

Men's Program

Programs especially for men

Death-Defying Daredevils

In this month's program learning discussion activity, we'll take a look at some of the most sensational daredevils over the past century and a half, along with the stunning and death-defying feats they've performed.

Preparations and How-To's

- This is a copy of the complete activity for the facilitator to present. Check the links in the article in advance for videos of feats performed by the daredevils being discussed.
- Print a [large-print copy of the article and activity](#). Read the article, pausing to engage in conversation using the Discussion Starters.
- Ask the [trivia questions](#) and have participants answer.
- Distribute the [Matching Exercise](#) and instruct participants to match quotes with the famous daredevil who said them. Ask participants to share and discuss their answers.
- [Pictures](#) of daredevils in action can also be displayed to enhance the activity.



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Introduction

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“A Man Just Can’t Sit Around” – Larry Walters

According to truck driver Larry Walters of San Pedro, California, this sentiment—a man just can't sit around—is what inspires people like him to risk their lives for a thrill. In 1982, Walters created a homemade flying machine by attaching 45 helium weather balloons to an ordinary lawn chair. He set sail for the Mojave Desert, piloting the contraption he had dubbed *Inspiration 1*. His plan was to use a pellet gun to shoot out some of the balloons and gracefully descend to the desert floor. But his plan went awry when he quickly ascended to an altitude of over 15,000 feet and reached controlled airspace. Forty-five minutes into the flight, as he neared Los Angeles International Airport, he began shooting out some of the balloons. He descended slowly, got tangled in some power lines, and caused a 20-minute blackout in a Long Beach neighborhood. He climbed to the ground safely and was promptly arrested.

Discussion Starters

- Do you remember the stunt of “Lawn Chair Pilot” Larry Walters?
- What did you think when you heard about his attempt to fly a lawn chair?
- Would you ever have considered doing such a thing? Do you think it would be fun or scary?
- He named his flying chair *Inspiration I*. Do you think he was planning to build and test a second model?
- What would you name a homemade flying machine if you devised one?

Other Famous Daredevils

For Walters, defying death for the fun of it was a one-time thing, but for many of the famous and infamous daredevils throughout history, it became a driving quest and even a profession. Here are some of the best.

Charles Blondin

Also known as the Great Blondin, this 19th century-French acrobat and tightrope walker awed the public with acts of daring on the high wire. He began his career as a very young child, and by his twenties he was one of the biggest crowd pleasers in Europe. But it was in the United States in 1859 that he achieved his most noteworthy feat. Blondin became the first person to cross the 160-foot gorge beneath Niagara Falls by walking 1,100 feet on a tightrope. The ultimate entertainer, he didn't stop there. He challenged himself several times over with increasingly difficult variations of the feat. Blondin crossed the gorge wearing a blindfold, pushing a wheelbarrow, using stilts, and toting a man on his back. Ultimately, Blondin made the trip with a stop midway across the falls to sit on the tightrope, cook an omelet, and eat it.

Jeb Corliss

As a professional skydiver and BASE jumper (people who parachute off fixed objects such as buildings or tall cliffs), Jeb Corliss made a name for himself by leaping from famous world landmarks, such as the Seattle Space Needle, the Eiffel Tower, and the Petronas Twin Towers in Malaysia. Corliss also attempted to jump from the Empire State Building in 2006, but was arrested before he could take the leap. Here is a video of him in a wingsuit jump from a helicopter in China, followed by flight through a hole in the side of a mountain.



Eddie Kidd

This famed daredevil has performed over 3,000 death-defying motorcycle jumps. He was a stuntman in the movie *Hanover Street* in 1979, when he famously jumped 120 feet over a railway span. He is best known for stunting for Pierce Brosnan in several *James Bond* films. Off the big screen, he made several thrilling jumps, including one over the Great Wall of China and another over a 50-foot high viaduct. After suffering a near fatal crash during a jump in 1996, Kidd recovered and returned to bike racing in 2007.

Alain Robert

This well-known French daredevil helped forge the extreme sport known as “urban climbing.” Robert gained notoriety with his illegal and very dangerous climbs up some of the tallest skyscrapers in the world. In doing so, he acquired a nickname—“the French Spiderman.” Also famous as a rock climber, Robert has scaled more than 85 challenging structures around the globe, including the Sears Tower, the Sydney Opera House, and the Petronas Twin Towers. He completes each climb using only the architectural form and features of a building to assist him. His climbs are usually unauthorized, and he has been arrested nearly every time he reached the top of a building. Ironically, he has also received multiple awards for his achievements as an urban climber.



