

Coach Wise

Climbing: Demystified

By Dave MacLeod

All photos by the author

Part 6: Count your battle scars



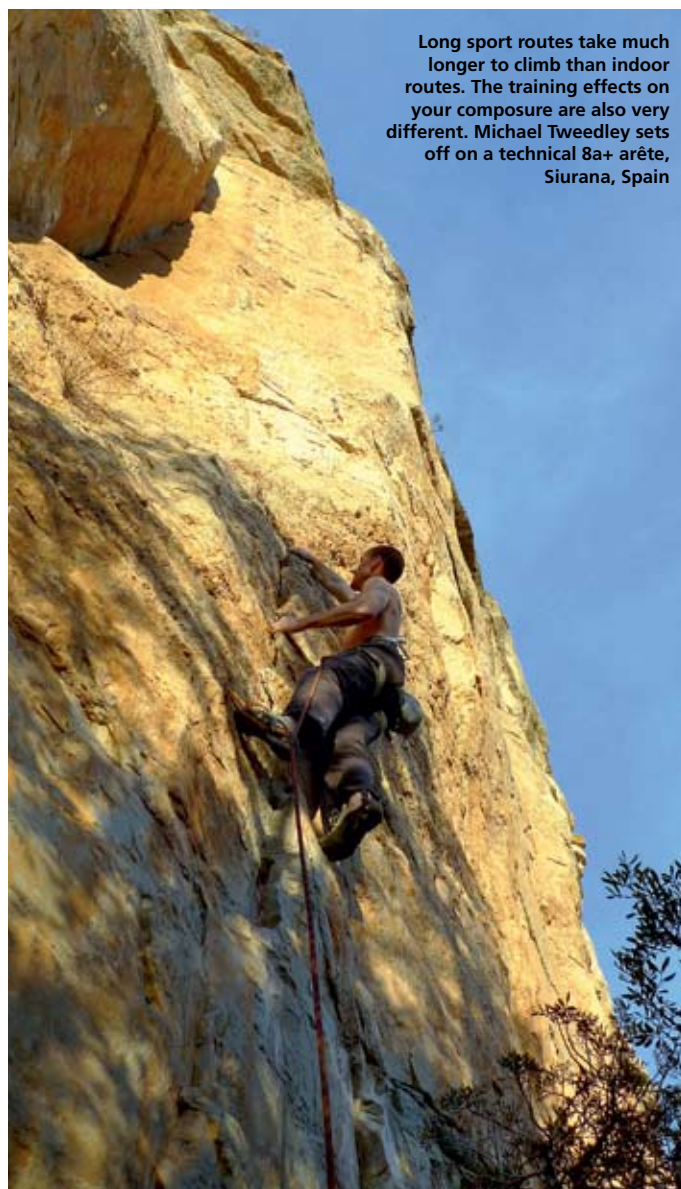
For obvious reasons a lot of folk's regular diet of climbing and the bulk of their preparation for their goal routes happens in climbing walls. The invention and proliferation of large city-based indoor climbing centres has been a godsend to climbing in many ways, but believe it or not it's also created some problems.

This article will show you how the presence of a local climbing wall can create enough problems to sabotage any potential benefits, and what climbers had before, that they lack now.

What I'm getting at here are psychological phenomena that influence what we value as important skills, and how our habitual diet of climbing affects how we try to gain them.

In my observations of what specific things climbers talk about when discussing improvement and training, I noticed that there were slow, steady changes in what climbers focused on.

When I started climbing (in the early nineties), if you picked up a climbing magazine you'd find articles showing you the basics of how to gain upper body and finger strength and endurance. There was quite a lot on weights and basic finger strength exercises. Later in the nineties, there was more about how to organise climbing wall sessions of the correct intensity to build endurance and how to schedule sessions into a longer term development. This was all fine, because it was emerging knowledge at the time – climbers in general didn't know this stuff.



Long sport routes take much longer to climb than indoor routes. The training effects on your composure are also very different. Michael Tweedley sets off on a technical 8a+ arête, Siurana, Spain

However, if you talked to your local 'guru' of hard climbing when you met him or her at the crag (I'm picturing Fawcett, any one of the Birkett dynasty, Cubby Cuthbertson or perhaps the editor of this magazine?) they'd tend to bring up more general ideas about the desired characteristics of a good climber.

They'd recognise that the best climbers were not always the strongest or even those doing a huge volume of climbing and hence maintaining a high level of fitness. A good example of this in action would be a climber like Mick Fowler. How come Mick could stroll around the country putting up new

routes up to E6, on virtually any type of cliff, yet admit freely that 'training' is not really an activity he would give a second thought to?

