

Winter Skills Course in Scotland to prepare for Himalayan Expeditions

Report by Caroline (Karolina Pakėnaitė)

Last March, I had the invaluable opportunity to attend a 3-Day Bespoke Winter Skills Course at Glenmore Lodge, made possible by the generous Des Rubens Bill Wallace Grant from the John Muir Trust. This course was instrumental in preparing me for my upcoming expeditions in the Himalayas, allowing me to develop essential skills and foster a stronger connection with my climbing partner. It also provided the space to explore communication and navigation strategies that are tailored to my experience of deafblindness.



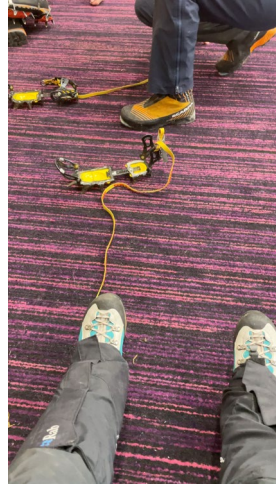
Photo description: *Remi (cameraman), Karolina (me) & Bosley (guide dog), Scott (instructor), Sara (film producer) and Sammar (climbing partner) are standing all together in front of Glenmore Lodge building on a snowy day.*

Day 1: Foundation Skills and Essential Techniques

We began by covering the basics: packing strategies, learning how to use crampons for the first time, and handling an ice axe. Even small but crucial details, like keeping gloves on when accessing gear in the rucksack, became part of the learning process. I was advised to carry my helmet inside my rucksack rather than attaching it externally—practical tips like this proved invaluable.



Photo description: *All climbing gear and rucksack laid out on a table.*



Video description: *Learning how to put on crampons.*



Photo description: *Me in my climbing kit on the Scottish snowy mountains on a sunny day.*

In adapting to my deafblindness, we explored different navigation strategies. Initially, I attempted walking without any aids, but quickly realised that following my guide's footsteps was critical to avoid hazards like holes or cliffs with my low sight. However, due to my tunnel vision, this became exhausting whenever my guide moved out of my line of sight. We tested a sling system, attaching ourselves to each other, which provided me with a reliable reference point and reduced the need for constant scanning. We switched to a brighter-coloured sling for better visibility and added markers for additional references. In windy conditions, when the sling moved too much, we found holding a hiking pole between us was a better solution. This also allowed me to walk straight as I was able to follow through touch which also eased the strain on my neck.



Photo description: *Remi, the cameraman going up the snowy mountains with his ice axe.*



Video description: *A sling being attached to me and Scott.*



Video description: *Me and Scott going up the snowy mountain whilst being attached to each other.*

Day 2: Rock Climbing and My Guide Dog's Outdoor Adventure

Due to adverse weather, we switched to rock climbing in the woods, away from the winds. We tackled the rock face in our boots, and I honed my skills in rope handling and belaying. Practicing with a fixed rope was a significant step towards one of my future climbs.

Additionally, my film cameraman gained valuable skills and knowledge on how to safely film and carry the equipment during climbs.

One of the most memorable moments was having my guide dog, Bosley, join me for the day. Although my instructor wasn't used to having dogs during the course, Bosley's calm presence won him over. Bosley stayed still and obedient, watching attentively as I climbed, and grew more alert whenever I slipped. This moment was bittersweet, as Bosley is nearing retirement, making this one of our last big adventures together.



Photo description: *Me belaying Remi whilst Scott is supervising.*



Photo description: *Bosley, the guide dog off duty, looking up at the camera.*



Video description: *Remi is being attached to the rope whilst filming me climbing.*



Photo description: *Me smiling at the camera near the rock face, whilst Remi is looking at his camera in the background.*

Day 3: Braving the Elements and Advanced Navigation

On the final day, we embraced the harsh conditions—snow and wind—while practicing navigation with a compass and map. We delved into reading weather forecasts and assessing avalanche risks, and I learned how to self-arrest with an ice axe. Most importantly, we learned to “read ourselves”—understanding how our bodies and minds react to the challenging environments. In the biting wind, we initially felt too lazy to put on more layers and through that we still ok, but our guide reminded us that this was exactly when we should be adding layers before it became too late for our bodies to adapt. This made us realise how this kind of self-awareness is crucial in extreme conditions.



