

The Theory Of Teaching Outdoor Climbing In Indoor Gyms

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Posted By: **Ashley Routson** in [CWA Blog](#)



It is fair to say that most indoor climbing gyms share the same separation of clientele.

We have new and experienced climbers, recreational and competitive youth climbers, boulderers, and rope climbers (further broken down into top rope and lead climbers).

And each of these groups comes with a list of demands and needs.

As a gym manager, I am constantly being pulled in multiple directions. Managing the demands of each customer group simultaneously is no less than a balancing act. It requires patience and high levels of communication with my department heads and routesetting team.

The space itself is finite, and creating a space that caters to all types of climbers can be challenging.

I would venture a guess to say that 99 percent of all gym managers are focused on programs, classes, and events that keep our customers climbing inside our facilities. The bread and butter of most indoor climbing gyms are the entry-level classes, events and groups, and youth programs (both recreational and competitive).

Our job is to make indoor climbing accessible, fun, and exciting for our communities.

The one category of climber that often gets ignored or forgotten is the outdoor climber and, more importantly, the indoor climbers aspiring to become outdoor climbers.

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 senior managers and for program managers in indoor climbing gyms.
- **What Will You Learn:** The theory of gym-to-crag programming in indoor climbing gyms, and why they may be right or not right for your gym.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** For people who think about routesetting, we recently published a story about [how setting far away from outdoor crags works](#).

Bouldering outdoors is a natural transition for indoor boulderers. It requires less education and the out-of-pocket investment is significantly less than outdoor rope climbing. This article will focus on the outdoor rope climber.

Most outdoor (rope) climbers typically start with single-pitch outdoor sport climbing. They might move on to multi-pitch sport climbing or single-pitch trad climbing. Eventually, some make it to multi-pitch trad climbing. All of these forms of outdoor climbing require more knowledge and skill than needed for gym climbing.

There are many moving parts when it comes to climbing outdoors, and these parts can be both overwhelming and intimidating to the novice outdoor climber.

This brings us to the question of the moment. Should indoor climbing gyms play a role in preparing indoor climbers for the great outdoors?

Well, that depends.

It depends on the landscape of the gym and on the experience and expertise of the staff. Not all indoor climbing gyms are created equal. A lot of modern-day gyms are designed specifically for indoor climbing.

As a result, some gyms might not be conducive to outdoor-themed classes. And then there is the staff. **Not all gyms have the luxury of hiring experienced outdoor climbers, and many gyms struggle with the retainment of our most talented and knowledgeable employees.** For some of us, the experienced outdoor climbers are routesetters, not instructors.

And as much as I love my routesetters, I can't lean on them for everything (and I kind of sort of already do).

If the gym has the space to do it, and staff that are stoked about teaching them – I think there is

a place for outdoor climbing classes in indoor climbing gyms. If we have customers or members who want to climb outside, and we have the tools and resources to better prepare them, **then why not?** Some gym managers might argue liability reasons, but that excuse holds little water.

There is no legal precedent for an indoor climbing gym's liability in outdoor climbing. Technically speaking, outdoor climbers assume nearly 100 percent of the risk involved—unless they are utilizing a guide service. But that is off-topic.

The American Alpine Club [published a good article last fall](#) on liability and the assumed risk of outdoor climbing. Please note that the article mostly focuses on landowner laws and statutes and does not mention climbing gyms anywhere.

I wouldn't go as far as saying that it is our responsibility to show our gym members how to better prepare themselves to climb outside—but I will go as far as to say **if we can provide the service to them, we should.**

I was a Girl Scout for more years than I'd like to admit. The motto "always be prepared" is ingrained in me forever. I want my gym members and staff to be prepared when they climb outside. I want our gym and staff to be a resource of knowledge and skills for members. And because I can, I want to be that resource too.

It is important to mention the [American Mountain Guide Association \(AMGA\)](#). [AMGA offers a Single Pitch Instructor \(SPI\) Program](#) that teaches climbing instructors to "proficiently facilitate and instruct the sport of rock climbing in a single pitch setting." Now, keep in mind that there are a lot of prerequisites for this course that might prohibit many indoor rock climbing instructors (i.e.: traditional lead climbing experience) from pursuing the certification.

For gyms that lack experienced staff, or are unsure of how to develop their own classes and programming, the SPI Program could be useful.

I am blessed to work for a company that was founded by a professional outdoor climber who saw the need to build an indoor training facility for outdoor rock climbers. The location I manage has three different-sized 50' synthetic hand cracks. We have a 50' finger crack, layback cracks, multiple aretes, a pillar, and a huge chimney.

We have four telephone poles that ice climbers can use to train axe and crampon placements. We have a rappel deck with dead trees bolted to the floor and the I-beams, where climbers can practice setting top rope anchors. Our class offerings are pretty extensive as a result. Intro to Crack Climbing, Intro to Ice Climbing, Intro to Outdoor Sport Climbing and Anchor Building Theory are among the most notable.

Full transparency—just because we offer these classes, doesn't mean they are our

best-selling classes. Most people who climb at our gyms never venture into outdoor climbing.

Persons aspiring to climb outside are a small percentage of our overall clientele. Michigan is known for its world-class ice climbing, but it isn't exactly a hub for outdoor rock climbing. Most of us fly or drive substantial distances (or cross international borders) for world-class outdoor rock climbing.

The flip side is that the demand for outdoor classes, albeit low, is still there. The Red River Gorge is just close enough and popular enough with our membership to increase awareness and intrigue about outdoor climbing—especially single-pitch sport climbing.

And we have a small, unbolted, top rope-only crag about an hour west of us that creates a demand for anchor building classes. **This is why we see value in offering outdoor climbing classes.**

Interested in Offering Outdoor-Themed Classes in your Climbing Gym?

Since most new outdoor climbers gravitate toward outdoor single-pitch sport climbing, this is where I would recommend starting. As mentioned earlier, not all indoor climbing gyms are created equal. A class of this nature would require an anchor system similar to those found outdoors, to help educate students on how to safely and efficiently clean anchors and routes.

The good news is that most skills can be learned two feet off the ground. All advanced classes start at the ground level, before advancing up our 50' walls.

We drill bolt hangers into the walls of our lesson spaces, at eye level or shoulder height, for most advanced classes. We introduce the concepts on the ground floor and have our students practice these skills in a less risky and controlled setting. From there, we take our students into the main gym to practice these skills at heights—once again, in a controlled setting.

Outdoor climbing inherently gave us indoor climbing. So, in reverse, if we can make outdoor climbers, or at least help our members become them if they want to, then it makes sense to do it.

Learn More About Gym-To-Crag Events

Join us at the 2024 CWA Summit in Portland, May 15-17, 2024, and hear the Access Fund discuss gym-to-crag events. Tickets are still available!

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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**MANAGING INFANTS IN INDOOR
CLIMBING GYMS**



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