

Risk Management In Routesetting

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Routesetting is creative as it is strategic, and learning how to be efficient and risk-averse in the industry not only produces a better product, but may help with longevity in the profession.

Article at a Glance

- **Writer:** Jess Malloy, head coach at High Point Climbing Gym. Jess has written about coaching, management, and routesetting for the CWA for more than two years.
- **Who Should Read:** Senior managers and routesetting staff at all levels.
- **What Will You Learn:** For managers, an intermediate dive into risk management protocols in routesetting, and for routesetters, the ways these can be implemented for yourself and your team.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** Explore the [CWA's Routesetting Guide](#) for up-to-date information on risk management in the commercial climbing gym space.

To get insight into how to create the most efficient, high-value product on the walls, we reached out to multiple headsetters.

Good Training Creates Good Climbs

When given the opportunity, an experienced headsetter will prioritize risk management and

efficiency from day one in staff training. Hayley Zumwalt, USAC Level 3 (L3) Routesetter, set a precedent by having a written staff training plan for new routesetters that includes a professional development pathway.

"I have a guide I wrote a few years ago that outlines what a routesetter should be focusing on at months 1, 3, 6, and a year+," says Hayley.

For Hayley, this gives her the opportunity to help beginning routesetters set goals while still allowing space for them to learn at their own pace.

After seven years of routesetting, risk management remains a priority for the teams Hayley works with. Teaching to set movement is important, but the basics precede her program. This sets the tone for each person to focus on their own goals while managing risks to the team.

Hayley expands on this sentiment further, "If you are working in an environment where the people around you have not been properly trained and/or are being unsafe, it can be very distracting to your creative process."

When a team has good flow, it's because, as a group, they trust that each person can complete what needs to be done without interfering with the goals of others.

Blake Green, USAC L4, has evolved his process for training new routesetters since he first started 13 years ago. When teaching new routesetters, he focuses heavily on the "why" of routesetting.

"Why are we adding a foot? Why do we think it's too hard? Why do we care about this reach issue? Why this possible solution instead of the other one?"

Teaching new team members with this strategy has produced high-value products for him and his team. "I've been super impressed how good the first climb has been when I've given someone a setting assignment after a few weeks, and they more or less nail it and have fun in the process."

This method works well for producing unique and engaging climbs by routesetters who have a more developed understanding of why they are putting holds on the wall.

When it comes to learning and understanding safety, Work at Height (WAH) certifications can be useful training. Recently, Blake attended one of these trainings through the CWA and found a great amount of insight and value.

"There are problems we're only just now encountering in our industry's relatively recent entry into Work at Height, there's truly a wide range of opportunities for managers to craft a policy that meets their needs versus just copying and pasting what they've seen before."

"Attending an industry-level certification through CWA gives professionals a solid baseline scope of knowledge while also creating opportunities for idea sharing and collective problem solving."

While there may be more than one approach to investing in your new routesetters, the end goal should be more climbs that are engaging, that are created quickly and efficiently, and without injury or unnecessary strain on the crew.

Creating High-Value Climbs through Efficiency

Lex Johnson, USAC L4, feels that good training creates better flow during the routesetting process.

"For me, I feel like the day is the most efficient when everyone is on the same page about what needs to be done. If there are people on the crew waiting to be told what to do, then I haven't done a good job of training."

Doing this allows a head routesetter to shift their focus to more important tasks, or to oversee, correct routes, or fill in as needed. This means the routes are more likely to meet any targets or goals before the forerunning process even begins.

Taking the time to teach risk management and communication may seem like a waste of time at the front end, but the cost of not doing so increases risk for routesetters, climbers, and the business.

Blake points out an example, "...one I've seen before, a routesetter gets metal in their eye mid change-over, and now we're down a whole body trying to execute a time-sensitive task. In that case, even if we maintain quality, the rest of the crew is experiencing a higher degree of stress to achieve the same outcome with fewer human resources. **That strain makes small mistakes more likely.**"

His example shows that there may not be an obvious correlation to how being risk-averse creates a higher value product, but the lack thereof can increase the likelihood of a lower quality one when things go wrong, especially with time constraints.

