

Onward And Upward: Gym Owners Look Into 2021

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2020's impact on our industry, on our members, and us as people is still being understood. In a way, we're still in the thick of it. One obstacle is overcome just to see another one forming on the horizon. As climbers though, we inherently keep moving upward. We hope we're finally reaching for that rest jug, and if we're not – we grit our teeth and dig in.

We reached out to gyms across the United States and Canada to hear how they managed to do just that – grit their teeth and keep climbing. With the start of 2021, we know it won't immediately get easier. We're hopeful, though, and have reason to be.

Some of the answers have been edited for brevity and clarity.

Tom Davis, owner of Pacific Edge Climbing Gym Santa Cruz, California



Jake Byk, Climbing Wall Association: What kept you going in a year so fraught with change?

Tom Davis: We have been in business for over 27 years. We love what we get to do for a living, we love climbing, and we love the community. We are not going to let any of that go, no matter what.

JB: COVID-19 has changed the way the climbing industry operates. What best practices or changes would you recommend to other gym owners?

TD: A well run climbing gym poses minimal risk for transmitting disease, far less than most public spaces simply due to the sheer

volume and size of the facilities. Simple measures such as reservation systems to control capacity and encouraging handwashing go a long way for preventing transmission.

JB: What's one thing coming out of 2020 you are grateful for?

TD: The love and support of our community. It has been overwhelming and so wonderful. We cannot let this crisis take our love and human interaction away.

JB: Looking into 2021, what's one of the first things you're hoping to improve about the way you create community for your members or operate your business?

TD: Frankly we have prioritized community for 27 years and it has really worked. The only thing is we did drop the ball with regular communications with our members during the first two closures. We had not done regular email communication prior to this year, so it was new for us. We will not let that happen again.

Walson Tai, owner of Calgary Climbing Centre Calgary, Canada

Jake Byk, Climbing Wall Association: What kept you going in a year so fraught with change?

Walson Tai: Fear of the unknown 😊. Like most people, my team was heading into something that only epidemiologists study. What could happen to us, and what actually did happen us, was unheard of. Kept us on our toes, and moving in a positive direction with our best foot forward.

JB: COVID-19 has changed the way the climbing industry operates. What best practices or changes would you recommend to other gym owners?

WT: Keeping in touch with your peers. I found the best practice during these hard times is keeping in touch with other gym owners closest to you. Not everyone has something to give or offer, but we share struggles. That, I found, sparked hope, and promise from peers that work, relate, and live in an industry similar to yours.

JB: What's one thing coming out of 2020 you are grateful for?

WT: Our community of climbers. The way everyone looks after each other, and care for one another is inspirational. Very proud to be a part of this group of wonderful people.

JB: Looking into 2021, what's one of the first things you're hoping to improve about the way you create community for your members or operate your business?

WT: Relatability. Evolving with our community that is passionate about our sport during these difficult times is not easy. Finding that balance between their struggles and yours, requires a large level of relatability.

*With so much regulation, social pressure, uncertainty from authority, I feel our **community** needs us to try and improve the struggles that we ALL share.*

As an active climbing individual, everywhere you go someone is telling you what you can, and cannot do, like a constant moving crux hold. This pandemic compounded a phenomenon that is creating a gap that has surfaced over the past 9 months. I feel relatability will help focus our community of passion in climbing, towards a greater experience for everyone who climbs.

Luke Bertelsen, manager of Rocks & Ropes Tucson, Arizona



Jake Byk, Climbing Wall Association: What kept you going in a year so fraught with change?

Luke Bertelsen: Knowing that there is a light at the end of the tunnel has kept us going, but outside of that we wanted to be a fixture for the Tucson community like we have for the past nearly 30 years.

During the past few months that has been in a limited capacity, but we have worked hard to create a safe space for our community where climbers can still come in, be active, and see other people. Over that time, we have gotten to know a lot of our members even better as we've gone through tough times together. It has given us a whole new appreciation for each and every one of them.

JB: COVID-19 has changed the way the climbing industry operates. What best practices or changes would you recommend to other gym owners?

LB: The details are going to be slightly different from gym to gym. Of course, there are some universal practices - enhanced cleaning protocols, mask wearing, social distancing, hand washing to name a few.

