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May 10, 2005

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'Return2Sender': Getting a rush from rocks

By JULIE JAG
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER



Timmy O'Neill has come to talk about crack. He's addicted to the rock, the white powder, to getting high. He lives for the adrenaline rush.

Timmy O'Neill sizes up the ascent of Greenland's Mt. Nalumasortoq, a 2,000-foot granite monolith, during one of his climbing trips. (Nathan Martin/Contribued photo)

That's why O'Neill became a professional rock climber.

Tonight, O'Neill will delve into his slippery profession when he helps present the climbing film "Return2Sender" for its California debut at the Rio Theatre at 7.

"Crack is just one of the things we're going to talk about," joked O'Neill, 35, of Boulder, Colo.

Along with O'Neill, the Peter Mortimer-directed film includes segments on 10-year-old boulderer Cicada Jenerik (now 11) of San Francisco and brooding soloist Michael Reardon of Joshua Tree. Biscuit, the climbing dog who gained fame in Mortimer's earlier film "Front Range Freaks" will also have a bit part.

For the record, O'Neill isn't addicted to cocaine. He's addicted to adrenaline, and crack is just one way to get it. In his case, though, crack refers to a narrow split in rock wall. In the film, it's specifically a tall, red slab of sandstone in the Utah desert. Crack climbers like O'Neill powder up their fingers with chalk, then cram them into the slots and contort their bodies like circus freaks to shimmy up the fissure to the top of the wall.

Bloody knuckles, blisters and pure elation ensue.

Like any drug, though, the adrenaline-inducing effects of crack climbing lose some of their potency over time. So to mix things up, O'Neill has also

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taken up slack-lining. Slack-lining is the equivalent of walking on a dog leash across two points. In "Return2Sender," O'Neill just happens to be doing it 1,000 feet in the air across 70 feet of nylon line tied between two sandstone towers. A couple of times, he balances on one foot halfway between the towers as the wind whips around him.



"I wouldn't consider it to be crazy," he said of his adrenaline-driven lifestyle. "I would consider it peculiar. It's abnormal."

O'Neill is abnormal, but it has worked for him. He's most renowned for setting a speed record on Yosemite's El Capitan. He made the half-mile route in just over 3½ hours — most climbers take about five days. Antics like that, plus his odd-ball sense of humor, have made him a staple in light-hearted climbing films. He also garnered a starring role in the upcoming Discovery Channel program "Urban Explorers," which is to air in June.

And Mortimer has found an equally off-beat group of climbers to pair with O'Neill in "Return2Sender." Reardon is an outspoken free climber (no rope) whose words can be as abrasive as some of the falls he's taken. Jenerik, who will be in Santa Cruz to view the film for the first time, is considered the future of women's climbing but is still just a kid.

The film's mix of peculiar personalities makes it work, O'Neill said.

"It delves into the psychological part of why they do it," he said. "These people let you into their head to a certain degree, which is uncommon in this type of film. Usually it's more like mountain porn. ... They don't ever delve into the characters and the personalities."

That's part of the reason Mark McCarroll, head of the UC Santa Cruz recreation program, thought it would be perfect for Santa Cruz, a town full of personality. Proceeds from the film go to the program, which organizes outdoor activities for UCSC students.

"(Timmy's) off the chart, and I think Santa Cruz honors that kind of personality," McCarroll said. "He just loves bringing people into what he does."

If that's the case, then audience members take heed: addiction to adrenaline may result.

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