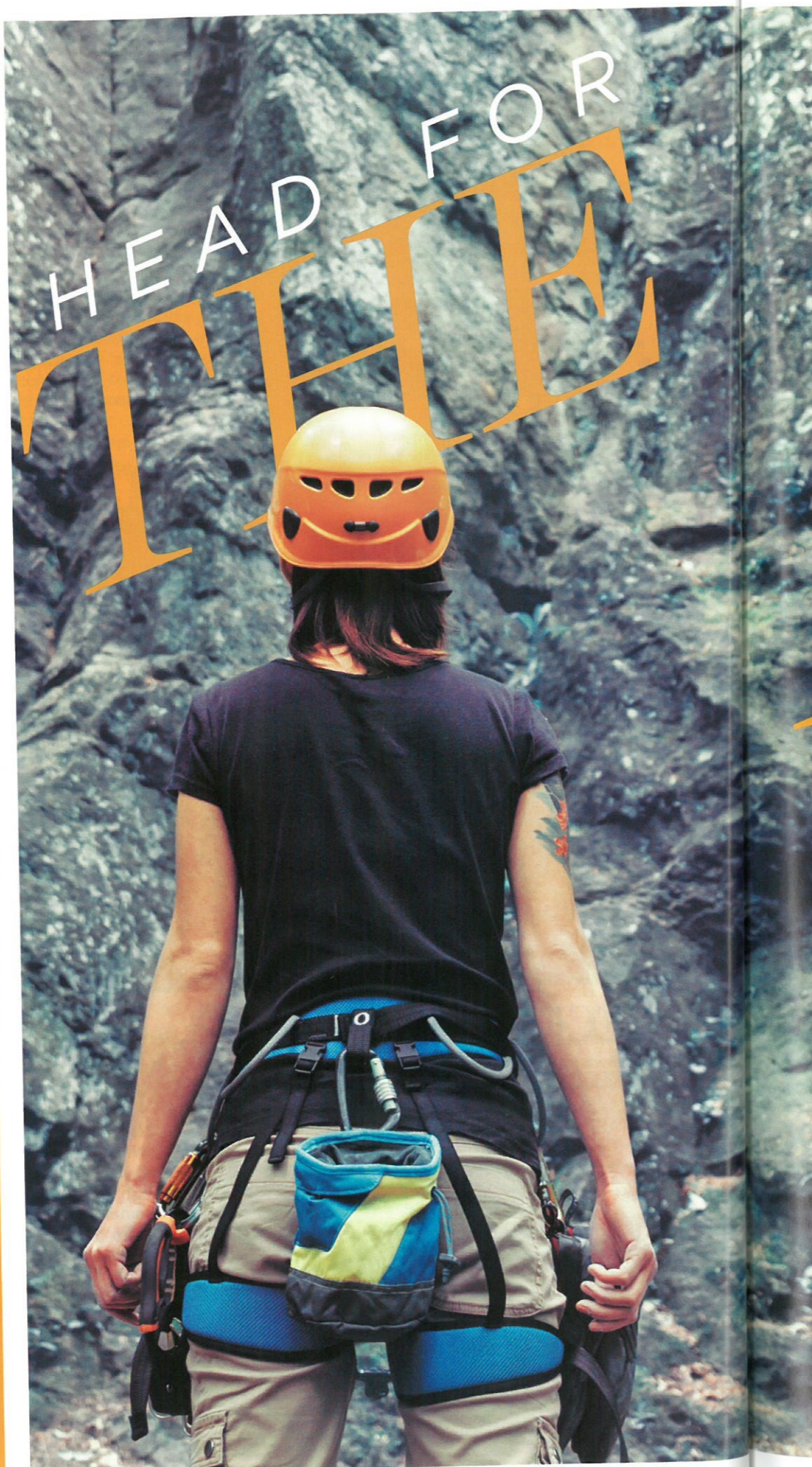
is a Guinness World Record Holder as the fastest female to climb the Seven Summits and the quickest woman to complete the Explorer's Grand Slam. She has reached the last degree of both the North and South Poles, and not content there, in 2016 will attempt to become the first British woman to successfully scale and descend K2.



SHAUNA COXSEY

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has won countless international competitions and came second in the BT Sport Action Woman of the Year Awards 2014. She is head coach of the Royal Air Force Climbing Team, organiser of the Women's Climbing Symposium and an experienced route setter. Although Shauna loves outdoor climbing, she is concentrating on competing.



How did you get into climbing?

S: I started climbing at a local wall at the age of four, after seeing a female free-climber on TV. I quickly became obsessed with the sport and asked my father to take me as often as possible. At the age of seven, I started competing and became a member of the GB climbing team at the age of 11.

V: As a former businesswoman, it took a recession and looking for a challenge for me to discover climbing and all the different types and styles. To narrow them down, there are four main categories; advanced trekking, alpine mountaineering (mixed rock, snow and ice climbing), rock climbing and ice climbing.

What specialist equipment do you need?

S: When you very first start climbing I wouldn't worry about buying equipment as you can hire everything. For bouldering you don't even need a partner! It's super safe and a great way to build confidence and get fit.

V: This depends on the terrain being tackled. For alpine climbing, you'll need a pair of crampons, a helmet (get one that fits) and a harness. An ice axe, carabiner hooks and an ascender (used for ascending on a rope) are also climbing essentials. A well-fitting backpack, which can be tricky to find for women, is also crucial.

How does competitive climbing work?

S: It's brilliant that our sport has just been shortlisted to be considered for the 2020 Olympic Games. There are three different disciplines to competition climbing. Bouldering, lead climbing and speed climbing. The event would be a combination of the three disciplines and there would be one overall winner for male and female.

For some, bouldering is the ultimate expression of climbing – no ropes, no gear, just the joy of pure movement, in relative safety, not too high above the ground. Bouldering is my main focus at the moment but I originally started competing in lead climbing, where you're tied to a rope and able to climb much higher.

What advice would you give to those with fears to conquer?

S: Climbing is a very social and fun sport. The climbing community is incredibly relaxed and there is always a great atmosphere. It's so easy to get into, especially bouldering. You can book an induction course at your local climbing centre and there are usually beginner coaching classes and ladies nights that you can go along to.

V: Focus on what you can control. You can't control the weather, avalanches, earthquakes or rock falls. Being scared is natural but I keep calm by reminding myself I'm attached to a sturdy mountain. Secondly, I climb more slowly the higher I go because of thinner air, so I'm actually more in control. And finally, not all climbs are sheer drops so the gradual change in height and surroundings as you twist and turn is less dramatic.

Climbing looks like hard work – how fit do you need to be?

V: Your fitness regime depends on your goal. My rule is the higher you plan to climb, the more important cardiovascular exercise becomes and the less important weight lifting is, as where the air is thin oxygen is limited, and the brain, lungs and muscles all compete for it. Overall, I'd suggest focusing on cardiovascular exercises to improve your strength and core. Plus stretching, which is equally important but is often neglected. Don't over-train and ensure you have rest days so that the body can repair itself.

As for nutrition, I eat smaller portions more frequently to maintain energy levels and try to get between seven and eight hours sleep. Finally, water! Try to finish a 1.5 litre bottle every day – no exceptions. I also take electrolytes, either directly or via sports drinks.