

Why Your Routesetters May Be Avoiding Eye Protection (And What To Do About It)

September 23, 2025

in [CWA Blog](#)



I remember one time I was setting at a dingy, University Climbing Wall. I am sure many of our readers here at CWA know the kind of wall I am talking about: fake rock, t-nuts that are either stripped or set back so far you sometimes need an extra, extra-long bolt just for a foot hold. We rarely (if ever) set-screwed anything, but we always placed a hold to stop the really big jug (the Blue Telephone) from spinning so much. We also set everything with hand wrenches—though we could use any drills or drivers we personally owned for stripping.

One day, my friend, who we'll call Leo, was stripping a route on the tall walls. Fifty feet up, hanging on a GriGri, Leo was muttering and cursing under his breath while rubbing his progressively redder eye. He came down and asked if he had anything in his already swollen eye. I couldn't see much, but I could tell he had something small and dark in there, just past the faint, light-blue ring of his contact lens: like someone had drawn a tiny dot with a ballpoint pen.

We eventually sent him to an Urgent Care-type place a five-minute walk down the street. He came back as a pirate. He was wearing a patch, covering the watery, goopy mess that his eye had become.

"They dyed it and looked at it with a weird light. Here, I have photos! I scratched it pretty bad all over," he told me. "But the worst part was that I had a piece of metal stuck straight into the white part of my eye! Apparently, they used tweezers rather than a magnet to get it out. I was expecting them to stick my head in the MRI and let it work its magic!"

The next time I set with him, he was wearing eye protection.

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, and folks who manage risk in their facilities.
- **What Will You Learn:** The logic some folks would use in avoiding PPE, and ways to mitigate that mistake.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** This throwback article on [risk management in climbing gyms](#) is worth a read on this topic.

It's ironic how common stories like this are told—often beer in hand when sitting at the local late-night burrito joint after FINALLY wrapping up the setting and route-map/beta video uploads for tomorrow's youth comp. Or in that awkward period where it isn't quite lunchtime, but you have a break between setting and forerunning.

For me, that was always perfectly timed with my umpteenth cup of coffee. Routesetters hold this interesting juxtaposition with the hazards of our job: the public think we're professional climbers, the climbing members and consumers of our product think we're lazy dance choreographers, and we think we're artist-athletes (all of which are mostly true). But at the end of the day, we essentially work construction with cowboy attitudes toward PPE.

I'd argue that beyond work-at-height and general climbing risks, the most persistent but underrated hazards are **eye injury and hearing damage**. Below are some common tropes I've seen—and sometimes embodied myself—that explain why routesetters shirk eye protection. Along the way, I'll break down what's really going on, and how indoor climbing gyms might help their staff steer clear of unnecessary risk.

"I don't need eye protection; I've been doing this for years without an issue."

LINK: <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/Sd0v9wUN0I8>

These hit home for me. I've been guilty of the classic "safety squint" more times than I'd like to admit—especially back before I got older, more jaded, and more afraid of hurting myself.

But here's the thing: probability doesn't bend to experience. No matter how many times you flip a coin, it's still 50/50 odds to land on tails. Each bolt stripped overhead, each grinder fired up, each hold yanked off the wall carries its own probability of sending shavings or plastic shards flying.

Confirmation bias convinces us that because nothing bad has happened yet, we must be doing

something right. **Survivorship bias** reinforces it: the routesetters who are still working after years without eye protection tell their stories, while the ones who burned out after an accident aren't around to argue. That illusion of safety eventually catches up to you.

“I don't like eye pro—it's foggy, scratched, or gives me a headache”

Another common complaint, and a valid one. Safety glasses often aren't designed for sweaty indoor climbing gyms, awkward positions, or the constant on/off rhythm of routesetting. They fog up, slip down your nose, or pinch in weird places. Some of the cheap, clear plastic ones even seem to distort depth perception just enough to make setting and forerunning harder, even though they're just plain plastic.

Here's where climbing gyms come in: **employers may be required to provide PPE**, and employees are expected to use it, but the quality matters.

