

The Future Of Auto-Belays?

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Photo: CityROCK

There has been a lot of chatter about auto-belays in recent months, both in the media and behind closed doors. Although the frequency of auto-belay-related incidents is relatively low (compared to the frequency of auto-belay usage without incidents) — the severity of these incidents has caused many gym managers and owners to become extremely concerned.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Ashley Routson of Planet Rock, who began writing for the CWA in 2022. She has a specialty in technical writing and management-related topics.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is written for anyone who currently thinks about auto-belays in indoor climbing gyms.
- **What Will You Learn:** The low-hanging fruit of mitigating risk on auto-belays and why your *first* answer probably shouldn't just be 'ban them'. NOTE: The CWA does not currently offer an Industry Standard recommendation on whether or not to *use* auto-belays. However, we do have a Standards and Best Practices that gyms should follow when they decide to use them. See below.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** The CWA published an updated 2023 Auto Belay Position Paper. [Download that here.](#)

Statistically speaking, the vast majority of auto-belay users leave our gyms

unscathed. Bouldering remains the most dangerous form of rock climbing for most indoor rock climbing gyms. Most injuries that take place in indoor climbing gyms are a result of bouldering. And almost all of these injuries are less serious than injuries from climbing on top rope, lead, or auto belay.

However, the most serious incidents reported in indoor climbing gyms — death, becoming paralyzed, and other severe forms of bodily harm — tend to happen on ropes and auto-belays.

The taller the wall, the longer the fall. The longer the fall, the higher the potential for serious injury or death. The industry has experienced at least two auto-belay deaths in the past three years and several serious injuries related to auto-belays.

It is important to note that the majority of auto-belay-related incidents and deaths are not a result of the malfunction of the auto-belay itself. Most auto-belay accidents happen because of human error—i.e. forgetting to clip-in.

In September of 2023, a three-year lawsuit over an auto-belay accident ended in a \$6M settlement. And this has rattled the indoor climbing gym industry.

Climbing gym managers and owners are worried. Some gyms are considering removing auto-belays altogether (some of the gyms impacted by serious injuries or deaths have already done so).



Photo: CityROCK

Others have introduced new auto-belay policies and orientations. Some gyms require auto-belay tags to be worn on the harnesses of those approved for auto-belay climbing.

The tricky part to navigate, however, is the percentage of blame that lies on the shoulders of the indoor climbing gyms. Most insurance companies require very little of us — a legal waiver and gym signage is typically enough to satisfy them. But is it enough? Let's dig in.

Climbing Gyms + Auto-belays

The best way to eliminate the risk of auto-belay injuries and deaths is to remove auto-belays from our gyms altogether. I will discuss why this might not be the best option for our customers later. For now, let us discuss how gym managers and owners can mitigate the risk of auto-belay injuries and deaths. Each of these topics will be explored at length below.

Education, education, education.

We need to educate ourselves, our employees, and our customers. All new customers should go through an auto-belay orientation.

Regular inspection and maintenance of auto-belays is a simple solution that goes a long way. Daily inspections can take place in-house, but we should also be sending out our auto-belays for routine maintenance per the recommended timeline of the manufacturers.

Gym signage + auto-belay gates + routesetting.

If we know that accidents happen when people forget to clip-in, climbing gyms should be making it more difficult for people to leave the ground without seeing a sign or moving a belay gate reminding them to clip-in.

Rescue clinics + rescue quickdraws.

In the case where our orientations and signs are not enough, we should have a rescue plan for customers who forget to clip-in.

Auto-Belay Orientations

If your gym isn't already doing auto-belay orientations, you must start now, it is an industry standard. And don't forget to document! Most gym software companies provide managers and owners with ways to digitally track all in-house training and certifications. Auto-belay orientations should always be required prior to use, and gyms should be documenting these trainings on every client profile. The layers of risk management thus become more visible; because we're not only protecting our clients from themselves, but us also.

What should be included in an auto-belay orientation?

I'm glad you asked. When in doubt, go straight to the manufacturer. Everything I know about auto-belays, I've learned from manufacturer websites and reps. Both [TruBlue \(Headrush Technologies\)](#) and [Perfect Descent](#) (Planet Rock's two auto-belay manufacturers) have video orientations available on YouTube. Both manufacturers also offer signage for your facility to help customers ensure they are clipping into the auto-belay.

