

# Coach Wise

## Climbing Demystified



### Part 3: Creatures of Habit...

By Dave MacLeod

In the previous two articles I've started to describe the effect of our engrained habits on our climbing performance. Now I want to explore this in more detail and try to get you thinking about which of your own habits are holding you back.

Engrained bad habits can make a climber's experience work against them at least as much as it does for them. Most climbers can see this easily, except when some arrogance accompanies the bad habits, so the climber will always fail to see bad habits for what they really are. They will always think their current way is the best or kid themselves on there is no other way for them!

#### Stage one:

Understanding the negative effects of bad habits is easy.

#### Stage two:

Finding which bad habits you have, is a bit more difficult. I'll take you through a couple of really common ones and flag up some more you might have picked up.

#### Stage three:

Actually changing engrained habits is desperately hard for most people. And the longer you've had the habit or the older you are, the harder it will be. It's not all doom and gloom for the vets though, the 'stuck in your ways' disadvantage of the old is sometimes balanced out by a sharper will to respect, understand and use the science of performance (usually fueled by the dull ache of a long performance plateau).



**REMEMBER: What you do, you become**

### How habits affect your performance

The thing about habits is, most of the time you don't even know you've got them, or even notice that you keep doing the 'thing' you've got into the habit of. They just happen. What determines them from the outset? Lots of things do. The big ones are the coincidental circumstances when you were introduced to the activity (in this case, climbing), your influences, and your current resources (e.g. your climbing wall or rock shoes etc). But naturally your personality is important too.

Let's dwell on this for a second. I've met many climbers who have a sense that their personality is responsible for much more of their 'fate' than it actually is. They will say "I'm just not cut out for [insert characteristic]". For sure, if you have developed strong habits in the opposite direction from where you need to be, you can't blame yourself for feeling like you aren't cut out for it. But it's probably just that your current habits are not cut out for it.

We can see that this personality fate attitude doesn't hold much water when we look at different populations of people. It's well known that different groups of people are consistently better at certain activities (e.g. Asians and maths), and case studies of successful individuals demonstrate quite convincingly that the effect of circumstance and external influences have much more to do with the success than is given credit for. I don't have space to explore this fully with examples, but if you are unconvinced, have a read of Gladwell's 'Outliers'. But we can see it clearly in our world of climbing without looking too deeply. Do the eastern Europeans inherently enjoy the freezing cold on alpine faces more than us? Do the Basque country's super fit climbers inherently enjoy disciplined training any more than us? Of course not. They train because everyone in the Basque trains hard. It's the norm. All the men climb 8c or above, so if you are on 7c, you are the bottom of the pile! Everyone needs to be part of some norms.

In the UK, [almost] everyone climbs HVS or 6a+. When I refer to 'everyone', I mean everyone in *your* world - the climbers you directly see around you. So if you climb E2, you are already doing well. It's hard to keep your foot hard on the gas pedal when your already out in front. What if everyone climbed E7 and you hardly could think of another climber with as low a level as yourself? Could you still settle for HVS, E2 or even E4?



**Emma Sutton clips in the most efficient position, and saves energy for the crux of Delicatessen 7a+, Siurana Photo: Dave MacLeod**

**In this scenario, the reality is that people don't sit and say I'm not cut out for it. It's too unbearable. The personality just has to deal with it.**

So, the answer to all this follows fairly easily. Surround yourself with climbers with higher standards than yourself, and you will find yourself settling less and gritting your teeth and breaking the barriers more. The higher standard, the better. Even if you don't have direct access to these invaluable influences, stay as closely in touch with what good climbers do, think and say as you can by any of the media channels you can. Don't worry too much about using these external motivators - it's just a training tool like any other. So often folk hang in the no man's land between deciding to go the extra mile and do that last route, or calling it a night and heading for a pint. All you need is something nudging you towards the good side to make quite a large difference to your choices over time.

**"If everyone around you climbed E7, would you settle for HVS?"**

So, influences matter a lot. What else does? Resources matter for developing habits. Let's explore this by looking at a really common movement technique destroying resource - bad rock shoes.

## Look at it from my shoes!

Almost everyone I've ever coached needs to change their rockshoes. When I tell them, the response is always the same; "But I don't need a super tight pair of shoes at the level I climb at. It won't make any difference to me."

Is that true? Definitely not. To understand why you need to think about how footwork and technique develop over time. But first lets get the toe-pain issue out of the way.

Many experienced climbers still wearing baggy, floppy 'entry level' shoes do so because of the memory of past agony with 'performance' shoes (that didn't fit). Performance rockshoes are designed to be snug, yes, and designed to be removed from time to time for comfort (I can wear mine for six hours at a push but usually take them when I can for comfort). But if the shoe fits, it should be snug but not painful to wear. Most people try on one or two pairs in the shop but no more than that and don't really try standing on edges or walking about in them. Because rockshoes need to fit snugly, it's pot luck whether a certain model/manufacture's last fits your individual foot shape. There is only one thing for it - go to a shop that has a massive range, and try on everything until you find the perfect fit. That two hours could save you years of lost performance gains.

