

Sitting at the large kitchen table in the quaint Spanish town of Cornudella de Montsant, I edit photos feverishly on my laptop. To my right is Finnish female powerhouse, Anna Laitinen, completing an online school assignment. Matty Hong sits across from me cutting a video for Petzl, while Jon Cardwell heads up the table transcribing an interview with Daniel Woods. I bite into a dried fig, chewing on the small seeds as they pop in my mouth. “We can only have one person in this house who chews like Daniel,” Matty says with a sober expression, yet sarcastic tone. He is referring to Daniel’s excessive amount of chewing while consuming his meals. It’s quite comical and everyone in the house wonders how to chew something into submission as he does- but this is Daniel. He trains his body into submission, he climbs into submission, until he can’t hold on any longer or sends- he **would** chew his food into submission.

“Do you chew your coffee as well?” Matty turns his attention to Daniel who is sitting on the sofa eating an intricately prepared oatmeal dish Anna has taught him from her years of experimentation.

“Sometimes,” he says through slow, purposeful chews and a deadpan expression.

“Like if there are coffee grounds in it or something?” someone asks. Everyone laughs.

“ExACTly,” he responds, emphasizing the letter “t” as if creating two unique words, ‘exact’ and ‘ly.’ This word is just one of many that comprise Daniel’s unique vocabulary of phrases like “lezz go” and “good on ya.” Daniel might be the least intentional, comedic pro climber out there- or perhaps he is just so sarcastic no one can ever tell if he is intentionally joking.

While I’ve known this table of guys for about a decade, much of that time has focused on climbing; topics of emotion, motivation, obsession, and balance never came up. However, the more time I spend climbing with Daniel and observing his behavior and patterns, the more interested I became in why he is the way he is and how it has translated into him being one of the world’s best rock climbers.

Daniel needs no introduction. Making his mark as a nine-time USA ABS Nationals Champion in the indoor climbing scene, establishing numerous 8C and even 8C+ boulder problems and accomplishing 9b on a rope, there is no doubt that he is not one of if not *the most* talented American climber of his generation. However, there is more to Daniel than just the success, fame, and friendly demeanor. While to many he might appear as a humble and even relaxed person for the accomplishments he has achieved, inside he is in a constant mental struggle to stay balanced and keep his sometimes unhealthy addiction to climbing in check. These days, climbing has become so specified with such excelled levels in each discipline, it’s a wonder how and why Daniel continues to push himself to succeed in indoor bouldering, outdoor bouldering and outdoor sport climbing all at the same time. He will be the first to admit that sport climbing and bouldering are entirely different sports and require different ways of thinking and training. Additionally, indoor competition climbing has diverged so far from outdoor bouldering that those who win the competitions might never even step foot on a real rock or have a desire to. Regardless, Daniel, with all his drive and motivation, has settled on the task of excelling in all three disciplines at once and has no plans of stopping anytime soon.

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Later that day we are at the Laboratori in Margalef. Daniel stands underneath First Round First Minute. He wants to tick off the left variant First Lei 9a+, before tackling the 9b he came here to complete. Woods has a methodical routine of “obsessively chalking his hands,” looking at his skin, and holding his hands up to the wind. He looks at the holds and rehearses the beta in his mind and often out loud. He stands atop his skate shoes and blows twice into his climbing

shoe before putting it onto his foot, repeating the same process with the other shoe. He stands on the small rock tower to reach the first holds, a commonality in Margalef where all the start holds seem to be well beyond reach. Breathing deeply in and out, moving his arms back and forth, he prepares to pull on the wall. For the next hour he practices each move, trying every foot combination, picking which hand holds he wants to use and in which way. He works out the sequences and divides the full line into different bouldering problems, assigning each a grade. His goal for his first session is to climb each “boulder” separately. He is hard on himself, knowing what he is capable of, and expects to always perform at his highest potential as long as he has prepared properly. For this trip he created a strict training regime and feels ready and capable of tackling any challenge.

