

Wynne Leon (00:02)

In the spirit of trying new things, I'm creating some episodes that focus on a particular person or pursuit that exemplifies the Tri Cycle. People who show how to break goals into manageable chunks, surf the uncertainty, and turn outcomes into fuel for the next adventure. My first case study is professional climber, Alex Honnold. Watching some of his biggest accomplishments have taught me a

great deal about the power of practice in trying. They also remind me that even in seemingly solitary pursuits, we can get a leg up from learning from others. And finally, Alex's case study is a good reminder that setbacks are part of the process. Alex recently made the news because he free soloed the 1,667 foot Taipei 101 Tower on January 25th 2026.

Alex became widely associated with term free solo when he was featured in a National Geographic documentary by filmmaker Jimmy Chin called Free Solo. It means climbing without any ropes or protection. In the movie Free Solo, Alex climbed the 3,000-foot wall of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. The without ropes part is the part that makes those attempts seem bonkers.

And even though it's the element that has made Alex more well known to the general public, I don't think it's the key part of what makes him interesting. For me, it's all the trying he did before he free-soloed. He climbed each section of the route he chose over and over using ropes. He spent months working out each move on every pitch in all sorts of conditions. Watching him work this out.

is like seeing a master not only work out his strength, but also his confidence and muscle memory. He put in the time to get to know the route he'd climb intimately. It's like me getting ready to free solo the staircase at my house. Something that I do daily, by the way. I don't even have to think about the 15 individual steps that carry me to the second floor. I just know them. I'm joking about that.

But if you watch a toddler try to master climbing stairs, you realize we should be very proud of ourselves for knowing how and when to move up and shift our weight from the back leg to the front leg. No one might be cheering us on or filming our every move anymore, but every step is proof that practicing things hundreds of times makes them less risky.

The second thing I thought was insightful about Alex's story in Free Solo was his use of trusted advisors. One of Alex's climbing buddies is another amazing climber named Tommy Caldwell. Alex and Tommy hold the speed record for climbing El Capitan at a little under two hours, a feat that they did while roped. Most climbers spend about four to five days climbing.

In preparation to free solo, Alex asked Tommy to help him climb. He used his friend's knowledge and expertise to prepare for his free solo attempt. The edge he gained was not only in having a buddy to work out the problems with, but also gaining a different perspective on how to do it. I used to climb with my friend Jill.

To be clear, we're talking about roped routes, in the gym, maximum 50 feet high, completely different ballpark than Alex. Not only a different ballpark, but like playing T-ball in comparison to a major leaguer. But nonetheless, seeing how Jill would climb something helped me learn how I would. She had different strength. She was shorter and stronger than I was. We'd never climb exactly the same way. But watching her balance out a move...

or how she puzzled through it gave me confidence I could do the same. Here's a non-climbing example. I recently did a podcast with host and producer Roger Kastner. I've listened to his podcasts and I've had conversations with Roger, but going through the experience to record a podcast and see how he produced it gave me some insights about how to improve my process. Writing is another great example.

I had an author make the comment that he learned about his book from me because he got the benefit of having someone else's reaction. Even though it's seeming solitary pursuit, we need editors, beta readers, and marketing people to help us find out what resonates. As my friend and award-winning playwright, Jack Canfora once told me, I am an open book, but I need others to help me find the best pages.

Reaching out to friends to help us try, like Alex did with Tommy Caldwell, is a great way to speed up the learning curve and make the effort worthwhile.

One of the parts of the free solo movie that adds drama is when Alex takes a fall when he's practicing a pitch. He injures his ankle and takes a brief break to rest it. It's an excellent reminder that most attempts to try something will come with setbacks. Sometimes it happens as a stupid accident or in a moment you'd wish you could take back. Or maybe something you feel like you should have been able to anticipate. Or maybe global events affected your project.

But regardless of how happens, it's part of process. In the case of Alex's free solo attempt of El Cap the ankle was a significant part of why he didn't accomplish the feat in the 2016 climbing season. The available light was waning and the weather was worsening. Alex and the filmmaking team picked a day that would be their last opportunity to film the attempt in 2016. And Alex starts climbing.

Then as he's climbing the very same section on which he hurt his ankle, he knows it's not the right day and he makes the decision to call it

The part that doesn't match the conditions that most of us face when we are trying things is that immense amount of pressure he had to climb because they were making a film about it. Or at least I hope we don't have that pressure. But the wobble that comes with when we fail and have to try again is relatable, right? When I'm trying something, it feels like the setbacks create a wedge that lets the extra doubts come in. Like Alex's ankle.

We might want to try before they are healed or before we've changed the approach and fall again. A lot of wisdom and experience goes into balancing our itch to try again, to please other people on the team, to match the outcome that we thought we'd have with the opportunity to get it done. But we have to make sure we're listening to the conditions and we've learned as much as we can from the setbacks and are ready to go.

I want to leave you with one last thought about preparation as it relates to trying. Alex free soloed El Capitan in 3 hours and 56 minutes. That's 3000 feet in less than 4 hours. Nine years later, he climbed Taipei 101 in 1 hour and 31 minutes. That's even faster. 1667 feet in an hour and a half.

It strikes me that in addition to being a phenomenal climber, he isn't taking much time to make decisions at that speed. That matches my experience of trying. That in the big moments, you want to leave the deliberations at home. In a small example, I will prepare to read a statement or speech that I'm giving if I wonder about whether

or not I want to use a particular word as I'm reading it out loud, I will mess it up. Every. Time. In fact, I can tell you the exact thought process that happens. I'll be reading a script out loud and then think, is that the right word? And then, no, I can't think about that because I'll mess it up. And then, dang, I messed it up. Decisions take time and energy.

When we want to bring our best effort to a try, we need to have practiced enough to not have to think about it. As Teller, one of the magicians in the Penn and Teller team says, sometimes magic is just someone spending more time on something than anyone else might reasonably expect. Amazing feats like Alex Honnold's free soloing El Cap or Taipei 101 Tower.

seem out of reach at first glance. But when you break it down, they're just examples of someone else trying. In this case, practicing and preparing, learning from others, and then working through the setbacks. It's what we can bring to the things we try as well. Thank you for listening. I hope this new segment on The Life of Try is useful and energizing as you think about trying your own TRY cycle for summoning the walls in your