Getting to Know: Alexa Nazarian

How UC Irvine’s nationally decorated rock climber’s influence reaches beyond climbing.

She researches new platforms for testing cardiotoxic drugs. She studies Biomedical Engineering (BME) at UC Irvine. She also happens to be one of the best rock climbers in the nation. Alexa Nazarian is full of superlatives: one of the nicest people you’ll meet but also the most competitive and calm. “That's something that's really impressive about her,” says coach Nicolas Canac. “How she somehow manages to be hyper-competitive—which is something you need, I think, to push yourself to your limits—while at the same time stay cool and collected at all times, which is also important because you don’t perform well if you’re frustrated or angry. It’s a difficult line to walk, and she does it perfectly,” adds Canac.

Alexa Nazarian is currently a junior at UC Irvine, where she serves as Vice President of the school’s Rock Climbing club, whom she climbs with three to four times a week. When asked about what interests her in climbing, she replied that the “problem-solving” aspect of the sport is what appeals to her. Nazarian is a master problem-solver—juggling the work of being a student, researcher and climber—similar to how she solves climbing “problems”—finding the most efficient way to climb a route, and finding nearly indistinguishable crevices in the wall as she transitions from one difficult hold to another, positioning and adjusting her body in a seemingly unlimited number of ways.

Growing up, she competed in many tournaments, but winning her first major competition—a regional competition with competitors from all over the western United States was “one of the best days my life,” says Nazarian. She joined Zero Gravity in 2009, one of the premier youth climbing teams in the world. She is now one of the team’s several alumni, all of whom have gone on to place well in all types of competitions.

Nazarian’s rock climbing resume includes the following:

- 2nd in Sport Climbing, Sport Climbing Series (SCS) Regional Championships (2012, Fremont)
- 1st in Sport Climbing, SCS Youth Divisionals (2013, Seattle)
- 3rd in Sport Climbing, SCS Youth Nationals (2013, Atlanta) — Female Junior
- 3rd in Speed Climbing, SCS Youth Nationals (2013, Atlanta) — Female Junior
- 4th at SCS Youth Nationals (2014, Atlanta) — Female Junior
Earned a spot on the U.S. youth team in 2013 and 2014
2nd in Sport Climbing, Collegiate Climbing Series (CCS) National Championship Series (2015, San Diego)

Alexa needed no introduction to climbing. Home videos showed Nazarian climbing out of her honeycomb playcrib—she climbed everything in sight from random poles, buildings, anything that was climbable. Her official introduction to rock climbing began when she was six, when her parents threw her brother Ari a party that took place in a climbing gym. Although introduced to the sport at age six, Nazarian did not start climbing until three years later, only after constantly pleading her parents to sign her up at a climbing gym. Her parents tried to keep her busy with other sports such as tennis, but she gave those up in order to pursue climbing.

Nazarian says that the coolest part about climbing is the traveling, where she was able to go to British Columbia in 2013 and New Caledonia—the French territory located in the southwest Pacific Ocean (1200 kilometers east of Australia) known for its rich marine life in 2014—through qualifying for a spot with the United States youth team. Other benefits included Team USA gear and making friendships with people all around the world. “A lot of people trade their jackets and gear with other teams. I traded my jersey with a girl from Austria, so I have an Austria jersey,” says Nazarian.

Although a highly decorated athlete, it can be easy to miss Alexa due to her low-key demeanor, even in the heat of competition; however, her friendliness, competitiveness, and work ethic does not go unnoticed by her peers. “Besides being a very accomplished climber and researcher, Alexa is one of the nicest people I know,” says graduate student mentor Nicole Mendoza. Nazarian conducts undergraduate research in Dr. Michelle Khine’s laboratory. Her project involves creating an in vitro cardiac organoid model—a heart model, but to test the cardiotoxicity of drugs without using a real heart. “She is one of the most dedicated researchers that I’ve had the privilege of mentoring,” adds Mendoza.

As member of the Rock Climbing club, Nazarian provides advice to many of the new climbers on the team, offering support and encouragement as well to those new to the sport. Her experience is invaluable to new climbers and is always happy to help others. Although Nazarian conducts research and studies BME, she is still able to climb and perform her duties as Vice President. “She’s a genuinely great person and always shows concern and care for others,” Canac says.

A product of Notre Dame High School (San Jose) and Zero Gravity, Nazarian dreams of being a biomedical engineer and professional climber—pursuing climbing more competitively after graduation. She is excited about the possibility of rock climbing being included in the 2020 Olympics hosted in Tokyo. She keeps a calm demeanor, but her love for the sport is evident. Her coach thinks that is why she remains calm and focused while climbing. “Because even if she’s falling over and over again attempting some super difficult climb, she’s still having a blast,” says Canac.

Alexa’s interests:
Favorite sports to watch – Basketball, tennis, international and national rock climbing competitions.
Favorite sports team(s) – Golden State Warriors.
Favorite athletes – Stephen Curry (basketball), Andy Roddick (tennis), Jain Kim (climbing).
Favorite hobbies – Fantasy Football. Board games with friends and family.
Favorite genre of music? Indie rock, Electronica.
Currently listening to? Jamie XX.
Favorite TV shows? Parks & Rec, Gilmore Girls,
Show(s) you are watching right now? Master of None.
Favorite foods? Armenian food – Manti (Armenian dumpling), Sarma (stuffed grape leaves).
What are you reading? The Art of Learning & The Road by Cormac McCarthy
Do you speak any other languages? Armenian
Hidden talents? Can play flute (played for 8 years).