Ultimately the best practice in my mind is to be strict with policy enforcement. We started with very high expectations from all of our patrons. This helped us create a safe environment for everyone.

JB: What's one thing coming out of 2020 you are grateful for?

LB: We had to think on our toes A LOT. Lots of new operations planning, policy, and protocol, rollouts, etc. This never would have been possible without a cohesive management team and staff. I am so thankful for all of that. Having to do that helped us all use some muscles we didn't regularly have to. I think we will be better for it going forward. In addition, and this just cannot be stressed enough, I am thankful for our community. Throughout the pandemic we've had a continual stream of community members stepping up to support us. It has meant a lot to us.

JB: Looking into 2021, what's one of the first things you're hoping to improve about the way you create community for your members or operate your business?

LB: I would love to improve by being more open and more available to the community with programs and events. Obviously over the past months that just hasn't been possible. No Reel Rock, no member's competition + BBQ, no BellaRock - our women's climbing groups.

There were a lot of 'nos' in 2020, so I am looking forward to being more available to the community by slowly being able to offer more.

Brad Werntz, owner of Boulders Climbing Gym Madison, Wisconsin



Jake Byk, Climbing Wall Association: What kept you going in a year so fraught with change?

Brad Werntz: We really felt a deep obligation to our community to keep moving forward, as well as to our team. We had tremendous member support, where 75% of our monthly AutoPay members continued to pay us through our closure. Many of the ones who didn't wrote us heart-breaking letters: "We love you and wish we could support you, but we [just lost our job/had to move/took in family], and are sorry that we can't." The outpouring of support was both uplifting and a burden to bear, in the best of ways.

JB: COVID-19 has changed the way the climbing industry operates. What best practices or changes would you recommend to other gym owners?

BW: We did everything we could to maintain a sense of community, even in a virtual and remote space. We understand that this is really an abstract idea, but it was important to us that we treated it as if community were as concrete as our walls, floors, ropes, and routes.

While we did upgrade our facilities while we were closed, we put even more effort into our community. For every wall we repainted, bathroom we re-finished, and repair we made while we were closed, we also redoubled efforts to engage everyone we could who was home, remote, and alone. We see no reason to stop this now that we're operating again. Having big walls or high traffic is great, but if people don't feel that the space is important to them and irreplaceable, they won't support it when they can't access the facility.

JB: What's one thing coming out of 2020 you are grateful for?

BW: We got space and permission simply to do our best, whatever that meant. We had an aggressive growth plan for 2020 - somewhat driven by investors and banks - and that went out the window pretty early on in the year. So, while from the outside it looked as if we were focusing on surviving, actually all of our attention has been on thriving.

It's been difficult, no question. However, we ended the year better than when we started in many ways. While we have debts to repay that are more than money, we can't help but be grateful for all that.

JB: Looking into 2021, what's one of the first things you're hoping to improve about the way you create community for your members or operate your business?

BW: During closure, we built a series of feedback loops in order to engage with our community in a new way. A key component of this is our quarterly Community & Culture survey, which helps us assess how comfortable our members and guests are with Boulders, both in the facilities and in the community. It's been really eye-opening.

Overall, our goal is to help make our gyms representative of our community at large. As with many gyms, overall we're more white, male, young, and affluent than the city of Madison.

Our new Climb for Community program is designed to help change this, creating pathways to participation and engagement across a broader, more intersectional spectrum of people, from all walks of life. We've been working on this for a long time, and we'll roll out the whole program slowly, but we're really looking forward to seeing how it will change everything we do for the better. Stay tuned.

Community Is the Word of the Hour

The word "community" was mentioned by our interviewees more than 20 times, and that's clearly not an accident. There's a lot of uncertainty going into 2021, but if there's a common theme that can get us through the unknowable struggles ahead, it's each other. We know how resilient we can be if we stand together and help one another climb higher into the new year.

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About the Author



Jake Byk is the marketing coordinator for the Climbing Wall Association. He's an avid hiker, mountaineer and lover of hard-to-reach places and long drives. He's spent four years as a journalist, then a public lands advocate, documenting the Great Plains and Mountain West before joining the CWA.

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