Psst. The CWA can help too!

Though not feasible in every facility, I believe we can do more than videos. I understand that many gyms struggle with labor costs and, to a much larger extent, the hiring and retention of employees. Auto-belays produce a similar if not higher risk profile as roped climbing, and it's hard to imagine a gym making a policy out of signing off on someone to climb after having them only watching a video of belaying.

In my opinion, the only way to truly know if a new customer has understood and absorbed the information from an orientation (video or in-person) is to have an instructor demonstrate the gym's expectations in real-time on a real auto-belay.

Retraction Tests

All orientations should include a retraction test. Customers and staff should be testing the retraction of the auto-belay lanyard before use. Any auto-belay that isn't retracting properly should be taken out of commission immediately. This has the added bonus of double checking that the lanyard is attached correctly.

Regular Manufacturer Inspections

In a perfect world, one where labor costs and employee retention does not matter, every indoor climbing gym would have an in-house wall manager (or facility manager). More often than not, this responsibility falls on the shoulders of the General Manager or Head Routesetter — or both.

Either way, climbing gyms should designate one employee to oversee auto-belay inspection and maintenance. This person would be responsible for regular inspections of auto-belays, as well as sending auto-belays back to the manufacturer for routine maintenance. Finally, all of this information should be documented by the gym.

Gym Signage + Auto-Belay Gates + Routesetting

The "one-two-three-punch signs at eye level remind climbers to clip-in. Bright and visible auto-belay gates reminding the climber to clip-in. Having routesetters hide the start holds and footchips behind the auto-belay gate so that a climber cannot leave the ground without unclipping the gate from the auto-belay. All three of these things combined can help prevent a climber from leaving the ground without clipping in. It's not a failproof system, but as climbing teaches us, redundancy helps.

Auto-Belay Rescues

Okay, so a climber forgot to clip-in and started to ascend the wall. Now what? Every gym should have an auto-belay rescue plan. All gym employees should be trained on auto-belay rescues.

This article isn't about how to perform rescues, but if you do have questions or need advice or feedback from other gym managers, [I highly recommend visiting the "Incident Report & Technical Rescues" forum on the CWA Community Hub.](#)

Headphone Usage

This might be controversial, but have you considered banning headphone usage on auto-belay routes? I personally have not gone as far as to ban headphones, yet, but I understand why some gyms have a no-headphone policy in effect. Other gyms split the difference and allow one ear bud to be used, leaving the other ear unobstructed to hear instructions.

When a climber forgets to clip-in, we must get their attention. Headphones can inhibit our ability to get the attention of the climber and get them to stop climbing. Like I said, I'm not there yet — but I'm thinking about it.

Is Getting Rid of Auto-belays the Answer?

For one reason or another, bouldering is the most attractive offering to the majority of new climbers.

It doesn't require a belay lesson or belay certification. It doesn't require a partner. And the kicker? Boulderers are not as responsible for the risk of others. When you boulder, you manage your own risk. When you belay, you are responsible for the safety of another person. And that's pretty freaking intimidating.

But bouldering is hard. It is dangerous, it is dynamic, and it is scary. All falls are ground falls. Bouldering is not always kid-friendly, and it isn't always beginner-friendly, either. And this brings us to the auto-belay—the most accessible version of rock climbing.

Auto-belays are arguably the easiest way for most new climbers, especially older adults and young children, to start rock climbing. When used correctly, auto-belays give our communities access to rope climbing without the need of a belayer or belay certification.

Rock climbing is, inherently, a partner sport. Auto-belays provide the experience and safety aspect of rope climbing without the need of a partner. In my eyes, getting rid of auto-belays is one solution to the problem — but it doesn't have to be the only solution.

Download the CWA's Auto-belay Position Paper

About the Author



Ashley Routson is the General Manager of Planet Rock Climbing Gyms in Madison Heights, MI. She is a proud graduate of THE Ohio State University, where she was a member of both the varsity swimming team and varsity rowing team. Ashley came to the indoor climbing industry after nearly two decades of working in the restaurant and craft beer industries. She is also the author of The Beer Wench's Guide to Beer--a comprehensive book detailing all things craft beer. When she isn't pulling on plastic rocks in the gym, Ashley loves moderate trad and sport climbing in the great

outdoors.



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