Yet ask any rippled young lad in the climbing wall to go and repeat a bunch of Fowler routes and he'd probably tell you he still hasn't climbed E6 on-sight, or anywhere near it. We could have this discussion about any climbing discipline, for example Edlinger was nowhere near as strong as the Brits in the eighties yet was years ahead in strolling up 8a+ on-sight. What is going on here?

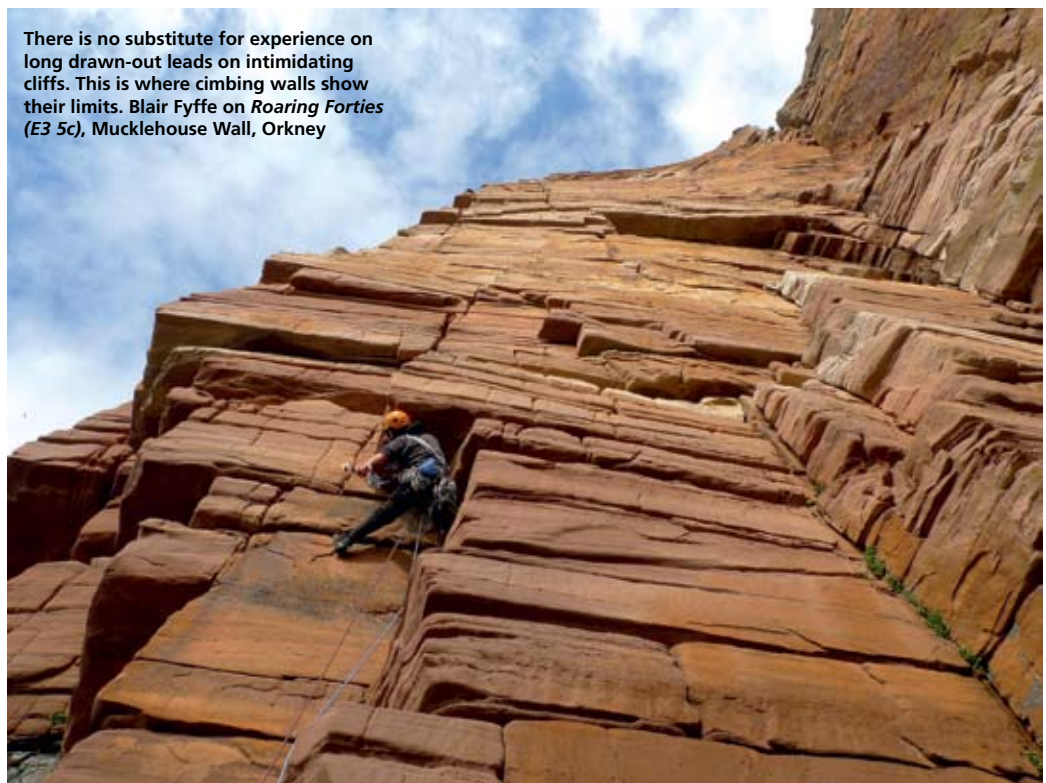
Some of the attributes that climbers developed strongly before climbing walls were pure tactics – knowing their enemy (the climbs) very well and the best way to deal with it because their climbing took place in the same venue as their ultimate goal routes: the crag. But perhaps the more significant part of this is the general approach to climbing; the way they attacked a climb.

Battle Hardness

If you started climbing quite a long time ago, you'll remember that climbers used to talk about being 'a good leader'. Note the difference between this and 'a good climber'. In fact, if they talked about someone being 'a good climber', that was probably a polite way of saying they were fit or talented but were missing something that was stopping them being any good at actually completing hard routes. What's the difference?

Well, the attributes being alluded to in the term 'a good leader' were of course multi-faceted, but a big part of the skill of completing routes is simply the ability to battle hard and not give in.

Yes, it really is that simple. My own observation is that climbers who learned to climb on hard routes outside and did large volumes of them with other good climbers are good at snatching victory from the grip of defeat on hard leads. Whereas in general, those who haven't learned to climb with a diet



There is no substitute for experience on long drawn-out leads on intimidating cliffs. This is where climbing walls show their limits. Blair Fyffe on *Roaring Forties* (E3 5c), Mucklehouse Wall, Orkney

of routes at their limit and influences of others doing the same, lack the skill to push themselves through sticking points on hard routes and get to the top. Why is this?