Daniel Woods is **obsessed** with rock climbing, and according to him, he has always been this way. “I think to do something top notch, you have to tap into a different side of yourself and to get into that side you have to become obsessive about it. You only think about it, and you are always thinking about minor details that you can change to make it easier. I know if I approach something and don’t think about it I feel more in limbo with it. I don’t know it that well, and it takes me longer to get it done.” This obsession directly translates into nervousness and ultimately a lack of sleep when in “project mode.” On these restless nights Daniel is up thinking about sequences. He watches videos and contemplates the efficiency of his beta. Woods believes this obsession helps him to retain motivation and accomplish things quicker. To date, he has never tried something for longer than 17 days, and the culprit of his 17-day spell, Creature from the Black Lagoon 8C, took so long because he spent too many days trying it in the heat of summer. Unfortunately, his obsession sometimes makes him so psyched that he struggles to wait for better conditions.

Just like his outdoor projects nerves, he feels the same way the night before and the day of big competitions. With competition climbing, his worries are different- *Am I in good enough shape? What’s going to happen? What tricks will the setters throw our way?*- “Competition is for a result,” Daniel tells me. “When you compete, that’s the only time in climbing when you’re gonna be competitive with others. You only compete to get a result, and whether that’s making semis or making finals, podium, winning- that’s your objective.” The main concern is only for that day, and then it is over, “if I don’t perform how I want to perform then that’s it, you go onto the next competition. Whereas with outdoor climbing you can dwell on it for years,” he says. “Outside I can put a lot of pressure on myself to do some ascents. You have way more things to deal with like conditions, and that’s usually the biggest stressor- if it’s gonna be too cold, too warm, rainy, whatever. It’s rare to get a perfect condition every day. You have to have a ton of shitty days, and you get that one good day. And sometimes on that one good day, you are still working the route so....” From my observations, he seems more motivated to succeed outside. With competition climbing, if you decide to compete, those are the climbs you have to try, and if you want to win, those are the climbs you have to finish. With outdoor climbing, Daniel can push himself to the same level while finding a line that motivates and inspires him. “The line and the movement has to look attractive. The rock has to be solid. I like simple. Simple moves,” he tells me. “Movement that looks really complex doesn’t really attract me, but I’ll still try because it’s something I’m not good at. Something that’s pure gets me really motivated.” It comes with no surprise that his favorite thing about climbing is movement and feeling light when he moves, “That’s probably the sensation that feels the best- when climbing feels effortless,” he tells me. Daniel feels the same desire and motivation from boulders as he does from rope climbs, defining himself as a “climber” rather than a ‘boulderer’ or ‘sport climber.’ While he is best known for his performances as a boulderer and thinks he is better at it, he looks at rope climbs as “putting together a bunch of boulders,” and he is working to improve his level of sport climbing to be on par with his level of bouldering.

Daniel has a more difficult time transferring over from rope climbing to bouldering because of the power required to boulder at the top level. He finds that it is much easier for him to build endurance than power, and tends to allocate different seasons to each so he can train appropriately. He views them as two separate sports. "Even when you are bouldering on a rope, the feeling is different. You're not hitting the ground; you're still climbing more moves than a boulder." Perceiving the two forms of climbing as entirely different sports helps him to maintain motivation and never feel burnt out. He believes he is "addicted to the feeling" and notices that he doesn't feel as happy if he goes a few days without climbing.

When Daniel first rose to the top in his climbing, he didn't have the amount of competition that he does now. Over the past decade the amount of gyms, coaches, teams, and die-hard climbers has skyrocketed. Rather than feel any threat, Daniel says, "It puts pressure on me, but in a positive way because I'm psyched that there are a lot of people out there climbing hard and it pushes me to up my level- either to try to maintain with them or try to up it." One characteristic that Daniel does not lack is confidence. His confidence is not to be confused with cockiness, because for his talent and tick list, Daniel might be the most humble climber out there. He admits that he thinks "it's impossible to know if you're gonna do everything all of the time. I'd say most of the time I can know I can do a move just by looking at it from the ground without touching the holds." With his experience and knowledge of himself as a climber, he has been able to build up a level of confidence that directly translates into the goals he sets for himself. Growing up, he says, "I felt strong, I was doing harder climbs, and my coaches were telling me I was performing well. I would see how I was performing compared to other people and I was like 'oh I'm climbing well,' but I also knew I had a lot to learn, so when I was younger I don't think I was as confident. But now I'm confident because I've had 23 years to do moves. And to do moves of all different grades, all different kinds of holds. So I think that's why the confidence increases because you train yourself to be able to increase it. I definitely had a desire to always perform well. My goal in life was to be good at something. So I think that opened my eyes to progress in climbing a lot faster because that's all I cared about. That was what I was obsessed with." Impressed with his self-analysis I wondered when this obsession began.

