

Routesetters Working With Coaches: Part 3

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In the previous two articles, we explored how routesetters and coaches can collaborate to enhance athlete development and the overall gym experience.

This final story will dive deeper into actionable steps both parties can take to foster a strong, ongoing partnership, addressing the final hurdles in communication, expectations, and gym culture.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Andrew Carter Smith, Head Coach at Triangle Rock Club in North Carolina. He specializes in content for both coaches and routesetters.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is for routesetters, managers of routesetting, coaches, and program staff.
- **What Will You Learn:** This is the second article in a series on how to build up to working together effectively, cross-departmentally, with coaches, and with routesetters.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** Make sure you read [Part 1 & 2 of this series here!](#)

By now, it's clear that routesetters and coaches play interconnected roles.

Routesetters create the space where athletes develop their skills, while coaches guide athletes through those challenges and fine-tune their performance and approach. Both parties aim to

elevate athletes to new heights, but communication barriers and differing priorities often create friction.

The key to overcoming these challenges lies in building a culture of continuous collaboration, where shared goals are consistently aligned and revisited.

The question is: how can we ensure that collaboration becomes a natural, productive part of the gym staff's ecosystem?

Ongoing Communication and Feedback Loops

It's not always enough to occasionally meet or exchange ideas sporadically. Effective communication between routesetters and coaches may sometimes be better structured into the daily rhythm of the gym. Here are several methods I have used to ensure ongoing dialogue:

Regular Check-ins:

Establishing bi-weekly or monthly meetings between the head routesetter and head coach can prevent miscommunication. These can be formal or informal and do not necessarily need to be super involved.

These sessions can review athlete performance, training needs, and upcoming competitions, aligning both parties on the best routesetting strategies.

Post-Comp Debriefs:

After major competitions, routesetters and coaches should sit down to analyze what went well and what didn't. Routesetters can gain valuable insights into how athletes performed under pressure, while coaches can highlight specific movement patterns that were particularly challenging or beneficial.

Aligning Routesetting with Training Cycles

One major point of contention in some gyms is that routesetting doesn't always align with an athlete's training cycle. For example, a set may be too intense when athletes are supposed to be recovering or too soft when they need a real challenge (I especially see this in lead climbing terrain!) Addressing this requires a strategic approach to when and how routesetting takes place.

Periodization of Routesetting:

Similar to athlete periodization patterns, (e.g., base building, peaking, and recovery phases), routesetting can follow a similar schedule. Routesetters may benefit from setting more "compy" routes at some times of the year and more "outdoorsy" others. There are better times throughout the year to experiment with interesting/funky movement styles, also.

Collaborative Route Design:

Coaches can work with routesetters to design (or even help set) specific routes or problems that target weaknesses in their athletes.

For instance, if a team is struggling with skate-style coordination moves, the routesetter can make a set with multiple coordination-focused problems. This ensures that every new set has a clear purpose that aligns with the athlete's developmental needs.

Encouraging Setter-Coach Cross-Pollination

As noted in the second article, many gym employees wear multiple hats, often serving as both coaches and routesetters. However, gyms that financially and logistically support individuals in each role should aim to facilitate more intentional cross-pollination.

Forerunning Together:

One of the easiest ways to get coaches more involved in the routesetting process is through forerunning. Coaches don't need to be setting experts to offer valuable feedback. When coaches test out new problems before the athletes, they can help determine whether the problems align with the training goals and provide immediate feedback to routesetters.

This can save time and improve the overall quality of the set. This may work best in small doses or in prep for training camps, but those finer details really depend on the gym and context.

Coaches as Movement Analysts:

Coaches often have a deeper understanding of specific athlete biomechanics than routesetters, especially for long-term athletes.

Encouraging coaches to take part in the problem-solving process can result in routes that are better tailored to the team's strengths and weaknesses.

A coach might suggest subtle tweaks in body positioning or add volumes that encourage a particular movement style, creating a richer training environment. I am thinking specifically when gyms are hosting youth or para-competitions and the routesetters may be less familiar with a given population's size, limitations, or skill.

How many 5-way ties do we see in U-15F competitions every season because those girls are so strong?

Looking Forward: The Future of Routesetting and Coaching Collaboration

The indoor climbing industry is evolving, and as facilities continue catering to both recreational climbers and competitive athletes, the relationship between routesetters and coaches will become even more critical.

Looking forward, gym owners and managers must prioritize the integration of these two roles if they want to create a sustainable and supportive training environment.

Just as coaches can attend continuing education certification courses,

routesetters could benefit from more formal education on athlete development and training principles. This would allow them to set more effective training problems and contribute more directly to athlete progression. **With the increasing popularity of indoor climbing, routesetting is poised to become a more recognized and formalized profession.**

By encouraging greater collaboration between coaches and routesetters, gyms can help elevate the craft, attracting more talent and ensuring that both routesetting and coaching become integral parts of the athlete development pipeline.

Supporting routesetters by creating the opportunity to guest set, take certification courses, and even learn more about movement mechanics, you help your coaches, and your gym's members.

NEW! Routesetting Certification

The CWA Certification Program now has a Professional Routesetting (PRS) Certification. For folks all along their career ladder, this new offering from the CWA will give you even more tools to move up throughout routesetting effectively. You can learn about that and our Work at Height (WAH) Certification on the **Certification Dashboard.**

Ready to Get Certified?

The partnership between coaches and routesetters is essential to creating a dynamic, supportive, and engaging training environment.

By fostering a culture of communication, aligning training goals with routesetting strategies, and encouraging cross-role collaboration, gyms can ensure that athletes reach their full potential while making routesetting a more valued and respected profession.

Ultimately, it's a win-win for everyone involved—coaches, routesetters, athletes, and gym members alike.

About the Author



Carter Smith is a coach, routesetter, and outdoor educator. He is currently the Head Coach for Triangle Rock Club and lives in North Carolina with his partner and 2 dogs. Carter received his Masters in Experiential and Outdoor Education from Western Carolina University in 2022. Carter's passion lies in helping children and adults to use climbing as a vehicle for self discovery.



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