Photo description: *Our instructor near the screen showing photos for different types of avalanches.*



Video description: *Me and others practicing to self-rest with ice axe.*



Video description: *Our instructor showing us how to use a compass and a map.*



Video description: *All of us trying to put on extra layers in very windy conditions.*

Looking Ahead: Haptic Wearables and Future Summits

This course was more than just a refresher—it laid the foundation for new developments. I am now collaborating with brands and researchers to adapt my gear and prototype a haptic wearable for communication on future climbs. This device, integrated into both mine and my guide's equipment, uses wireless vibrations to help me receive directions in low visibility, snow, wind, or darkness—all while being deafblind. We'll be testing its effectiveness in cold weather during my ascent of Mera Peak (6000m) this November. The plan is to refine the technology and develop a haptic code system for future expeditions, including my ultimate goal of summiting an 8000m peak in 2026.

One of my greatest hopes is to climb one of these peaks alongside another deafblind climber, showing that these adaptations not only benefit me but can support others venturing into high-altitude mountaineering. I believe that addressing these challenges will make the mountains a little more accessible for all adventurers—including sighted and hearing climbers who face similar challenges in extreme conditions.

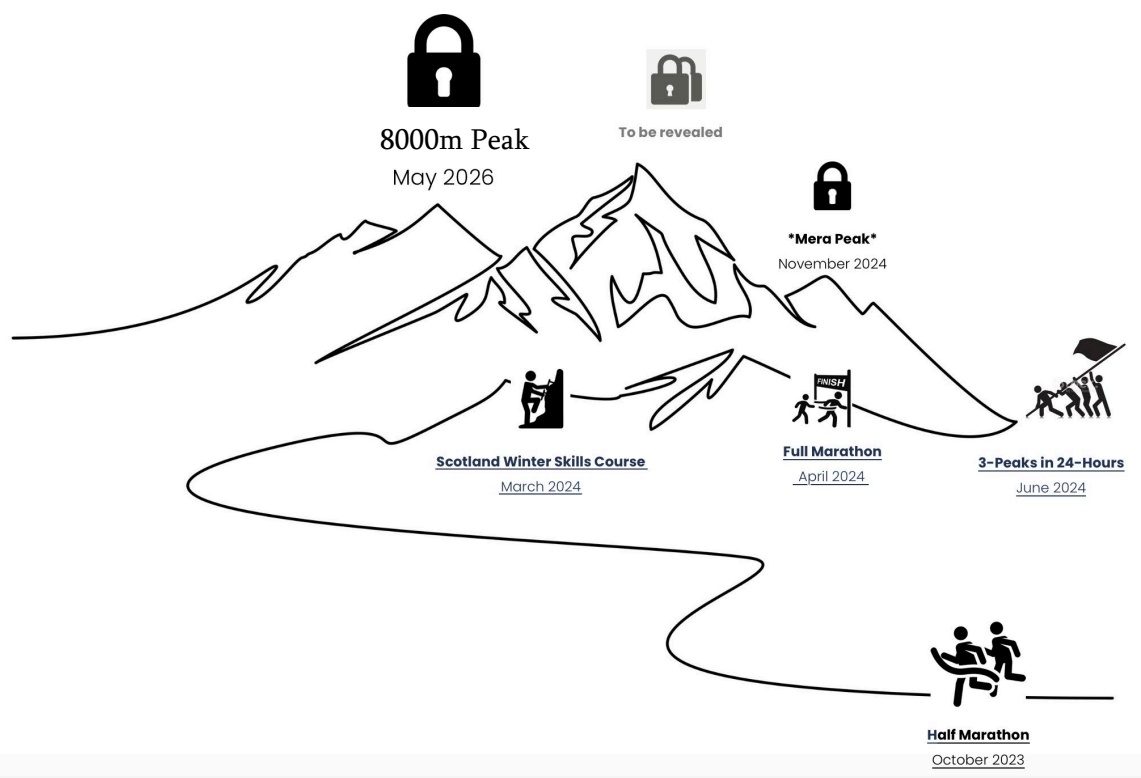
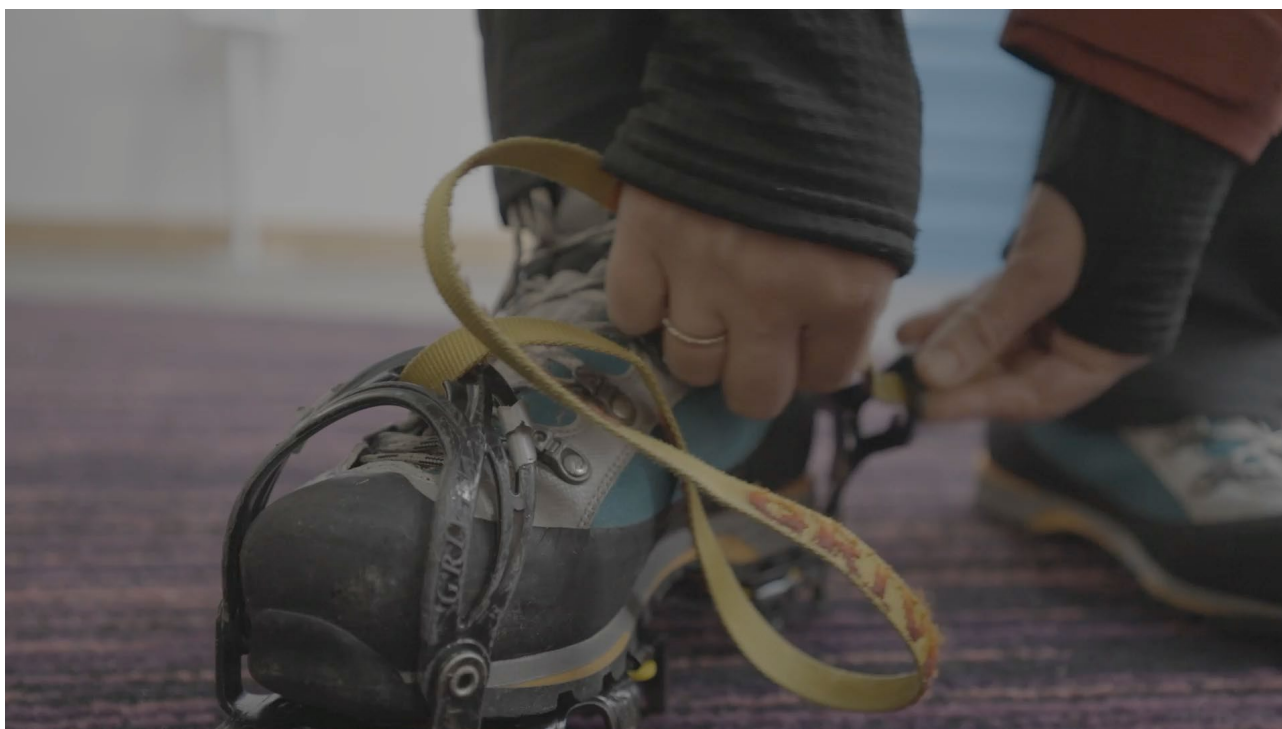


