

DON'T LOOK DOWN

Not only is Yosemite National Park in California an area of environmental importance and scientific research, it is also the birthplace of highlining

Think walking along a giant shoelace is tough? Highlining moves it up a notch. **Hannah Summers** meets the woman leading the way, Faith Dickey, and finds out all about her balancing act

Photograph by Jordan Tybon



That's 50% of the challenge for her. "It's such a mental feat, because you are aware that if you mess up, the risk is huge." It's a process that involves being in tune with her body and brain. "Walking with no safety means getting to know the difference between intuition and fear. Am I feeling fear, or is it intuition telling me that this is not a good day, not a good time?" Her instinct is pretty sound, too. Dickey's walked around 40 highlines without leashes, and believes they've all been the right decisions – to date she hasn't felt caught out, or faced what she describes as a "near-death experience".

Take Yosemite Valley, home to one of the first highlines in the world. Talking about this 2,900ft-high line is the only time Dickey seems to lose her calm demeanor. "Starting the line is like sitting over an abyss with the entire valley sucking you to its floor. It's not that long in the grand scheme of things, but it's so high up and so scary."

Scary isn't the kind of word I expect from a free-soloing highliner, but it highlights the psychological battle she faces with every walk. This particular line – which she calls her "project" – has frustrated her for years, and with each free solo attempt she's been unable to remove her leash. "It just hasn't felt like the right time or place," she admits.

Dickey's success is inextricably linked to her ability to quieten the voices during the walk. She is constantly "battling the ego", fighting different personalities in her mind that can help or hinder her crossing. The best thing to do, she says, is block out the constant stream of thoughts, and relish the chance to be in a silent space in a culture where "we're so connected that we've lost the ability to be alone". For Dickey and

other highliners it's a chance to enjoy the best of the world's natural surroundings, although music – dance or hip hop – creates a rhythm for a successful line cross. It also helps her remember why she's scooting

across yet another canyon: "It reminds me that what I'm doing is supposed to be fun, because sometimes you can get overwhelmed by fear. It makes me realise that I'm totally privileged and I'm not going to die." Making it to the other side brings euphoric relief – the best way to "purge all the verbal bullshit" we deal with every day.

And that's why she can't stop; if you have the skill to see the world in this way, it's a

California's Andy Lewis, known as 'Sketchy Andy', holds the most accolades for slacklining and performed alongside Madonna during her Superbowl halftime show in 2012

When Faith Dickey lowers her eyes she sees an inch-wide cord, a 3,000ft drop and a distant floor of brutally hard desert rock. For most, it's the stuff of nightmares – the moment we wake up clammy, gasping and thankful for a plump mattress.

But Dickey isn't like most of us – not by a long way. One of the world's only professional female slackliners, the 26-year-old Texan's passion, and day-job, is walking a loose line across the world's highest canyons – no fear, no safety harness and, terrifyingly, no second chances.

Slacklining hasn't always been this extreme – the sport originated in Yosemite Valley, California in the late 1970s, when rock climbers started slinging webbing (a flat woven band) between two points. Walking across the length of nylon soon provided its own source of fun for climbing rest days; move the webbing up a couple of hundred metres and you have highlining, a more extreme sub-category of the sport. "If you fall and hit the ground and you're more likely to die than survive, it's probably a

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highline," is Dickey's blunt explanation.

Her progress in the sport has been spectacular. After just a few months walking highlines with a safety rope attached, Dickey felt able to ditch the restrictions and wobble across canyons with no leash. This is a specialised, less commonly attempted discipline of highlining, known as free soloing. "At some point I felt the need to push myself to my absolute limit mentally," she tells me.

That strength of mind has made the sport very much Dickey's domain. She jokingly refers to herself as "That Slackline Girl", and has travelled the world racking up endless world records, ticking off highlines in high heels, slacklining between two moving lorries and snagging the record for the longest highline for a woman – a head-spinning 350ft. For Dickey it's not as horrendous as it looks: "It appears death defying, but when it's done properly it's extremely safe." Using double lines, athletes plan for instances where lines may break, and every aspect is backed up, so "no one is going to get hurt or die if something goes wrong".

She modestly accepts that huge skill and an ability to bury fear are major factors in

her record-breaking success, but tells me that conditions are just as important – warm but not too hot, a slight breeze but nothing too strong. Any extremes make it even harder – wind can move the line in a way that makes it impossible to cross.

Irrespective of the weather, training her body and mind is Dickey's biggest challenge. She **keeps fit** surfing and climbing, telling me that the first step towards slacklining success is physical – she needs to feel

Professional surfers, snowboarders and cyclists have all used slacklining as part of their training. The discipline helps improve their core strength, endurance and mental resolve.

iron-clad confidence in her abilities. Strangely, that confidence is less about balance and more about holding on, and she's made herself proficient in catching the line

when she falls: "It's my safety net – when I walk without a leash I know that my ability is giving me an extra chance if something were to go wrong." Never doubting her skill then allows the next step: using logic to combat the fear – Dickey knows she has the physical ability to walk the line, and that it's only her mind separating her from success.

Photograph by Judith Dozieres (above); Basia Sobanska (right)

LINE OF BEST FIT: Highlining is hugely psychological, so Dickey's faith in her gear and ability to catch herself if she falls is vital





ABOVE: Dickey takes to the highline, crossing the majestic Yosemite Valley

pretty rad (as Californians would have it) way to do it. It's taken her from the world's most iconic lines in California ("Yosemite Valley is so beautiful and demands respect – no line is less than 2,900ft from the ground.") to the staggering cliffs of France's Verdon Gorge (the 820ft-high site of her highest free solo highline), and the "magical, fairytale" scenes of rural Czech Republic.

YOU'RE SITTING OVER AN ABYSS WITH THE VALLEY SUCKING YOU TO ITS FLOOR

Travelling to take on her next highline challenge has given her the chance to meet other like-minded slackliners. California may be the birthplace of the discipline, but Europe has really embraced it as an outdoor sport, and Dickey spends three months highlining across Europe, returning to the Czech Republic each year to host her Girls Only Slackline Festival. It's an event she's created to encourage equality among slacklining participants, and to make a space for women. It should help spur on some healthy competition too – Dickey's in the habit of breaking her own world records, and is keen to see some female challengers pushing her, and the sport, further. "I'd love to see more women participate and reach the level of men, or surpass them. I often see that women don't believe in themselves as much, but this particular sport is so mentally focused that women don't have any disadvantage."

A study by psychologists Eric Brymer and Robert Schweitzer found that understanding the fear behind extreme sports is good for your emotional wellbeing.

If you're tempted, just learn to manage your doubt. "**Fear is like a muscle.**" Dickey tells me. "If you work on it, you can gain control of it, and not let it direct your life."

Ladies, form an orderly queue. There'll be no pushing from me at the back... **e**

SLACK STATS

Slacklining was born from tightrope walking, also called funambulism, which dates back to Ancient Greece.

The first highline was set up in 1983 in Pasadena, California. Climbers Scott Balcom, Chris Carpenter and Chongo Tucker suspended the 22ft long line under a bridge between two support beams, 80ft in the air.

Slackline Yoga – also known as YogaSlacking or Slackasana – is the art of practising traditional yoga poses while balancing on a slackline to improve your physical and mental health.

The Lost Arrow Spire in Yosemite is the world's most coveted highline, with only a few dozen people having walked the line.

Tricklining is a tangent of slacklining, which involves jumps and flips. See it for yourself at the Bristol Slackline Jam on 18 and 19 July. maverickslacklines.co.uk