"Probably when I was like five."

*"That's amazing ..."*

"No, I was probably like, I'd say nine. At nine years old I was competing and training."

*"And you picked climbing, and that was it at nine years old?"*

"Yeah. I mean I haven't really tried any other sports."

When Daniel is feeling confident, motivated and goal-oriented, he essentially runs at two speeds: zero and one hundred. He tries every move at 100%, he trains at 100%, and he obsesses over perfecting and memorizing the beta at 100%. It's no wonder that someone who spends so much time at 100 needs to be at zero the remainder of the time. While some might perceive his periods of zero negatively, Daniel says, "to be honest I don't think I get into a super negative space. Maybe to some people, they are like 'oh he looks pissed,' but I'm not pissed, I just feel tired. I don't feel like talking, and I don't feel like doing other stuff." He prioritizes the conservation of his energy to dedicate entirely to his climbing objective. He admits that while he is focusing on a project, his stress levels are high, resulting in minimal and poor quality of sleep. While he knows his body and mind cannot sustain this behavior for long periods of time, this is the only behavior he has ever known.

2017 was a hard year for Daniel. It began with a DUI which coincided with a divorce, both things that he knows attributed to his lack of confidence and motivation. Rather than fight what his body and mind naturally needed, he chalked it up to being an off year. "I kinda was like 'I just wanna chill and hang out and do some hard things here and there,'" Daniel says. "Whereas this year, I'm going back to my old self where I go on a trip and all that I care about is what's gonna get done during that trip." During this period, Daniel observed that a break from project-ing allocated more energy and time towards doing other things in life like being with friends. "When I'm in my climbing zone I kind of switch. I don't really have motivation or energy to do other things because I just wanna accomplish what I'm here to accomplish," he says. "So my rhythm now is to climb hard, do a season that I am proud of, and then take a rest period and re-up for another season." Balance is something all people struggle with, but for climbers like Daniel, he struggles to find a "balance of knowing when to rest and knowing when to up it." Focusing on balance is a newer thing for Daniel and has come with time and maturity, but he still is no master.

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We return to the Laboratori and wait for the temperature to drop to a reasonable level for an attempt. When the sun leaves the cliff and the winds pick up, Daniel is ready to "give it a burn." He stretches his hips and knees, looks at his tips, and lifts them to the wind. He repeats his pre-climbing ritual. With efficiency and lightness Daniel is through the first bolts, he has dialed the beta, completed each section, and knows he can finish the route. While the conditions are not perfect, he does not think it should be a problem. The goal of the day is to complete First Ley then sort out the moves on the top of First Round First Minute. He has gotten through the first crux and has achieved a high point when his body reaches all-time fatigue, the pump kicks in, and he falls while going for one of the final hard moves of the line. As he falls, a second fall occurs. With a clank, the quickdraw he had fallen at hits the ground and Daniel's body hovers a little over a foot off the road. *What had happened? Had a bolt broken? Had I done something wrong?* He had almost just hit the asphalt street and had fallen from close to the top of the line. I process all the things that could have gone wrong and resulted in a catastrophe. I lower him, heart beating through my ears, and we stand in shock and silence. A man and woman close by run over; they have seen the whole thing and tell us it was a carabiner that had ripped in two. We locate the two pieces on the ground, still not fully processing what has happened and how bad things could have been.