First let me say again, I'm generalising here and not everyone will suffer badly from this (or even at all). The main reason is that training on 'real' routes that you've read or dreamt about helps because it creates a positive pressure you place on yourself. They are important to you. You've looked at that picture of that E1 a hundred times, and you're not going to let your on-sight slip without a fight.

If you can't get the runner in at the crux, you're going to grit your teeth and hang in there until you do. Do this, day in, day out, throughout your development in climbing and you'll discover how many times you'll stand on the top of a route, gasping for breath and wondering how on earth you managed to get there without falling on every move. That knowledge becomes the habit of a lifetime.

The flipside of this is the climbing wall route. Another blue 6b+ at your local climbing centre... You recognise all the holds from the last one that was set

with the same holds and you know it'll get changed again in another month. It's not important, it's not memorable. Of course your effort on it could be, but the route probably isn't.

So in normal climbing wall situations, there is rarely much incentive to give 110%, to really lose yourself, bear down and battle like your life depended on it. You'll rarely find yourself retreating back to a poor rest in extremis to figure out the moves above for the umpteenth time, your climbing partners shouting sincere and spirited encouragement from below.

Instead you'll just blast on and throw for the hold with the most obvious method, and if you fall, you fall. In this way, you never learn the skills and tactics of the tenacious leader.

There is an exception to this at climbing walls – if you have a good competitive scene with peers you climb with and push each other intensely, or if you compete in formal indoor comps. So start competing if you don't already!

More often than not, by the time those who spend more than half of their climbing time indoors are trying their goal routes, they are already more than fit or strong

enough. They fail on the routes because they haven't learned to battle, to not give in, to retreat to rests and regroup and to switch off and go for the run out when the moment comes.

Some climbers don't ever realise this is their weakness. Others do but look on this skill as a mysterious or as an untrainable superhuman attribute. It's not. It's simply that it takes time to train in just the same way as finger strength. Sadly, battle hardness is not something you can turn on for a special route. It comes from battling, day in day out, for years.

How do you know if you are doing enough battling to learn to be a good leader? Count your battle scars! Battle scars can be physical or psychological:

When was the last time:

- You topped out or fell off and discovered you'd cut your hand open and didn't even notice?
- You completed a route but were so lost in the moves that you can't remember you did them or something that happened during the ascent?
- You completed a route and can remember a specific part in more vivid detail that you believed possible?

Winter climbing is an excellent teacher of battling and anticipation skills for all aspects of the climbing game. This skill will really help your rock climbing too. Dave MacLeod on *Blade Runner (IV, 5)*, Sgurr a' Chaorachain, Applecross



- You completed a long pitch on a route and amazed yourself that you'd been on the lead for three hours when it felt like 30 minutes?

- You completed one route and were so exhausted you had to stop climbing for the day? Or were so pumped you had to get your belayer to untie your knot?
- In the middle of a hard lead you noticed an overwhelming feeling of thirst and dry mouth because you'd been hanging in there for over an hour, sweating and dry mouthed with constant concentration and/or fear?

The goal is to have this sort of experience all the time, not once in a blue moon. If your habitual climbing diet contains this level of psychological/emotional involvement, it's hard not to get good at

climbing, even if you are not the fittest climber around.

Conversely, the fittest climber will get nowhere on the hard routes, or at least have very inconsistent results if they don't have enough battles.

Note that the learning here is not just the ability to deal psychologically with protracted leads and the feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, arduousness and pressure, it's also about learning countless small tactics that are partially or largely subconscious: rope and gear skills, tactical preparation for leads, pacing, maximising rest positions, breaking routes into smaller sections and many more...

Some solutions to this, if your circumstances limit you to the climbing wall, can be found in this month's web article.

9 Out of 10 Climbers Make the Same Mistake

A Different Book about Coaching from Dave MacLeod "Navigation through the maze of advice for the self-coached climber"

Cost: £15

Nine out of ten climbers are stuck! They are stuck on the same things. Some of the things that hold climbers back from improving their climbing standard are the same as they were twenty years ago: motivation, managing time, and not being able to analyse and correct their own basic technical or tactical errors. But they are also stuck for a new set of reasons.

Twenty years ago, the problem was that no one knew how to train for climbing. Information was scarce. Today, it's the opposite problem. Book after book lists technique, exercises and tips. Navigating this barrage of information, filtering out the irrelevant and homing in on what matters to your life, your climbing and your circumstances has been the limiting step for today's climber.

This 176-page book is the first to present the science of improving at climbing in a way that will actually help you make confident decisions and stay focused on the things that will make the biggest difference.

Buy a copy at Dave's website: www.davemacleod.blogspot.com



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