This goes back to Hayley's point of **how an environment that lacks active risk management can negatively affect the outcome.** "Being in that type of headspace does not usually foster a fun or creative environment and therefore hurts the product."

When it comes to being efficient, it seems that a large part is dependent on being able to trust that the routesetting team will make the right choices, not just for their climbs but for their well being and while watching out for others.

Keeping Your Team Risk Averse

When it comes to risk management practices in routesetting, a lot of the information will focus on drills, ladders, equipment, and keeping the space closed off and clear to avoid accidents and injuries. Topics like working at height are important, but Blake makes a valid point. “Routesetters will do the same thing as all people, we will default to what is easiest, not only physically but also cognitively.”

This isn't to say that risk management practices are thrown out the window, but rather to say that practices need to be **easy to follow and efficient**.

There's another aspect to risk management that seems to be a common priority for head routesetters, though it may not be included in some routesetting training; it's watching out for their team when they are forerunning and climbing.

The CWA's new **Professional Routesetting Certification (PRS) Program** and the Routesetting Guide highlight the importance of routesetter wellness, including warm-ups and forerunning risk mitigation.

Lex has brought this into his team through his 11 years of experience. “Safety on the team to me usually revolves around injury prevention. Everyone knows that eye protection is important, helmets are important, etc. etc., but the biggest concern for me is personal injury. Most routesetting injuries I know of happen during forerunning.

Making sure employees are warming up and creating an environment where people can feel comfortable saying ‘no’.” Routesetting is known for putting a lot of wear and tear on bodies, to the point where it has almost been accepted as inevitable.

This concern for the wellness of the team is echoed by all the routesetters we spoke with. While work at height risk management is still important, the care for your crew seems to be at the forefront of most of their minds. Hayley's way of doing this is by creating an open and conversational environment “so that if someone feels unsafe or wants to talk through the best way to do something, they feel comfortable asking instead of feeling embarrassed for not knowing how.”

Blake acknowledges this as well: “Our job comes along with so many injury possibilities that are **already difficult or impossible to completely avoid**.”

He expands on this further, and points out that there is no reason why preventable injuries should be happening or ignored. While it's tempting to just accept that getting hurt is part of the profession, the headsetters we spoke with had enough years of experience to understand that with good training and communication, many injuries are unnecessary.

Lex expands on this more, and its importance to every aspect of the gym. "To me, training and safety standards are about increasing the longevity of a setter's working lifespan and making the business more successful, which is mutually beneficial for setters, the gym and the community at large."

These leaders in the industry have a clear understanding that risk management in routesetting isn't just about using the equipment correctly, nor is it a boring procedure where steps can be skipped because they are unnecessary.

It's multifaceted, and includes the safety of their own bodies from climbing injuries, the safety of their team members, and has the potential to negatively or positively impact their routes, the event, the gym, or their career. Warming up, communicating, and being confident in the basics are likely not romanticized parts of the job, but they are crucial for creating success within the gym.

About the Author



Jess Malloy is the Head Coach at High Point Climbing Gym in Birmingham, AL. She has worked in five climbing gyms in the past eighteen years, is a USAC L1 Routesetter, a L2 USAC Coach, and has accumulated years of experience as a climber, coach, setter, yoga teacher, and as a published writer. She is also the Head Coach for Catalyst Sports's Climbing Team for Elite Para Athletes. She is the owner of @yoga.for.climbers, a small business where she can combine all her passions into one. She loves runout slab and trying to find static moves around dynos. She gets nervous on pumpy

overhanging sport but can always commit to the last move on tall boulders. When she isn't climbing, she reads books and comics, lifts weights, and does yoga. She also hangs out with her ten-pound rescue pup, Beta, who despite her name is not a good crag dog but is an excellent cuddler.



