

Boost Your Setting Team's Creativity With These 5 Exercises

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A participant competes in a 'dyno' competition at The Crag Nashville. Photo by Kyle Somers.

New climbers frequently ask my team, “Hey, how do you guys know where to put the pieces?” There’s also “Hey, are you just making it up or do you draw a map?” And my personal favorite: “Hey, what computer program do you use to tell you where the pieces go?” (hearing “pieces” over “holds” will always make me giggle).

On most days, I take the time to actually put down my drill and have a discussion with the climber about what routesetting is and how, technically yes, I am just “making it up”... but that we always have a target grade in mind and usually some sort of movement assignment.

However, last week, I actually laughed when a guy came up while I was on the ladder to ask, “Why did you move that over instead of keeping it where it was?” because my immediate thought was “because that's not what Gordon Ramsay would want to climb.” Wait, what?

There are days when everyone shows up and has fruitful ideas and is psyched to set. But there are just as many other days where we’re feeling uninspired or stuck on one idea, or quite frankly just out of ideas that seem exciting. To counteract those feelings (and inevitably promote experimentation!) I divert my team to a setting exercise (we just call them games) to get everyone out of their heads.

Last week, I had everyone write anything they wanted on slips of paper, which we put in a bowl to draw for assignments. Some submitted actual moves, some submitted specific songs to listen to while setting the route, and others (aka, me) submitted items like “WWGC? – “What Would Gordon Ramsay Climb” and “Bob Ross”.

The results were as silly as you can imagine, and it was much more enjoyable to set a “Bob Ross, 5.8ish” than “use slopers, 5.11+.” Sometimes you need straightforward assignments, but I encourage all routesetters, even if your whole team isn’t on board, to partake in an exercise that is a little wacky to see what kind of product it can produce.

I reached out to routesetters across the country for their favorite games.

Here are a few to get you started:

1: Alexa, play “The Final Countdown”

One of the first games I remember doing as a new setter was setting a Team Boulder where all the holds were bolted but we only had 10 seconds to alternate putting one hold on the wall and we were not allowed to talk to each other. I don’t think any of us **loved** that first boulder but it was certainly different than any of our other boulders which was the point of the exercise.

There are several exercises you can do using the clock. Some days, especially if we are moving slowly, we will reserve our last boulder as a five-minute boulder. If you’re feeling super speedy, try a one-minute boulder. You can also play musical chairs while setting and trade sets with someone every five minutes or so. **(Warning - this one takes a lot of open-mindedness and the ability to let go of ideas, make sure everyone is in a good mood!)**

2: Be a People Person

I asked Cameron Forbus of [Whetstone Climbing](#) what some of his favorite setting exercises are and he referred to the bios that Justin Wright of [InSpire Rock](#) writes for his team. These bios are fictional (with a photo!) and describe a climber’s characteristics and abilities. An example: “47-year-old Trad Dad who doesn’t have a belay partner so he’s forced to boulder” and “13-year-old strong youth competitor who is really good at crimping but wants to get better at sloper compression” and “absolute bro who climbs V5 but only if it’s a dyno.” So often we think like a routesetter and forget how to experience the routes as rock climbers. This exercise gets us out of our own bodies and imagines the experience of someone different.



Photo: Kyle Somers

The Crag routesetting team with writer and head routesetter Hayley Moran, center. Photo by Kyle Somers.

3: Setscrews and Stones May Break My Bones but Words Will Set Banger Boulders

Chris Feghali of [The Cliffs](#) once shared with me a list of inspiring words that he got from Brad Weaver of [Thread Climbing](#) but when I reached out to Brad, he said he actually adapted that list from [Jacky Godoffe](#).

On Brad's list, there are words like "millennium falcon" and "lobster" and "roll the dice" that invoke some type of feeling to be interpreted through movement. Rana Akkawi from [Brooklyn Boulders](#) has words like "spooky" and "swimming pool" and "heartbreaker." **The more words or phrases you combine, the wilder it usually gets.**

You can combine these words with actual movements (ex: Face Out / Super Mario Worm) and then combine those with mystery grades. Ask your team (and maybe even other staff members!) to write down inspirational words and keep these on your setting cart for days where you need some extra creative juice.

4: The Ole' Switcheroo

Start the day off as usual and have your team choose and bolt their holds. Once bolting is done,

tell them to switch boulders with someone else. Don't let anyone share their ideas or intentions with the holds until after forerunning. It's always interesting to see what ideas ended up showing up anyway due to the nature of the holds versus a setter's complete overhaul of an idea. You can also do this with grades if the terrain is mostly standard and the holds chosen are directional.

5: Wild n Out

When I met Tonya Bamboe of Edgeworks at the [Setter Showdown](#) last month, I asked her what she likes to do when she's out of creative ideas. She told me, "I ask myself, what is the most messed up thing I can do with this hold?"

We've seen this trend in #failsetting or #FilthWagon from Miles West of [SoILL](#) which usually includes the pollution of jibs to a small area or some crazy overlapping scenario that may be difficult to understand from a physics perspective.

If you're going full-on wild card, have a team conversation about what is off-limits and what is safe. Maybe full-on wild card is creating something novel with actual holds but it can also mean making holds out of other objects. Chairs, skateboards, lawnmower wheels, mixing bowls have all been things I've seen on the wall in the last year alone.



Hayley Moran and The Crag setting team go full "wild card" by incorporating a trampoline at their 'dyno' competition.

Photo by Kyle Somers.

If you're asking yourself, "will it work?" you owe it to your members to at least try. While these exercises are meant to be fun, it is equally beneficial to have a reason to break up the normal "go-to" moves we all get suckered into setting.

This is especially true if you're setting for Gordon Ramsay (no one wants to be an idiot sandwich). By using words, music, feelings, etc., your team can push the boundaries, work together, and use the materials you already have at your disposal to try something new.

Routesetting is the heart of the indoor climbing industry, and collaboration is what pushes routesetting forward. **[Register for the 2022 CWA Summit](#)** to connect with fellow routesetters!

About the Author



Hayley Moran is the Head Routesetter at The Crag in Nashville, Tennessee. She has a Master's Degree in Child and Family Studies and previously worked in the field of public health with a focus on health equity. She uses those experiences to help guide her work in the climbing industry by creating events and discussions that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion through the sport of rock climbing. When she is not on the wall, you can find Hayley baking in the kitchen, designing silly sweatshirts, or hanging out with her cat, Goblin.



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