

Coach Wise

Climbing Demystified



Part 2: The Work is the Easy Part...

By Dave MacLeod

The motivation to do the work is the hard bit. When it comes down to it, we all know that just showing up at the climbing wall or crag or gym regularly and getting down to it is enough to put our ability on an upward trajectory. Sure it's great to know exactly what you're doing to get optimum improvement from your time and effort invested, but for many the biggest problem is finding the motivation to keep showing up, week in, week out, when life gets in the way.

The motivation to change habits, move out of comfort zones, and stick to resolutions will matter more than any other aspect of your approach to improving at climbing. Just as in relationships, jobs, learning and many other fields of experience, big important things like the motivation to put the effort in end up at the mercy of stupid little things.

What a waste.

So this article covers the three most common motivation dead ends, cul-de-sacs, pitfalls and booby traps I've come across myself or observed in others over the years. Most of them are pretty simple to out-steer or solve, but they inflict soul destroying motivational oppression to many. You might find some of my solutions rather objectionably obvious, so sue me.

What You Do, You Become

1. Starting from scratch

In many older climbers (those who have been climbing for over a decade – so could be fifteen or less!) I've coached, I've detected a rather jaded attitude to 'starting afresh' with an all new plan of action to lick their form into shape. They've been here before, most probably every November when they hit the climbing wall again, or every April when they realise they are still struggling on the same grade they were last year, and the five before that.

Starting from scratch on a merry-go-round of a period of hard work, with some results, followed by a seemingly imperceptible doldrums where you gradually slip back to the starting place is soul destroying, don't you think?

I'm not about to tell you there is a magic way round the interruption to your sport and training caused by the 'one off' extra hours at work, DIY jobs, and the million other things that take their place, rightly or wrongly, at the top of the priority list. But the loss of previous hard earned gains in fitness is avoidable. Simply by exploiting a simple feature of how our bodies respond to training stimulus, we can have our cake and eat it.

The feature I'm talking about is that it turns out much less stimulus is needed to maintain a given level of fitness than to increase it. The amount of training we are talking about obviously depends a bit on your level, but for many of you it will be in the region of one session per week.



If you never climb in new places, on new rock types, your body will get used to the training and stop delivering improvements. Go somewhere different! Alicia Hudelson climbing *Dit Al Kul 6b+* on a strange conglomerate/flowstone mix in Margalef, Spain



Even subtle changes in the climbing stimulus will help to stay fresh and keep reminding your body to improve. Dave Macleod climbing on an unusually steep project, Glen Nevis



Trad climbers operating in the low E-grades or below can sometimes lose hard earned fitness from winter indoor climbing due to the nature of the most easier trad climbs. Peter Duggan getting a good psychological, but not physical workout on Secretaries Direct HVS, Glen Nevis

When most climbers have a super busy period, like, say, an autumn where you change jobs, move house and four weekends get filled up with mates weddings, they just give in, and stop climbing altogether until the dust has settled. The rationale is usually ‘I’ll just get frustrated if I try to fit climbing in with all this going on, so I’ll just forget about it for the time being’. I understand the psychology, but it only helps in the short term. Sure, stopping altogether will make it easier to pass the time until you have your leisure back, but when you start again six months down the line and feel weak and unfit, this always delivers a secondary and more severe motivational blow - ‘what’s the point of starting to climb this fitness ladder from the bottom, all over again?’

For sure this feeling has been strong enough in a few climbers to make them leave the sport altogether. Yet it’s unnecessary. It’s great to be open with yourself and accept when three sessions a week of climbing are going to be off the cards for a while. But instead of stopping dead, this time figure out what time you could manage per week. It doesn’t matter how small the amount of time is, so long as it’s as much as you can spare and it’s realistic.

“Any fool can handle a crisis; it’s this day-to-day living that wears you out”
Anton Chekov

For those few minutes or hours per week, you’ll switch mindset from your normal outlook on climbing/training of ‘I am trying to improve’ to ‘I am trying to maintain my current level’. Just this simple change of attitude will make it much easier to discipline yourself to stick to it for the weeks and months of busyness.

The result? When things calm down again, you can pick up where you left off and start working to the next grade with refreshed motivation and a rested body, instead of trying to force an unfit body to build back up too quickly (the result of which is often injury, never-mind frustration).