So folk go away with shoes that start hurting them. They have paid good money for them so persist until the agony is too much to bear, and go back to the floppies for good. The very thought of 'performance' shoes is enough to give them a shudder. Don't do it! If you buy a pair that hurts, swallow the mistake, get them sold on ebay, bite the bullet and start again with another visit to the shop.

Why is it worth it? This is how things play out when you go back to the baggies: Every time you are gripped up, at the last bolt of a climbing wall route, struggling to get in position to clip, with seconds to spare before you plummet, you try to place your feet well. Your floppy old boot skid and skate from small edges or glassy slopers, you grip on harder and scrape through with an adrenaline fuelled arm lock-off. A subconscious message has just been delivered with a thud in your motor planning area - 'taking time to place feet well only makes things worse!' Next time, without knowing it, you barely even register the foothold options and go straight for the lock-off. So the self-reinforcing pattern of 'footwork doesn't work' is set off and gets more and more engrained. If you let it go on for years, it will get



Many technical habits form subconsciously. The quality and fit of your rock shoes affects your technique in quite a different way to your conscious attention to your feet on critical moves. Here Dave Macleod needs to get his feet working for him quickly on the crux move of *Batuka (8b)*, Margalef, Spain

so engrained that even a good coach will struggle to break you out of it.

Instead, keep looking until you find that snug but comfy pair of performance shoes. Break them in and put the floppies beyond use, not in the cupboard 'just in case'. Next time you get to that gripper move or clip, look down, set your feet on those tiny edges and soak up the feeling of security. The subconscious message instead is, 'footwork is always the answer'. And it is. Do this, and you are on an upward path of climbing performance.

Note that we are talking about learning (or training if you prefer) that goes on without you consciously trying. These habits just develop by themselves as you climb. The brain does so much learning by itself. No amount of consciously working on your footwork while wearing bad shoes can compensate for that. So don't waste your time trying.

### More bad habits:

- Avoiding falling experiences (see below)
- Always crimping
- Climbing statically
- Always climbing in the same venues
- Moving both hands before moving the feet up
- Trying to use the side of the foot on small footholds

# Top Tip

## Know Your Enemy Habits:

Let's look at another extremely common set of habits that affect both technique and confidence - leading tactics. Female climbers should especially think about this - most female climbers I've coached are really held back by leading confidence, compare to a mere majority in male climbers. That said, many male climbers consider themselves confident leaders but actually use all of the same avoidance techniques (with delusion thrown in).

### The Fear of Falling!!!

It's a natural thing - fear of falling encourages three key mistakes in leading; not leading (toproping instead). Saying 'take' before they actually fall, systematically clipping too early or hesitating and slowing down when the point of falling approaches.

In a sport climbing situation where the fall is objectively safe, this is utterly destructive to climbing technique and confidence. The mechanism is subconscious as with the previous rock shoe example. Each time you do any of the above, the subconscious message to the brain is 'stopping or avoiding the possibility of taking leader falls is normal, and the flip side - pushing on to the point of falling is abnormal'.

Climbers often rationalise as: "I don't need to totally go for it, or even lead every time. I'll turn it on for a special route". It would be nice if that were really possible, but it's not. When you get to your goal routes and you have to lead, have to climb nearly past a clip before you can clip the rope in and have to battle on, pumped and on the edge of falling, the brain can't cope.

You've been reinforcing a norm of avoiding this situation for months and years, and all of a sudden you are doing the exact opposite. You are trying to concentrate on hard moves, but all the while your brain is screaming alarm bells THIS IS WRONG, THIS IS NOT NORMAL!!! Goal route or not, you can't magic confidence from thin air in this situation.

Put another way, climbers often believe that avoiding taking 'proper' leader experiences including 'wobblers' and falls above the protection on a regular basis has a neutral effect on their performance. Let's be clear, avoidance of these situations is a strong DETRAINING stimulus.

This comes back to the most basic training law - what you do, you become. You must go for it every time you climb, in order to be able to go for it at all. Easier said than done. So what should you do? A good starting place is never, ever to say 'take' (again, with the exception of where real danger is involved). Start every single route, every time you climb, with complete resolve to continue until you fall.

Falling is part of realising your potential in sport climbing (and ultimately in trad with modern gear). It's natural that it feels wrong to start with - we are programmed to feel that very strongly. So we must teach the brain to overcome this and judge the fall by its circumstances, not become scared at the prospect of any fall. The only way to achieve this is by repeated and regular exposure to it. It would be nice if there was another way, but there ain't!