Philippe Petit

Another daring Frenchman, Philippe Petit achieved his greatest claim to fame when he walked a tightrope between the north and south towers of the World Trade Center shortly after they were constructed in 1974. A self-taught high wire sensation, Petit began his career as a street performer in Paris, where he juggled, did magic tricks, and rode a unicycle. Soon, he moved on to bigger challenges, using his skills on the tightrope to perform on the Sydney Harbor Bridge in Australia and the towers of the Notre Dame de Paris. When he decided to conquer the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center at the age of 25, the feat began with intense planning and was carried out using assumed names, disguises, and falsified documents. With the help of accomplices, Petit managed to get past building security and shoot a cable from one tower to the other with a bow and arrow. Once the wire was secure, he performed on it for 50 minutes at an altitude of 1,350 feet above street level.

Harry Houdini

Houdini is remembered for his sensational performances as an illusionist and escape artist. Many of his stunts were death-defying acts. His greatest feat was called the Chinese Water Torture Cell. Houdini would hang upside down by manacled feet, locked in a restraint brace, and then be lowered into a glass tank filled with water. Draperies were spread to veil the tank, and two minutes later, Houdini would burst through to the amazement of the audience. In another stunt, he was handcuffed, locked in leg irons, and submerged in water inside a crate that was nailed shut and weighted with 200 pounds of lead. Houdini escaped in 57 seconds. In yet another, he was buried alive under six feet of dirt and barely managed to escape. Many of his tricks required him to hold his breath for more than three minutes.

Felix Baumgartner

In 2012, Austrian skydiver Felix Baumgartner became the first man to break the speed of sound in a freefall when he jumped from a helium balloon at an altitude of 128,000 feet. He wore a full-pressure suit, a helmet, and a parachute. He was in freefall for more than four minutes and reached an estimated speed of 833.9 mph. Baumgartner also set the world record for the lowest BASE jump ever—95 feet from the hand of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro. In addition, he was the first person to BASE jump from the completed Millau Viaduct in France in 2004. Two years later, Baumgartner amazed the world when he became the first to skydive onto and then BASE jump from the Turning Torso building in Malmo, Sweden.

Evel Knievel

It is difficult to hear the term *daredevil* without conjuring the image of motorcycle stuntman Evel Knievel. His nationally televised stunts rank among the most watched sporting events in history, and the stories about him breaking every bone in his body (which he claims are exaggerated) have become a thing of legend. He was a born crowd pleaser, and in his first daredevil event, he jumped over a box full of rattlesnakes and two mountain lions. The stunt earned him a sponsor, and he quickly took his place among the earliest professional daredevils. Knievel went on to jump his Harley Davidson over large rows of parked cars, trucks, and even buses at staged events. His attempt to jump the fountains at Caesar's Palace resulted in a crash in which he suffered serious injuries, including a concussion and multiple bone fractures. Most famously, Knievel attempted to jump the Snake River Canyon on a rocket-propelled motorcycle in 1974. The bike's parachute deployed prematurely, but the malfunction did not rob this daredevil of his lofty status among professional stuntmen.

Robbie Knievel

While Evel Knievel always dreamed of jumping over the Grand Canyon, it was his son, Robbie, who pulled it off. Like his father, Robbie is a professional daredevil who has completed more than 350 motorcycle jumps and broken 20 world records. His stunts include a jump over 21 Hummers and a televised 200-foot ramp-to-ramp jump on New Year's Eve in 2008. Robbie has also jumped over a moving locomotive and cleared five military airplanes on the deck of the USS Intrepid. He once jumped the 130-foot gap between the two 13-story Jockey Club Towers in Las Vegas. Upon landing successfully, he intentionally crashed his bike into bales of hay to prevent falling off the tower. When he completed his Grand Canyon jump, Robbie cleared a distance of 228 feet before landing, losing control of his bike, and breaking his leg in the ensuing crash.

Trivia Q&A

1. Where was Harry Houdini born?

Answer: Budapest, Hungary

2. How did the French Spiderman, Alain Robert, get his start scaling buildings?

Answer: He claims it all started when he forgot the keys to his home at age 12 and decided to climb the outside of the building to get inside.

3. Regarding the sport of BASE jumping, what do the four letters in this acronym stand for?

Answer: They stand for four categories of fixed objects from which people can jump—buildings, antennas, spans (bridges), and earth (cliffs).