Of course, There is more to it that just deciding you are going to do some maintenance training for a while. The practicalities form the next immediate hurdle. For some, a brief escape to a local climbing wall once a week is possible. Great! But if not, you’ll have to train at home. This option is a lot better than it sounds for the time poor - there is no travelling time involved.

Training at home requires a home climbing board (for those with space and inclination) or a simple wooden strip fingerboard on a door-frame. Climbers these days seem fairly resistant to the idea of having a facility at home, usually due to cost, permission problems, or getting bored trying to use them. All of these issues are fairly simple to side-step.

A wooden fingerboard strip and four screws costs less than a single climbing wall session, a bedroom sized board less than an annual wall membership. If a landlord is the permission problem for a fingerboard a little

polyfilla and a paint sample will cover up the offending holes on inspection day. If you really can't get away with placing any screws in the place you choose to live (is it worth it?) then rock rings can hook over rafters etc. The boredom problem is more of an issue. What goes wrong is that climbers who are used to climbing in the sociable atmosphere of a climbing wall or at least with a friend, try to suddenly go cold turkey and train alone on a fingerboard they placed in a dingy loft, basement, cupboard or otherwise mind numbing place to spend time. Training is meant to be fun. Where is the most fun place in your house? Put the fingerboard there! In front of the telly or in the kitchen are both choices that will make it far easier to rack up the hours hanging by your arms instead of feeling guilty about not locking yourself in the basement away from your family for the sake of strong fingers.

The beauty of working on a small home board or fingerboard is that it's well suited to short sessions snatched while the tattles boil or while watching the 6 O'clock news. Little and often (read as often as you can) are what reminds your fingers to stay strong because next season you will be back to normal.

Summary: Everyone has busy periods, but they don't have to force you back to beginner level. Tread water with one session per week instead and pick up where you left off instead of going to square one.

2. Plateau

We just dealt with one type of plateau - the see saw of training and detraining, but no net gain from year to year. There is only one type of plateau worse, the endless flat plateau, just the dullness of always being able to climb the same level. You've done every decent route in the country at your limit grade, and all the ones in the wall twenty times each. Do you want to tear your hair out yet?

When a coach utters the words 'performance plateau' to a climber, they are something that concern olympic level pro-athletes with a minor glitch in their highly tuned training regime. Have you climbed HVS as your limit grade for the last ten years? (insert more or less years or grades as required) Then you are on the biggest, most badass plateau around.

You share it with the vast majority of climbers who do the same stuff year in, year out and climb the same grade year in year out. 6a+s down the wall in the dark months, HVSs in the fair months, looped indefinitely.

Ask yourself, what shocks have you delivered your body recently to tell it it needs to get stronger/fitter/better at moving on rock. If vertical 6a+s (or 8a+s it doesn't matter) have been what you've always done, your body 'gets it' now. It's not going to grow any hard won new muscle cells or capillaries unless you give it something more pressing to think about.

One way to do this is simply to start climbing the grade you want to be climbing. That might sound rather obvious but it is, in fact, the way to go so long as you make some reasonable incremental goals. When you think about it, it sounds quite silly to say "I can't climb overhangs, they are too hard". How do you ever expect to master the next level unless you enter it? You must show up to take part. Naturally, this approach involves some falling off, some sore arms and a move outside the comfort zone, all of which are great ingredients for improvement. But this approach on it's own means the volume of climbing (measured in moves completed per unit time) goes down too much.

So the thing to do is use it in combination with staying at your usual grade, but changing some aspect of the experience. Here are some ways to do it:

Change the: climbing venue, rock type, angle, hold type, climbing partner, pattern of sessions, lead instead of top rope, boulder instead of lead (or vice versa).

The more ways you mix up the climbing you do and try different things, the more likely you are to consistently improve.

Yet climbers are so resistant to this. We are creatures of habit indeed. And perhaps the freedom from rules or competition environments further encourages us to shrink further into our happy little worlds of the routes, crags and partners we know. This is not training, it's repetition.

The whole of training theory can be summarised by this idea: what you do, you become.

Punchline? When wondering what's gone wrong with your climbing that's caused you to stick at this level, think: the only time more of the same will help you improve is if 'the same' you've been doing is doing new things.

