



# THE SLACK LIFE

Steel City Slackers find inner peace while balanced precipitously on a highline Text and photographs by Daniel Stainer

After public speaking, the fear of heights ranks as one of the top human phobias. So why would anyone purposely walk across a suspended length of flat webbing anchored between two trees and strung out over a steep cliff? For the Pittsburgh-based Steel City Slackers, it's just another walk in the park.

Inspired by circus tightrope walkers, the sport of slacklining was born out of the 1980s climbing scene. Unlike with tightrope walking, which uses a taut line under extreme tension, the synthetic webbing used in slacklining has a dynamic quality that emulates the bouncy action of a trampoline.

The idea of walking on a thin strip of webbing may be daunting to some, but participants say the sport is remarkably safe. Statistically, the number of injuries is extremely low, and the sport adheres to similar safety protocols as climbing—from heavy-duty harnesses to the dual-redundancy leash systems

that catch you if you fall.

Come along as we learn more about the sport of slacklining and the Pittsburghers who thrill to it.

## Embracing the Slacklife

IT'S LATE AFTERNOON, AND the warm sun is casting a magnificent glow against the distant city skyline. Underneath the Duquesne Incline, the Steel City Slackers have rigged a slackline spanning a 210-foot gap on a steep hill.

With the meditative focus of a Zen master, founding member Wade Desai methodically makes his way across the webbing, try-



From the moment cofounder Rachel Dobos saw a video of a man sitting cross-legged on a highline, she was hooked. Her background in acro, yoga and gymnastics has helped draw her to the art, balance and acrobatic aspects of slacklining.



ing out a few playful yoga moves along the way. As a trained emergency room physician who is currently on break while figuring out his next career move, Desai finds slacklining to be more fulfilling than his past profession.

If that medical training has taught him anything, it's that there is little time to waste. Desai and his girlfriend and fellow cofounder, Rachel Dobos, live out of their customized van, traveling from location to location while embracing the slacklife.

As Desai instinctively feels his way across the webbing one step at a time, he concen-

trates on his breath. He later reflects on the gamut of emotions slackliners often experience.

"There are these moments you go through where the only things on your mind are feelings like fear, anxiety, apprehension and doubt," he says. "But then your mind experiences the opposite—emotions like confidence, euphoria and flow. Flow is the goal. It's the perfect feeling of being absorbed in what you're doing with no sense of time."

Fellow slacker Adam Taylor agrees. "It's like trying to find peace in the middle of chaos," he says.

They explain that there's no chance of finding balance if you're freaking out and pumped up on adrenaline. Your mind must be calm, centered and focused, and you must learn to be intentional, rather than reactive, with your feelings.

That doesn't always come easy to a beginner, however. When starting out as a slacker, the biggest challenge is finding personal limits, especially since most people today aren't regularly pushed to extremes.

First-time slackliners can learn a lot about themselves when they're forced out of their comfort zones, particularly if they feel safe and supported.

"There really are no egos in the slacklining community," Dobos says. "If you're a beginner working alongside someone who is a professional, they are right there with you, cheering you on from the sidelines. Even the experts had to start somewhere."

### The Draw of the Sport

**PART ART, SCIENCE, SPORT** and mindfulness, slacklining transcends the sheer physicality of trying to balance precipitously on a highline. A version of slacklining that is popular with the Steel City crew is yoga slacklining, which incorporates traditional yoga poses and other balancing moves designed to develop flexibility, power and proper breathing technique.

Gear and certain aspects of engineering also draw people to the sport.

"Rigging a slackline and researching the right equipment are sort of like adult

(right) Chase Wade Rogers pulls himself back to the launch point after completing a successful run on a slackline affectionately called Green Bean, which the group set up in Seldom Seen Park in Pittsburgh. (below) Seasoned slacker Adam Taylor shows off his impressive balance on a highline set up below the Duquesne Incline in Pittsburgh. Awe-inspiring views of the city and the high terrain have helped make this spot a perennial favorite within the local slacklining community.





Known for his signature brand of slackline yoga moves, Steel City Slackers cofounder Wade Desai sees a bright future for the sport of slacklining. He was introduced to the hobby through a climbing partner over three years ago, and he describes his journey into the slacklife as profound.



Legos,” Desai says. “There’s an entire generation of people who grew up playing with stuff that you can connect together, do weird things with and make something creative out of it.”

If you ask members of the Steel City Slackers what they love about slacklining, many also mention the people they have met. The slackers view themselves as a diverse group with wildly unique backgrounds who are united through their passion for slacklining. Members come from all walks of life, and everyone brings a distinct perspective to the table—from the mechanical engineer and teacher to the elevator technician and geologist.

This team of enthusiasts also shares a love for the Pittsburgh community and adventure; they believe that balance is

the key to a healthy life. In fact, the Steel City Slacker motto, “Bringing Pittsburgh together through slacklining,” perfectly encapsulates their thinking in fostering an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Many members provide community outreach through beginner workshops and classes they conduct in partnership with such iconic Pittsburgh institutions as the Children’s Museum and the Carnegie Science Center, as well as Ascend Indoor Climbing Gym. The group also manages an infrastructure for people looking to buy and access gear.

The Steel City Slackers are proud of the stellar slacklining reputation they have earned across the United States and how Pittsburghers have embraced this outdoor recreation. Slacklining groups can be found elsewhere in Pennsylvania, but those tend

to be more urban focused. The Steel City Slackers take advantage of the Pittsburgh area’s unique mountainous topography and the region’s love of the outdoors to grow this new recreation.

As Philosopher Bertrand Russell once said, “To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.” What better way to accomplish this than suspended on a highline while taking in the breathtaking view. This is what living the slacklife is all about. ♥

—Contributor Daniel Stainer is based in Slippery Rock.

#### HOW TO GET INVOLVED

The Steel City Slackers set up slacklines around Pittsburgh a few times per month and welcome new members of all skill levels. Look for the group on Facebook ([slacklinepittsburgh.com](https://www.facebook.com/slacklinepittsburgh)), where you can view videos of slacklining. [steelcityslackers.com](https://www.steelcityslackers.com); [steelcityslackers@gmail.com](mailto:steelcityslackers@gmail.com)