

The Routesetter As Professional: In Conversation With Ward Byrum

October 22, 2019

in [CWA Blog](#)



As the sport of climbing grows, its infrastructure must grow along with it. Climbing gyms continue to multiply, and the demand for high-quality routesetting has increased in tandem.

As a result, routesetting is changing as a profession. To get a handle on what that means for the job and the sport, I spoke with **Ward Byrum**, Director of Routesetting for Earth Treks.

Ward oversees all routesetting operations for the seven gyms under Earth Treks branding. That includes hands-on setting work as well as team management for locations from Virginia to Colorado.

WK: *Do you feel like routesetting is changing at all? How does routesetting fit in with what's happening in climbing and climbing gyms?*

WB: That's a big question. I think in general, routesetting is changing — the rate of change is really accelerated right now. Gyms are more aware of the value that high-quality routesetting brings to a facility.

Also, because there's this heightened awareness of its value, there's a movement to compensate people better for routesetting. And routesetters who are good have elevated their value.

The trick is that there's maybe not enough supply to meet that demand now.

WK: *You mean there aren't enough good routesetters to go around?*

WB: Correct. And we're playing a game where everyone's kind of poaching everyone. I think a lot of people haven't really sorted out how to grow and create routesetters from scratch in these local communities.

We spend a lot of time talking about our company's Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion efforts. That's one of the biggest successes we've had recently as a setting program. We acknowledged that if we continue to look for amazing experienced routesetters, then our setting teams will be largely white men, because they represent the people that currently have the experience.

By tuning into that, we were able to create a wealth of entry-level positions and then actively open the doors to underrepresented groups to come in and interview for the base positions. Then we can grow them into full-time roles. It's something that's paid off in our ability to have more female setters represented, for example.

WK: *What do you think it takes for a climber to become a good routesetter?*

WB: I look at routesetting as essentially a form of product design. A lot of how we interpret routesetting is around that theme.

I think being a successful routesetter is being aware of who you're setting for. The more variety we have represented within the setting team, the more empathy and awareness and perspectives we have represented when we go to produce that product.

WK: *Are there certain things you look for in team members?*

WB: It doesn't come down to being the strongest climber. They don't have to have the most routesetting experience. We're looking for people who are creative, who thrive in a group-oriented environment where we critique each other's work constantly...

It's difficult. It's more aligned with product design, as opposed to the older terms, which were about replicating outdoor climbing, or a personal pursuit to create whatever the routesetter wanted to make.

WK: *Obviously routesetting is very physical work. Do you have any best practices for keeping a team running smoothly under the demands placed on commercial routesetters?*

WB: It's important just to know the physical abilities of everyone on the team. We try to have very team-oriented goals so that everyone is able to plug into that system and work at the highest level. We're able to change who is setting on what sections or what grades based on who's going to be most successful at that task.

Having a realistic projection of output is important. There are plenty of routesetters who can come in and set four or five routes in a day, but that might not be sustainable, or it might not be the level of detail we want invested into the product. It may not allow us to forerun and sample and test that product enough before it becomes open to the public.

It's about finding that balance between the level of product you want and the capability or energy you have to apply. Plus how much the company is willing to invest. It's balancing those three categories.

WK: *Do you see any misconceptions about routesetting staff among members and climbers?*

WB: A lot of our efforts lately in some of the member clinics we host or in our social media content are about removing the mystique behind routesetting. We want to allow people to peek behind the curtain and understand the process of setting.

We want people to understand that the setters aren't coming in and trying to set a sandbagged V4. They're legitimately coming in and trying to set something that serves the members.

One of our catchphrases is: "Every route and every boulder could be someone's project."

So we try to think about the person who is investing a lot of time trying to accomplish this goal.

WK: *Are there any sticking points between routesetting staff and gym management?*

WB: I don't think there's a friction point, but I think something that's important is the transition of routesetters from climber to worker.

One thing that's helped us is interpreting routesetters not as climbers but as [work-at-height professionals](#).

Once we begin to interpret them as work-at-height professionals, it enables the routesetters to take their job a little more seriously... they're in a work mode. It creates a feeling that things are different and they need to conduct themselves differently.

The other component is that gym owners, gym managers, people at the front desk, and members all see us operating differently. They see us utilizing these professional tools. So we're seen as more professional and further distinguish ourselves from just climbers who are putting holds on a wall.

That theme of professionalization has helped us gain respect industry-wide. It's enabled us to gain things like better pay and better benefits because of this specialization. I think that trend will continue, and I think it will further define what professional routesetting looks like. It's always a moving target.

WK: *How does routesetting fit into the growth or stability of the sport in the future?*

WB: Early on — I'm talking 20 years ago — maybe we kept a loose eye on bell curves and what grades are represented in a facility.

Now I'm going to keep a much closer eye on the amount of time each routesetter in a team is spending doing certain tasks associated with their job. I'm going to look at the product in pretty detailed ways. Eventually we will build that out much further.

I think stuff like Vertical Life and other programs that have back-end routesetting management tools but front-end capability to interact with members will be increasingly common. They'll be an important part of the process as the conduit for the information members want to give a setting team.

I think we'll see those systems perfected. Right now we're still trying to see what data points are

needed.

WK: *Now and moving forward, what do you think gyms can do to make sure routesetting is a strong point for their facility?*

WB: Ultimately, we need to find better ways of allowing the consumer to tell us what they want. It's tricky, because the person might not have a ton of climbing experience. A lot of user responses might be just: if I was successful, I like it, and if I wasn't, I don't.

It's really dissecting what a diverse climbing experience might be like. Some of our efforts now are around producing lifelong climbers. How do we keep members of the community engaged over long periods of time?

That includes social and community events, but there's a routesetting component too. How are we engaging with the community and keeping them excited so that it doesn't become a fad?

WK: *Is there anything else you think is important for the routesetting profession in the future?*

WB: While we're in this time of flux where routesetting is becoming a better compensated role within a gym and better respected, it is of equal importance that the routesetters themselves realize that they need to rise to that standard as well.

You also have to be professional. It's little things like wearing safety glasses, and it's big things like when members complain about a route that you're able to receive that information graciously and mediate to the best of your abilities. Make sure members feel heard.

Ultimately, we have to represent our companies and routesetting in a positive way so that we can break some of the stigma of, you know, the double-digit boulderer dirtbag climber who's doing this as a way of climbing for a living.

If you want to work full-time and you want to pay a mortgage and raise a kid and routeset for a living, you have to bring something else to the table.

I think that a lot of focus in past years was on how gyms need to pay routesetters more. And that has started to happen. The follow up is: routesetters need to rise to the occasion as well and do their part to elevate the industry.

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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