Figure description: A line figure of mountains with icons representing training milestones. First is an icon of two people racing for half marathon, second is of a person rock climbing for winter skills course, third is of two people at finish line for full marathon, fourth is of a group holding a flag for the UK's 3 peak challenge in 24 hours, fifth is a lock icon for Mera Peak to be completed in November, sixth is a faded lock icon that is to be revealed and final icon is also a lock for 8000m peak to be completed in 2026.

Personal Reflections and Gratitude

I am incredibly grateful to The John Muir Trust for their unwavering support. The Des Rubens Bill Wallace Grant I received earlier this year was the catalyst for this entire project, which has become about so much more than just the goal of summiting a Himalayan mountain. This journey is about resilience, inclusivity, and raising awareness about hidden disabilities. Together with my team, we are creating a documentary that will capture not only the physical and mental challenges I face but also the vital support provided by my entire team—from coaches and kit designers to Sherpas



Video description: It starts with a close-up shot of Caroline as she fastens her crampons securely onto her boots, followed by a glimpse of her putting on her rucksack. Next, the camera captures her walking confidently up the rugged mountain terrain, using her trekking poles for support. The scene then transitions to sweeping drone shots of the vast, snow-covered Scottish mountains, emphasising the sheer beauty of the landscape. The video cuts back to Scott, pointing into the distance with his pole, guiding the way. Caroline walks alongside him, at times walking beside him and at other moments connected by a safety sling. The final sequence showcases a dynamic mix of drone footage from various angles, capturing Caroline and her team as they traverse the snowy mountain. They are seen using their ice axes in different conditions, showing the versatility of their skills. The video closes with a powerful moment of camaraderie, as Caroline fist-bumps her climbing partner, Sammar

Huge thanks,
Caroline (Karolina Pakénaitė)
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