**We are naturally programmed to feel like falling is wrong, but it is part of finding your limits in safe climbing. The only way to feel confident is to practice it... a lot.**

**Dave Macleod falls from the final move of *Metalcore* (8c+), *The Anvil***

## Fear of Falling (continued)

If you do find yourself above the bolt and unable to continue, recognise that shouting for your belayer to tighten up the rope before your fall will make the fall much worse. The tight rope will make you slam into the wall, bashing ankles, knees, wrists or worse. This nasty experience often underlies climbers tendency to avoid falling even more. But all that needs to be done is to let yourself drop onto the slack rope which will catch you much more softly and give you a moment to get in position to brace your feet in case of any swing in. Of course it's good to let your belayer know of your imminent flight, but if they take tight while you are above the protection, ask them n

... You must practice falling as well, to get good at it (there is some skill involved in getting in position as you fall) but mainly to gain familiarity with it. If you shy away from this, your chances of ultimately being a confident leader are extremely low. Practice steadily from small falls beside the bolt, to larger ones where you get time to really feel you are falling. This is practice for the belayer too. Make sure they are giving enough slack to prevent a slammer when the rope comes tight.

Avoidance of leading scenarios and consequent lack of confidence is extremely common in female climbers especially. As well as the methods of avoidance I talked about above, other confidence destroyers are clip-sticks (if you have one, throw it away, it is your enemy!), asking climbing partners to lead first so you can top rope, grabbing a different colour hold rather than take the fall and extending every clip with a long sling to avoid the run-outs.

The bottom line here is that climbing at your limit on the edge of falling, and actually taking falls from above protection is essential as part of your every day climbing if you want to realise anything like your potential. If you don't have this confidence, you'll climb everything as if you are soloing, i.e. too slowly, statically and using far more energy than necessary. Eventually this style will become your engrained climbing style, leading or not. So it's also changing your technique in a way you don't want it to.

**The effect on performance is such that you could train your physical strength and endurance for a decade but still never compensate for the effects of avoiding real leading (and falling). Alternatively you could attack this aspect and gain confidence in a few months. It's your choice.**



**Falling badly from an E3 at Bosigran, Cornwall**

# Top Tip

## Finding the will: - to attack the bad habits

In my third CoachWise article we looked at two of the biggest bad habits that commonly affect climbers. Chances are you have one of either. So just addressing these will be enough to jump a grade or three. There are many more and I'll talk through some more on my CoachWise web articles over the coming months.

But even if you have understood that you have a bad habit like avoiding falls, what if you feel you can't find the motivation to do something about it. It's true, this is the hard bit. Ultimately, a direct conversation with yourself has to take place where you remind yourself fully of the benefits of making the change, the downsides if you don't and a strong decision to start now, not sometime in the future (which never arrives). But there are some additional tools to help, some of which we've looked at bit already:

- Surrounding yourself with influences who already have the habits you need to adopt will make it much easier to galvanise your own motivation to adopt them.
- In addition to real human influences, keeping inspiration in the form of images, film or writing that have helped you in the past to hand might keep you on the straight and narrow.
- Identify the key decision moments where you systematically fail to make the right (but hard choices). Try to alter them in some way to make the right choice easier, or the wrong choice harder, or even remove it completely if you can.
- Start now, but decide on small increments to adopt the good habit, piece by piece.
- Try coinciding your effort to change a bad habit with a change of scenery, like a climbing trip. Familiar situations like the local climbing wall are difficult places to change regular habits.
- Plan to give yourself a reward if you've completed a habit changing task you will find hard.
- Tell friends you are planning to make a change, to introduce a more public commitment to it.
- If you like being competitive with your climbing mates, use this to fuel your motivation, but remember it's just a means, not an end.
- With some habits it might be easier and more practical just to commit yourself fully from the outset, rather than in small increments. E.g. Give away that clip-stick, and throw those old floppy rockshoes in the bin for good.

Usually, a combination of all of these things is what works. Folk often go wrong because they feel that really motivated people shouldn't need any external motivational tools and should be able to find the pure willpower from within. It's a nice ideal that some of the most driven athletes in the world can sometimes get close to. But the reality is most athletes are using all these tools and still struggling to get the best out of themselves.

**Other's worry that certain motivational tools like competition with your peers can introduce a questionable motivation. So long as you see these tools as they are - tools for helping you get closer to breaking personal barriers, they should be perfectly fine to use. The 'moderation in all things' rule is useful here - use a little of all of these and your climbing will get better, but stay balanced. Going too far off the middle way, towards obsessiveness or a very one sided sporting experience of extreme attitudes, lifestyles or choices of any kind is usually a cul-de-sac with a long road back.**