EXPRESSING PAST ABILITY

Study this table:

	ABILITY	NON-ABILITY
GENERAL ABILITY	could	couldn't
SPECIFIC ABILITY	was/ were able to ---- managed to	wasn't/ weren't able to couldn't didn't manage to

Note :

- In general, we use **be able to** when we talk about a **specific achievement** (particularly if it is a difficult, requiring some effort) rather than a generic ability.

- We use '***managed to***' for things we were able to do but with some difficulty.

  e.g.:
  - He ***could*** walk when he was one year old.
  - The little child ***couldn't*** swim, so he used a float to help him float.
  - Jenny ***was able to*** leave the hospital only 6 hours after the baby was born.
  - She ***managed to*** escape from the fire.
  - The athlete ***couldn't/ wasn't able to*** walk after the accident.
  - He ***didn't manage to*** come on time.

- However, we commonly use '**could**', even when we are talking about specific occasions, with verb of senses: ***feel, hear, smell, taste*** and with verbs of thinking ***believe e.g. believe, decide, remember, understand.***
  e.g.:
  - She ***could feel*** the spray on her face as the boat raced through the water.
  - I ***couldn't decide*** where to go for my holidays.
- We don't use '*was/were able to*' before ***be + past participle***
  e.g.:
  - This furniture ***could be assembled*** by him, with just using a screwdriver.
  - The door ***couldn't be opened*** although he had already used the right key.

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- We use ***be able to***, not *could*, if the idea we want to express needs a ***to-infinitive form***, or a ***perfect tense***, or if it follows ***another modal verb***:
  e.g.:
  - We were very lucky to ***be able*** **to** live in the country during our childhood.
  - It was awful, not ***being able to*** see you for so long.
  - Since he left, none of the other team members *have* ***been able*** **to** match his enthusiasm.
  - We might have ***been able to*** move some of the staff to a different department.

Exercises:

A. Underline the correct words.

1. I *could / was able to* find my way because I had a good map.
2. *Did you manage to / Could you* book a table for us yesterday?
3. I'm afraid I *managed to / couldn't* understand what you just said.
4. I *couldn't / haven't been able to* swim since I got an ear infection.
5. Debbie *was able to / could* call me yesterday on her new mobile phone.

B. Complete the sentences using *'could, was* or *were able to'*. The sentences with (+) are positive, and those with (–) are negative. There may be more than one correct answer.

1. We _____ finish all the food without any problem! (+)
2. We_____ find any fish at the market today. (–)
3. I _____ never _____ hold my breath under water. (+)
4. Ben _____ play tennis very well by the age of ten. (+)
5. Our neighbours _____ baby sit for us yesterday. (+)
6. Maria _____ go out yesterday because she didn't have any money. (–)
7. Jackie_____ drive us all to the beach yesterday. (+)
8. My uncle was very clever. He _____ speak four languages. (+)
9. My friend wasn't at home when I phoned, but I _____ contact him later. (+)
10. He had forgotten to bring his camera, so he _____ take any photos. (-)

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C. Complete the sentences with *(to) be able to, being able to* or *been able to.*

1. I enjoyed ..... relax last weekend.
2. I remember ..... tie my shoelaces for the first time.
3. I'd like ..... help you.
4. Paul likes ..... buy CDs whenever he wants.
5. It's important ..... take time off regularly.
6. We will ..... buy an expensive present if we save our money.
7. I haven't .....sleep well since a week ago.
8. She may ..... answer your questions. Go and ask her.
9. He must have ..... do the test well.
10. You should .....to make the time to study.

D. Right or wrong? Correct the wrong sentences.

1. I didn't managed to get any bread on the way home.

   ..... .
2. I'll never manage to finish in time.

   ..... .
3. We couldn't understand Bob because he spoke so quickly.

   ..... .
4. Luke could fix my car when I asked him.

   ..... .
5. Nicola managed to get to the top of the hill without any difficulty.

   ..... .
6. The burglar could get in through the bathroom window.

   .....
7. He could speak fluent French when he was 5.

   .....
8. Veronica was very upset when Ben left her, but she managed to smile nevertheless.

   .....

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9. Since the exam was very difficult, only few students managed to pass it.

   .....

10. She didn't really want to go to Mexico, but Tony could persuade her somehow.

    .....

E. Choose the sentences with the most appropriate verb form. If both are possible, choose both.

1. At half-time we were losing badly, but in the end we could win.

   At half-time we were losing badly, but in the end we managed to win.

2. It's a pity your parents were not able to come to the prize-giving.

   It's a pity your parents managed to come to the prize-giving.

3. I had lost my key, but I managed to climb through a small window.

   I had lost my key, but I could climb through a small window.

4. The cinema was packed, but we were able to get a seat.

   The cinema was packed, but we could get a seat.

5. My friend claims that he was able to read when he was 3.

   My friend claims that he could read when he was 3.

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