Adrenalized to an all-time high, he takes a short rest before aiding up the line and replacing every quickdraw with his own. I think back to something I had asked him the previous day, "Hypothetically if you were to be injured and couldn't climb anymore... do you ever think about that? Does that ever scare you, the idea that climbing can be taken away?"

He had responded with "I'd probably just end my life. Call it good."

I had been shocked at his response. "*You'd really end your life?*"

"I dunno, it'd be hard. I wouldn't be the same if I couldn't climb. If I got injured and wasn't fully capable to actually pull on anything anymore then there would be a struggle for sure. I mean I would probably find something else but I wouldn't have the same happiness within because something was stripped away from me that I love. So I could like something else, maybe learn to love something else, but when you do something that is all you know since the age of 5, it's really hard to replace that."

Being superstitious, I instantly think I have jinxed him and caused this to happen. He hadn't died and wasn't hurt, but he was so close to having a detrimental injury which in his eyes near-

ly equated to death anyway- it was a lot to process and I struggled to keep my anxiety at bay as I belayed him on his quickdraw replacement mission. With the gear replaced, he takes a 15-minute rest and prepares for another attempt. I wonder if he will feel shaken after the experience, but as he works through the moves again the adrenaline only seems to fuel him further. He is angry he has fallen and chastises himself for being “weak.” He gets to his high point and again falls, yelling in rage. I can see his anger and disappointment; he even yells at himself. This time, however, he boinks and jugs up the wall, spending the next thirty minutes trying moves. He had told me, “I’ll look at all the different foot options, hand options, and I’ll see what’s gonna fit my style the best for climbing. I’ll try the move and when I try the move I’m always going for it pretty much at 100 and if I fall then, of course, it’s a surprise. But then when I fall I’m immediately like, ‘maybe I’ll look for another option,’ or ‘I’ll look and maybe it’s my only option and I just have to try even harder.” I can only assume he is looking for another option to make the climb slightly less tiring and give him a higher chance of success. He moves his feet back and forth, touches the handholds he is already using but in new ways, tries different sequences, and finally unlocks a method that will allow him to make one of the more difficult clips with greater ease. He feels content with his new approach and is ready to come down, rest, and try again. Until it’s too dark and he is exhausted, he will not stop. He is relentless.

Being a pretty upbeat person in general with a ‘sky is the limit’ outlook on life, I wonder if there was a time in his past that he was dealing with something emotional or personal that overtook his ability to perform, which he now looks back on and regrets. “I don’t really regret anything,” he tells me. “I’ve had a ton of hard times like a lot of people have had out there. Life’s not perfect, but I don’t look back and go ‘why did that happen to me, I’m gonna be fucked now for the rest of my life.’ You just learn from it, move on, move forward from there.” I can only assume this lack of regret and desire to remain positive and move forward undoubtedly contributes to his success in climbing.

Shortly after I leave Spain, Daniel returns to the Laboratori, seeking vengeance on First Ley. The conditions are cooler, he settles on his beta, and executes the send with perfection.

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There are three ways to live life: dwelling on the past, living in the moment, or obsessing over the future. Ideally, you have a healthy combination of all three, but for many professional athletes who know their careers do not last forever, they have to make the best of every moment and not overthink the less active and fame-filled future that awaits. Daniel does not seem to dwell on the past and little by little he learns from mistakes and makes changes to secure a better present and future. He sets immediate goals for himself, such as First Ley, and near future goals for himself such as a project he has been scoping and preparing for in Eldorado Canyon, Colorado. When he achieves one goal, he makes a new one, but as of late he has already began to think more about what his future will ideally look like in 5, 10 and 20 years. “I still want be an athlete for the next decade and push myself and then after I’m finished it would be kinda cool to work for a company I’m sponsored by or create my own company. But I’ll definitely always be in the climbing world and contributing to it in some sort of way. Obviously, you can’t be an athlete forever. There are generations that come up that are just gonna push the level that much higher, so you recognize that, pick your time to phase out, and then start something else.” Daniel refuses to put a time limit on his professional climbing career or even allocate an age limit; he believes when the right opportunity presents itself, it will be the correct time to make an exit and make a change.