

Jack Copeland

First things first. If you could tell us your first and last name. And what do you do?

Aarya Kumar

My name is Aarya Kumar, and I'm a student at the University of Missouri.

Jack Copeland

Okay, so we're here today to talk about your rock climbing. How did you get into rock climbing?

Aarya Kumar

See, my friend's older brother climbed a lot. And so he just, like, went to check it out, and he was like, hey, you should come do this. And I was like, okay. And so I just, like, went with him one day and it was just really fun. And I'd kind of been wanting to do it for a long time, but I just didn't really know how. So it kind of just gave me an in.

Jack Copeland

At what point did you realize that you were good at rock climbing?

Aarya Kumar

Good is so relative. Like, I still don't like, know that I'm like an insanely good climber. I'm like pretty good, I think, for like, how long I've been climbing. But, I don't know, it was less about, like, how good I was. And it was just like how much I enjoyed it. And it was just like a really good time. So I was like, I'm going to keep doing this a bit.

Jack Copeland

Do you think there's been like a development or milestones throughout your rock climbing journey?

Aarya Kumar

Definitely. So I started off bouldering, which is like low-level climbing with no ropes. And so it's like graded on like the V scale. And so it's just like a number scale one to theoretically like 14 or something. But like in a gym it usually goes to like eight plus kind of. And so like each new number you get is usually like a pretty big milestone. And yeah. So what number are you at now?

I've done an eight plus in like the gym I usually climb at. When I first started I look at like a four and I was like, no way I'm going to be able to do this. And then now, like four is what I warm up on. And so, yeah.

Jack Copeland

Do you find yourself working out in the gym or is climbing your main form of exercise?

Aarya Kumar

For me, climbing is my main form. It's really thought of to be more of like a skill-based sport. So you don't need to have like, this insane amount of upper body strength that a lot of people think you need to have a lot of. It'll come pretty naturally, just like through climbing. And so, yeah, I don't really go to the gym ever. I usually am just in a climbing gym. It's a lot of just like learning how to move on a wall. It's just not something that people have done before they do it. Like learning how to just like place your feet on a hold confidently and just move your hands and body in a way that lets you climb. You just get good at climbing through climbing a lot.

Jack Copeland

Before climbing, did you have any other athletic background?

Aarya Kumar

When I was little, I did gymnastics and dance a lot. I ran a bit like through middle school, and that's that's pretty much. Yeah.

Jack Copeland

So, you placed first in the women's division at, Como Rocks' RoChamBo this year. Can you tell me about what that felt like to be the first-place finalist?

Aarya Kumar

Yeah, I really debated if I should compete in it in the first place. I also set at Como Rocks, so I helped put up the boulders on the walls and whatnot. Yeah, so I kind of had the choice to set or to compete, and I ended up choosing to compete. Yeah, I kind of walked in and I was like, I'm definitely like not the best, like climber, but like, this is going to be fun to just try it out.

And so there was like a qualifying round where, you just have a few hours to go climb like the hardest ones you can. Your top five were scored. And so I did that. And then I found out that I made the finals and I was like, "oh man, okay." And yeah, so finals was really fun. And there was a spotlight and big crowd. And yeah, everyone was just really pumped up. So it was a good environment. And yeah, I was super excited to win. I climb in that gym. So yeah, it was just like felt like the whole community was like there, you know, and when and with me, you kind of.

Jack Copeland

I found this quote from a person whose last name is McGee.

Aarya Kumar

He's one of the owners [of Como Rocks].

Jack Copeland

The owners. Yes. And so this quote was, "One of the beautiful things about climbing is it's such an individualized challenge. It's you versus the wall. But everyone cheers everyone else on." So in a competitive environment, does that change at all?

Aarya Kumar

I would say no. Climbing is like the most collaborative and supportive like community I've ever been a part of, I think. Yeah, every time I walk into the gym, there's someone I know and someone saying hi to you and someone that you don't even know will be climbing and everyone's cheering them on and you're cheering them on. And it's just like a really great community. In the comp, see, there was like five finalists, and I honestly kind of felt like we were still pretty supportive of each other. Everyone would come back and you'd be like, "How'd it go out there?" And you know, I think it was still super supportive and yeah.

Jack Copeland

How do you feel like Columbia, especially since you've lived here for a while and have lived here before college and now as a college student, would you say it's a relatively rich climbing community?

Aarya Kumar

Yeah, well, before I started climbing, I was like, no one here climbs like, that's just, like, not a thing. What would they even climb? And I guess once I started climbing and I kind of became a part of the community a little bit more... the whole gym is there, and then you kind of start to meet people who climb outside, and we have places in Columbia to climb outside, which a lot of people don't realize.

Jack Copeland

What are some of those places to climb outside?

Aarya Kumar

There's Capen Park, there's some climbing there, and then there's the Providence area. Those are probably the two big ones.

Jack Copeland

Okay. Do you have a favorite?