As you can see, the imperceptible little influences in your day-to-day motivation reveal themselves as the pivot points between progress and staleness when you stand back and look at them square on. Get them sorted, and the rest has a habit of falling in line behind them.

3. People

The next huge lever of our long term motivation for climbing are the people we do it with.

People Power

If you ask ten climbers who've had a career stretching several decades what was going on at the time when they were climbing their lifetime best level, odds are they'll all mention the same thing, probably before anything else. "There were loads of good people around at that time". You just can't divorce sporting performance from the fact that we are social beings and other people are often the catalysts or the downright driving forces behind our behind our finest moments.

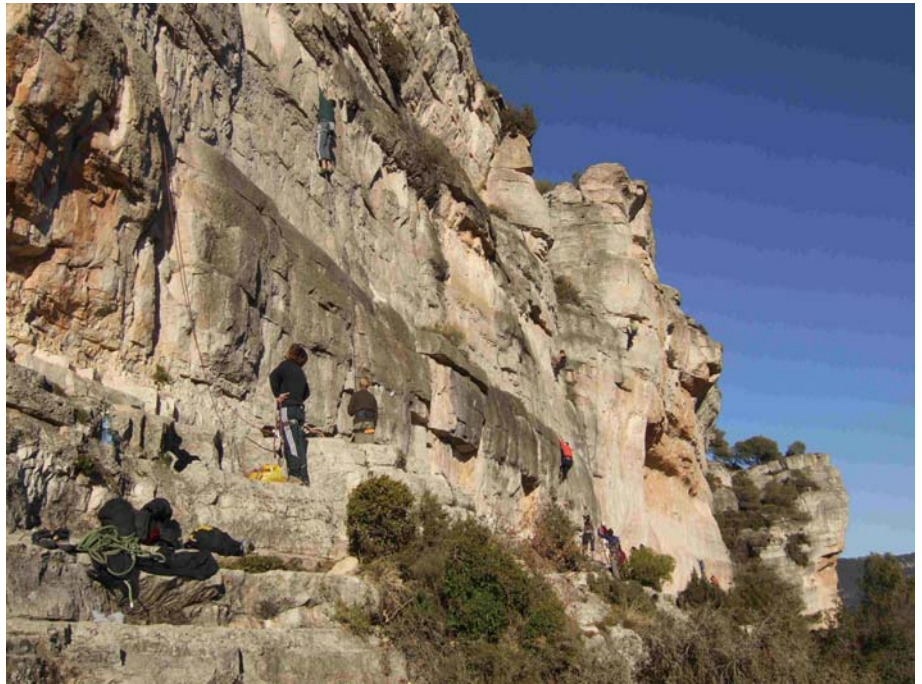
It's not always true for the most driven athletes (who, under certain circumstances operate better in relative isolation). But for the vast majority, we are likely to climb better if we are surrounded by good examples and people we like and who can help us access good climbing more often. Those with individualist driven tendencies should resist the tendency to worry about this fact of human nature. Milk it instead.

In general, the best influences will be other climbers who have greater knowledge, ability, keenness, encouraging and supportive spirit and are just good fun to be with. Their good company will help motivate you on those inevitable days when doing the duller elements of climbing training seems so futile. That said, hooking up with a partner too much at the opposite end of the scale from you might not always help. I'm happy to say I'm one of the most psyched climbers you'll meet, but my driven streak (which I let freely off the leash when climbing) is a little too much for my wife Claire, who is looking for different things from her climbing. Or at least that's what she tells me anyway.

Friendly competition is a very important catalyst, and a highly enjoyable aspect of climbing in its own right. So climbing with good people will both make your climbing a richer and happier experience as well as help you get better at it faster.

All of this is fairly obvious really. My main message here is not to underestimate its effect. If you are feeling like motivating yourself to work hard at your climbing is not coming easily, don't make other people your last port of call to find the answer. Make it the first call you make.

