

Diversity = Variety: What Does It Mean For Commercial Routesetting?

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Routesetting is a central part of the experience for every climbing gym's end users: its members. Routes that are challenging but varied are one reason why climbers keep coming back. In order to provide the best experience for your customer base, it's crucial to keep diversity in mind as you build your routesetting team and develop your setting program.

For an inside look at building a strong routesetting crew and what makes diversity so critical, I got in touch with **Sean Nanos**, Touchstone Climbing's Head Routesetter for all of Southern California.

Sean discovered climbing at boarding school in New Hampshire, but it wasn't until he moved to Oakland that he started setting. He rose to foreman at San Francisco's Dogpatch Boulders before moving to Los Angeles for his current position.

WK: *What are some of the meanings of "diversity" in routesetting?*

SN: The most tangible meanings of diversity in routesetting are size (including weight, height, and ape index), age, gender, race/ethnicity, climbing ability, experience, and style.

WK: *Why is diversity in routesetting important?*

SN: By definition, diversity means variety. For a commercial gym, supporting climbers in densely populated urban areas means you're going to be setting for nearly every body...I have yet to come across a single gym in any part of the country that is 100% all one "type" of person.

What diverse routesetting brings to the table is promoting inclusivity in our community and providing an experience that challenges every climber while at the same time validating their experience. It also opens the door to those who are interested in routesetting but didn't think it

was for them.

WK: *What parts of the climbing population are underserved by a homogenous routesetting staff?*

SN: The first groups that come to mind are women and short people (5'4" and under). As a 5'2" climber I can personally attest to feeling like I am not represented when I go climbing at a lot of other gyms. It's very discouraging and annoying when you know it can be done differently. From a membership perspective, unknowingly setting for one specific body type can ruin a person's first impression of what climbing is or how it can be enjoyed.

WK: *When building a team, what are you looking for a setter to bring to the crew?*

SN: I tell this to my new routesetters all the time: "You're here to share your climbing experience, and whatever that means to you is what I want to climb." Obviously we're still a commercial gym, so during forerunning we'll smooth out the climb as a group and make sure it's comfy, safe, and consistent. But the core—the "soul," if you will—of the climb won't change.

That's the goal, anyway. Every time we set a climb it's a manifestation of how we think climbing is experienced, and when I'm building a team, I need a lot of different setters' perspectives in order to come close to representing the variety of climbers that come to our gyms.

WK: *What makes building a diverse team difficult?*

SN: A lot of people still think that to be a routesetter you have to climb V10+. This archaic way of thinking is still prevalent when I ask someone if they are interested in routesetting. Also, most setting crews in the U.S. are still just a bunch of "tall" white dudes, which is a huge deterrent for talented potential setters that aren't tall white dudes.

The desire and passion to learn routesetting is more important than how hard you climb. With the right training, talent, and experience, setters are able to set great commercial routes for any level.

WK: *What can gyms do to find and maintain a diverse group of setters?*

SN: You have to keep your ear to the ground. You have to put in a little more effort to reach out to those people that show potential. Don't assume "if they're interested, they'll apply," because if your team is a homogenous group of dudes, there's a very high chance you'll keep getting resumes and interest from more of the same dudes.

I wholeheartedly believe that having setters that are all at different ability levels makes for more successful commercial routesetting. If your entire team climbs V10+, they can become very disconnected to the way moderate grades should feel and climb. They may know objectively what makes a climb "easier," but it's easy to set inappropriately for lower grades when everything feels the same.

I make it clear to my crew that everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. Knowing how to use those to efficiently and effectively set, forerun, and grade is a lot of work, but the work

shows when members climb our routes.

WK: *As routesetting develops as a profession and craft, how do you think diversity will influence gyms in the future?*

SN: As indoor climbing becomes more popular and all kinds of people are introduced to the sport, the need for standardized commercial routesetting training will become paramount in creating an inclusive community.

Even if you know a diverse team is good for your gym professionally and socially, you can't lead with diversity—diversity is what you get to after you do the hard work of making your crew more inclusive.

You can't hire someone just to make you look more diverse, you need to take a chance on people and figure out the best way to support them. Having a standardized training entry point can teach potential setters the basics and level the playing field so you can hire based on what an individual has to offer as a setter rather than as a token minority.

Elite routesetting teams will be composed of individuals capable of fielding climbs that can be enjoyed by all.

About The Author



Willis is the rare local who was actually born in Boulder, Colorado. He attended Williams College and works as a freelance writer out of Providence, Rhode Island. When he's not writing, you'll find him rock climbing, playing with his cats, and drinking too much green tea.



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