

Tackle a Ropes Course

Sunday, September 18, 2005; Page M04

I'm standing 40 feet above the ground on a pedestal atop a telephone pole. In front of me are two thin parallel steel cables, inches apart, stretching 25 feet to another pole.

"So, am I just supposed to walk across these cables without anything to hold onto?" I yell down to Clive Felgate, the program director of Upward Enterprises, an outdoor adventure school in Frederick that caters to small groups seeking physical and mental thrills. He yells back that I can cross them however I want, as long as I don't hang onto the safety line strung above me between the poles.

Great.

I'm wearing a rock climbing harness and attached to the safety line by a lanyard. Felgate didn't say I couldn't hold on to the cord of the lanyard. I step out gingerly onto the cables and stand sideways, each foot resting on both cables. Hanging on to the lanyard cord with one hand, I slowly begin to edge my way to the other side. Below the cables, there's nothing but air. Felgate tells me to try to let go.



Great.

I release my grip, lose my balance and almost fall before grabbing hold of the lanyard again. "I think I'll hang on," I yell down.

In the short time I've been here at the Bishop Claggett Center ropes course, I've already swung across rings, climbed cargo nets and crossed high wires 20 feet off the ground, with ropes as hand rails. And I've barely scratched the surface. This is one of the largest such courses in the mid-Atlantic, and there are more than 50 challenges, including zip lines, swinging logs, balance beams and climbing walls. Right now though, I have a span to cross.

Felgate says to use one foot on one cable and the other foot on the second cable. I attempt this maneuver and teeter on the brink of falling. "I'm happier with both feet on both cables," I shout out. A worst-case scenario flashes in my mind. It's not falling per se, but rather falling with my legs straddling one of the cables and landing in the middle. "Fear Factor" meets "America's Funniest Home Videos." As I cross, I hope the taut safety line won't allow this to happen.

Eventually, I reach the opposite platform and face the next challenge -- a single rope extending to another telephone pole. I'm getting the hang of this. I grab hold and swing my legs up, hooking my crossed ankles on the rope, and start inching forward. It's like fooling around on the jungle gym as a kid -- a jungle gym with a 40-foot drop.

What to Expect: Ropes-challenge courses are designed primarily for groups and are developed to promote cooperation instead of competition. Kid camps and companies use them for team-building, but you don't have to be a camper or on a corporate boondoggle to play -- it's a great activity for a group of friends. If you want to go on your own, the Ace Adventure Center in Oak Hill, W. Va., is one of the few around for solo adventurers. About half of the challenge elements are close to the ground, so even if you are afraid of heights there are still plenty of options. All high elements include some form of safety line to catch you if you fall. And there's no pressure to "challenge" every element. But go ahead, climb to the top of the 50-foot pole. You may not be as afraid of heights as you think.

What to Bring: Wear comfortable, loose fitting clothes and sneakers or light hiking shoes. Bring sunscreen, water, snacks and/or lunch. Harnesses and helmets are provided. Some challenges require crawling on the ground, so a change of clothes is advised.

Cost: Prices vary greatly depending on the course elements selected, length of session, and the group's size and type -- nonprofits, for example, often get a discount.

Upward Enterprises . More than 50 low and high elements. Groups of 10-75 may reserve the course at Bishop Claggett Center in Buckeystown for prices ranging from \$40-\$55 per person for a half day and \$55-\$125 for full day. Office - 1845 Brookfield Court, Frederick. 240-529-1620. <http://www.upwardenterprises.com> .