4. How did Evel Knievel (born Robert Craig Knievel) come by his name?

Answer: Before he was a professional daredevil, Knievel was a habitual petty criminal and once found himself in jail with a man named Knofel. Together, they became known as "Awful Knofel and Evil Knievel." Knievel changed the *i* in *evil* to an *e* to soften the persona the word bestowed.

5. What Guinness World Record is Evel Knievel known for?

Answer: Most bone fractures in a lifetime—433 by the end of 1975.

She-devils

While the vast majority of daredevils have been male, some females have infiltrated the ranks of this distinct group. Here are just a few female daredevils:

Annie Edson Taylor: At age 63, she was the first person ever to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel (1901).

Maria Spelterini: At 23, she became the first woman to cross the Niagara River Gorge on a tightrope. She did it several times: once blindfolded, once with peach barrels on her feet, and another time in chains. Her performance was part of the U.S. centennial celebration in 1876.

Debbie Lawler: Called “The Flying Angel,” she beat Evel Knievel’s indoor record by jumping 16 trucks on her motorcycle in 1974. Evel later reclaimed the title by just one vehicle, but Lawler still holds the women’s jumping record.

Mabel Stark: Dubbed the “original catwoman,” she was the first tiger trainer. She performed at Madison Square Garden in the 1920s, performing with as many as 18 tigers at once.



The Breitling Wingwalkers: Sarah Tanner, Danielle Hughes, and Stella Guiding make up this trio of female stunt artists (although a 2011 official video shows four women performing). They strap themselves atop the wings of biplanes and perform gymnastics while the pilots complete a series of loops, rolls, and upside-down maneuvers at speeds of up to 150 mph.

Discussion Starters

- Were you aware of any of these women daredevils? Which ones?
 - How did you know about them?
 - Which of all the famous daredevils (male and female) discussed in this activity are you most impressed with? Why?
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Daredevil Quotes

Following are quotes from some of the famous daredevils in the article. Try to match each quote to the person who said it. Some answers may be used more than once.

1. "Athletes have other athletes as competitors. My competitor is death."

Answer: _____

2. "The union of altitude and solitude fills me with an arrogant sense of ownership."

Answer: _____

3. "My chief task has been to conquer fear. The public sees only the thrill of the accomplished trick; they have no conception of the tortuous preliminary self-training that was necessary to conquer fear."

Answer: _____

4. "Life has to be dangerous."

Answer: _____

5. "I thought I was bulletproof or Superman there for a while. I thought I'd never run out of nerve. Never."

Answer: _____

6. "Don't try it."

Answer: _____

7. "My time on this world is limited, but the things I can do with that time are not."

Answer: _____

8. "If the F.A.A. was around when the Wright Brothers were testing their aircraft, they would never have been able to make their first flight at Kitty Hawk."

Answer: _____

9. "No prison can hold me; no hand or leg irons or steel locks can shackle me. No ropes or chains can keep me from my freedom."

Answer: _____

10. "Sometimes you have to go up really high to see how small you are."

Answer: _____

11. "I know it's impossible. But I know I'll do it!"

Answer: _____

12. "If you've climbed the first 140 meters, it doesn't mean that you've succeeded; you are going to succeed by climbing the last 10 meters."

Answer: _____

13. "I did everything by the seat of my pants. That's why I got hurt so much."

Answer: _____

14. "The reality is that no matter what you do in life, it's coming to an end. Once you accept there's nothing you can do about your own mortality, then you're now free. You have no control, so stop pretending you do, and just get on with living your life. Stop living in fear."

Answer: _____

15. "Life should be lived on the edge. You have to exercise rebellion: to refuse to tape yourself to rules; to refuse your own success; to refuse to repeat yourself; to see every day, every year, every idea as a true challenge—and then you are going to live your life on a tightrope."

Answer: _____

16. "It's best you do it and get it out of your system."

Answer: _____

17. "Authorities arrest me, release me, and then invite me back to host public events. I think it's interesting."

Answer: _____

18. "Everyone has limits. Not everyone accepts them."

Answer: _____

19. "You come to a point in your life when you really don't care what people think about you, you just care what you think about yourself."

Answer: _____

20. "Never try to fool children. They expect nothing, and therefore see everything."

Answer: _____

Daredevil Quotes

(Answer Key)

1. Robbie Knievel
2. Philippe Petit
3. Harry Houdini
4. Alain Robert
5. Evel Knievel
6. Annie Edson Taylor
7. Jeb Corliss
8. Larry Walters
9. Harry Houdini
10. Felix Baumgartner
11. Philippe Petit
12. Alain Robert
13. Evel Knievel
14. Jeb Corliss
15. Philippe Petit
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