If your team only has access to the sharp-edged, dollar-bin safety glasses, of course, no one will want to wear them. If legal in your area and within your company's policies, you could also consider a **reimbursement-or-match program**: if a setter prefers a higher-quality pair, you could potentially reimburse some or all of the cost. <https://www.osha.gov/personal-protective-equipment>

Personally, I hate the clear, boxy styles that dig into my temples. I wear a pair of shatterproof prescription glasses I bought myself—comfortable enough that I don't mind having them on and I forget about them. I also have a pair of (for now) unscratched cheap safety glasses I keep in my tool bag in a case so if I am wearing contacts I don't have an excuse.

Not all glasses are shatterproof, however. Regular eyeglasses may qualify under some setting SOPs or contexts, but not all. It's worth making clear what does and doesn't count for you and your team.

“The risks aren't even that bad”

Let's dig in. The risks aren't abstract; they're very real:

- **Metal shavings** from blown-out t-nuts or stripped bolts can shoot off like tiny projectiles.
- **Threads from bolts and t-nuts** can shear off while re-tapping or cutting threads.
- **Dust and debris** (chalk, rubber, plywood fragments) collect behind the wall and get blown out when holes are drilled, when behind the wall, or when removing holds and all the goodies fall out of the warm-up jugs.
- **Plastic shards** fly when holds shatter under torque or from age.
- **Acid from hold washing**: need I say more?
- And don't even get me started on the **angle grinder**. Sparks, resin dust, and high-speed

fragments, or even the BLADE ITSELF make eye pro non-negotiable.

The consequences range from annoying irritation (a day lost flushing out grit) to serious injury: scratched corneas, embedded fragments, or even permanent vision loss. Urgent care clinics see these injuries often. Vision, unlike skin or muscle, doesn't always heal back to "good as new." A single unlucky accident can leave lasting impairment.

"It's called fashion, baby, look it up."

I've actually heard this one while re-setting for finals at a competition I worked. Setters joke that eye protection looks dorky, or clashes with the laid-back "routesetter uniform" of paint-splattered-second hand-cutoff-Dickies-shorts and boxy, oh so barely cropped tees with logos for AntiGrav, Lov, Tension, and more.

The reality: there's no reason safety can't be stylish. Many brands make sleek, wraparound glasses that look more like ironic techy cycling shades than construction PPE. A small investment in gear that staff actually *want* to wear pays off in compliance and safety. If you have trouble getting the setters to wear eye pro, start a dialogue with them about what they might consider wearing!

Moving the Conversation Forward

If you're managing or leading a setting team, here are some questions worth asking:

1. **What's your setting SOP?** Do you explicitly require eye pro when using tools or working behind the wall?
2. **Reimburse vs. provide?** Are you giving staff only the cheapest option, or supporting them in choosing gear they'll actually use?
3. **What's your workers' comp situation?** Do you, your head setter, or your HR manager know how to navigate it if someone gets injured?
4. **Do you model safe behavior?** If senior setters aren't wearing eye protection, don't expect the juniors to.
5. **Are you normalizing the conversation?** Just as helmets have become standard in many outdoor settings, can you make eye pro feel just as non-negotiable in the gym?

The next time you picture a routesetter up on a rope or ladder, surrounded by a halo of chalk dust and tiny metal and plastic flakes, imagine them with eye pro on. Routesetters pride themselves on precision and creativity, yet we often ignore the tool we rely on most: our vision.

Which, ironically, is also what we say when someone is good at setting: they have the VISION!

Eye protection isn't about killing the vibe of setting—it's about preserving the craft, ensuring setters can keep doing the work they love, and modeling a professional standard that benefits everyone.

If you're a setter, consider this a friendly nudge: ditch the "safety squint" and find eye pro you'll actually wear. If you're a manager, ask hard questions about culture, policy, and resources.

Because at the end of the day, one unlucky fragment is all it takes to make you the next pirate at the burrito joint.

If you want more information about why we need SOPs for safety policies: consider reading my Undergraduate Thesis from almost a decade ago (so take that with a grain of salt, as we all know the industry has changed a lot in the last few years) which can be found here:

https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/f/Smith_Carter%20Spring%202018%20Thesis.pdf

Our Standards: Routesetting Gear for Work at Height

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?

About the Author



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RISK MANAGEMENT FOR COACHES IN INDOOR CLIMBING GYMS

September 23, 2025

MANAGING TURNOVER IN INDOOR CLIMBING GYMS

September 9, 2025