The one other thing to mention here is the question of what to do if your climbing partners are a negative performance influence. Fun to be with, but not exactly helping you hit the big number grades. It would be crazy to think of spending less time with people who are fun to be with just because of something like



Climbing trips with a keen group of climbers or to a popular climbing destination with a good scene can have a tremendous effect on your climbing and motivation. Often, the subtle influence of your company in a new environment allows you to forget your inhibitions and manage things wouldn't otherwise have tried or imagined doing

climbing. But you can still widen the net of partners you climb with, and just being aware of their negative influence can help you set limits on what you want to do, and set a nice balance between one type of fun (improving at climbing), and other types.

TOP TIP

The truth about famous climbers:

They aren't really much better than you are, yet their grades, results, level, rewards somehow end up being absolutely miles higher than you have managed.

Watch some world class climbers in a climbing DVD, making the performance of their life, on the climb they've spent years preparing for and trying. It looks perfect. It's as close as it gets. It creates an incorrect image of these climbers though. Understand that you are seeing the pinnacle - a concentrated shot of so many ingredients brought together into the final ascent (with the excuses, foot slips and whinges about bad conditions edited out).

If you want some real inspiration, you need to observe some good climbers over time. Some might indeed be super strong, but they can't use their feet. Others may be technical masters, but get them on a brutal power move and you'll be shocked how weak they are. It's not inspiring because the famous climbers are real heroes, it's because they aren't!

What is going on here?

It comes down to this:

4% less effort does not get you 4% less results.
Often, 4% less effort gets 90% less results.

The return on making that little extra effort is vastly out of proportion with the extra work required. Multiply this across all the disparate aspects of climbing performance, and 4% extra in each one delivers a windfall of results that lifts you over huge barriers of performance.

In practice?

- A top climber will try the boulder problem 26 times for your 25, and do it on the last go.
- A top climber will rest 20 seconds less per attempt on the climbing wall problem than you. (hint: multiply the extra attempts by the number of sessions per year, or per decade to see the significant effects of this on total training load).
- A top climber will hang on five seconds longer than you before shouting 'take' and see the move to get them through to that next shakeout, and then the top.

I could write out a million examples of how this plays out in practice. Each single one seems trivial, but taken together the effect explains why they do what they do, and you don't.

So, is it as simple as all that? I'll just try a bit harder, hang on a bit longer, do that extra route, go for that hold a bit more aggressively, and that'll do the trick? **Yes**, but it's not something to try for a few months, like a diet, or a phase of endurance circuits. The rewards are massive, but come chunk by chunk, building up from tiny steps over years before you are that climber who has just enough of every ingredient to produce a brilliant performance.



Dave Redpath pushes through a couple of years of hard effort and countless trips to complete his route Firepower 8b, The Anvil. You might ask 'What is the point of pouring so much time and effort into one hard route?' But the skill, strength and confidence built up lasts many times longer than the effort invested to gain it.

You might not have the patience for it.

TOP TIP

Finger Strength Training at Home: Finger Boards

Basic Principles:

Bouldering is the best way of getting stronger fingers because it challenges different gripping positions and works technique at the same time. Apply basic principles – you want to get good at using small holds, so you need to find an overhang. If you are a beginner this will be a slab.

You can also use supplementary techniques to get strong fingers like *campus boarding* and *finger boarding*. Even for the most ambitious climbers they should always remain just that; supplementary. They should be used in addition to real climbing, not instead of it. Otherwise they will ultimately make you a worse climber.

Injuries:

It is easy to give yourself chronic injuries to the tendon supporting structures by doing lots of finger strength training. Your fingers are small structures and not designed for supporting your body weight – treat them with care. It takes years of slow, steady improvement for them to adapt to hanging small holds.

Try to climb in control and be ready to let go if something nasty happens which might pull a finger. The most common cause of finger injuries is when your feet suddenly slip off giving a sudden loading on the fingers.

If you do repetitive types of training such as laps on problems or campus boards, take care to vary the exercises and don't be scared to take a few days off if something doesn't feel right. Remember that good recovery from training makes a huge difference to your susceptibility to training injuries (sleep, diet and lifestyle).

Finger Boarding:

This is a very powerful tool for getting strong fingers because you can set up a very simple and cheap wooden rung above a doorframe at home and do short sessions frequently. This means more training but you don't get as tired as when you do a full session at the climbing wall. Make sure you don't replace your climbing with this training or your technique will suffer.



Look here for more detail on the best way to use a finger board:
<http://www.davemacleod.com/articles/roughtrainingguidepage4.html>