Aarya Kumar

It kind of depends on what I'm doing. If I'm going out with people who are newer to climbing, I kind of Capen Park. It's just a little bit easier for beginners. Providence has, like, lead climbing though, which I also really like. So if I'm going out with some buddies who kind of also know what they're doing, we'll go out there usually.

Jack Copeland

Do you have any advice for people in Columbia who are maybe looking to get started climbing? Because it can seem like an intimidating sport.

Aarya Kumar

Yeah for sure. A lot of colleges have climbing walls. I definitely recommend just going and checking out your college's climbing wall. Or if you have, a climbing gym in town, checking that out is a really great way. I found that just going in there a few times, people will start to

recognize you and they'll come up and say hi. It really does not take much to get pretty plugged into the community. It kind of just happens without you even realizing. But just go and climb. You don't need you don't need to go with a friend. I think having a friend can sometimes help, but also just show up and everyone will talk to you.

Jack Copeland

So after winning the RoChamBo what's next for you, climbing-wise?

Aarya Kumar

I don't know, I've done another competition since then. I have a few kind of lined up, so I'm planning to compete a little bit more just because I think it's really fun. But yeah, climbing for me so far has just really been like a fun community. So it's important for me to just keep it that way. Also trying to plan some climbing trips and yeah, that's mostly what it is. Just keep climbing.

Jack Copeland

Can you tell me more about the first time that you went climbing outside?

Aarya Kumar

Yeah, I went out there. I was just super excited. I'd done a lot of watching videos and stuff, so I was like, okay, maybe this will be okay. But yeah, I was. I was super nervous. yeah. It was like the highest I've ever been once you start climbing up there, but then, you know, you do your first route and you're like, that was awesome. And you climb to the top and you kind of just like you're able to kind of just hang there for a moment while you're like, on the rope, and you kind of sit at the top. There's usually a really good view out, like behind you. And yeah, it's just like really peaceful to be up there and take a moment and then you get to come down and you're like, guys, look what I just did. And everyone's so excited. And yeah.

Jack Copeland

I feel like I would feel scared at the top.

Aarya Kumar

Yeah, yeah. Some people, there's a lot of people who climb who are scared of heights, which is kind of seems like a weird combination. But yeah, I don't know how that works for them.

Jack Copeland

I'm not the most, versed in outside climbing, but I know you're attached somewhere at the top. So does that mean there's someone just going up, like, completely free-hand doing that?

Aarya Kumar

Yeah, that's a really great question. So, typically someone will go up and lead a route. So that's where the ropes connected to them. And then as they go up they hook into these things called quickdraws. And so okay there's little bolts on like the rock outside that have been drilled in by someone and they're able to take their quick draws, which are basically like two little carabiners. And then it's like called a dog bone in between them. And they can just hook them in the bolt

and then they attach their rope to their quick draw. So theoretically, if they were to fall, they would fall to where their most, their highest quick draw is. So they're not going to hit the ground hopefully. And I mean the risk is always there. Climbing is dangerous. But yeah. So they lead the route and then once they're at the top they hook into anchors which are also just fixed on the rock. And then they're able to lower back down. And then the next person can basically top rope and they're able to just climb up with the rope.

Jack Copeland

Okay. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. So it's not as much as...

Aarya Kumar

They're not just free climbing. Yeah, no. There's another type of climbing called trad climbing or traditional climbing. And that's where you climb up and you place your own protection. So instead of using like quick draws and hooking into the bolts, you have like all these little gizmos, you kind of just like stick it in the rock and you pick which one you think will hold, and then you're able to hook into that like instead of the quick draw. A lot of climbing accidents will happen when people are trad climbing because if they fall, you really just have to hope that you picked like a really good spot to put your protection.

Jack Copeland

Talking about climbing as a dangerous sport, is your family or other people who are like worried about you when you go and climb?

Aarya Kumar

Yeah, in a gym, it's a lot more controlled. So I think that makes people feel a little bit better. But yeah, definitely the first time I was climbing outside, my mom was like, "I don't know about that." And then I was like, I've got to go. I've got to go climb outside. And she's like, "okay." And now she feels a lot better about it because I guess I haven't gotten hurt. But yeah, it's a lot about kind of assessing your level of like what you're comfortable risking. So like, I'm not really at a place where I'm ready to do trad climbing just because I don't really feel the need to take that risk right now. I might get there eventually. But yeah, I'm pretty happy just like leading and that feels like risky enough for what I'm comfortable with. Some people I know only like top rope because that's just a lot safer than leading, too. And yeah, some people only climb in a gym just because that's a lot safer than climbing outside. And yeah.

Jack Copeland

Is there something that you've now learned, having climbed for like a year and a half, that you didn't know or didn't expect to learn from, like rock climbing?

Aarya Kumar

Yeah. Well, obviously, all the climbing techniques and all of that I've learned. And I also just kind of learned a lot about myself and, you know, climbing is like, really, it's about like, your inner

determination and just how much you're willing to, like, put into it. And yeah, so that's taught me a lot about what I'm capable of.