

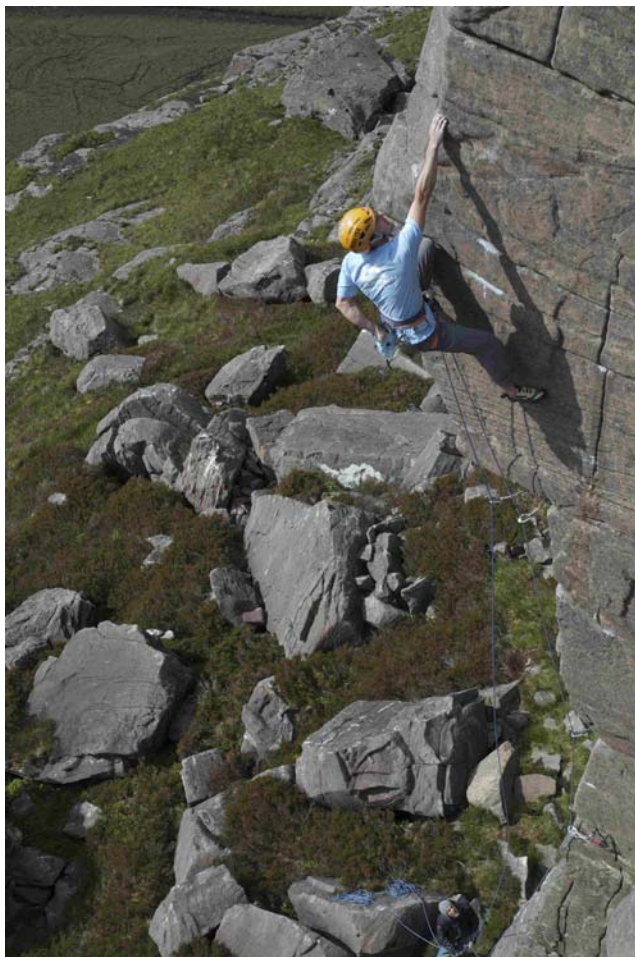
CoachWise

Climbing Demystified



Part 4: Fail Well, Climb it Next Time

By Dave MacLeod



You might have noticed in my Coachwise articles that when identifying the common hurdles climbers face in breaking to the next level, I've talked about very general things; what your climbing mates are like, which room of the house your fingerboard is in, that kind of thing. In this final article of the series, I'm going to carry on this theme by flagging up more wrong turns that carry most folk off the path to high climbing grades. All of them are simple, practical aspects of everyday life or psychology. Let's see if any of them strike a chord with you...

Failure is your friend

Regular exposure to different rock types and climbing venues helps to keep your attitude to learning and ability fresh and healthy. Dave MacLeod sampling Torridonain sandstone on Kolus E8 6c, Seanna Mheallan, during the first ascent

Dealing with failure

I have noticed a theme in my coaching clients over the years. More than half of them are very strong (physically) for the grades they climb and are already more than strong enough to realise their goal grades. Yet they are the ones totally focused on fine tuning their climbing/training gains to squeeze out that extra smidgen of strength. It's barking up the wrong tree. The real reason they are totally focused on strength is because deep down they are avoiding their real weakness which is either fear of falling, or fear of failure. I've talked about attacking fear of falling in previous articles on my training blog, but fear of failure is a real problem for so many. But how?

Well, it takes different forms. Here are some examples:

- Uncomfortable climbing with others watching or even just present.
- Getting attached to 'reference' routes you know well and use to measure current fitness levels, but using them far too often.
- Putting off trying desired routes until you feel fitter, but never feeling fit enough.
- Regularly getting frustrated and angry at your climbing performances.
- Uncomfortable talking or even thinking about time-framed climbing goals.
- You think 'I'll not do X route just now because I fell off that before and X is watching me right now. I'll do y route instead because I can cruise it'.

The problem here is that most climbers who have a fear or failure problem, don't actually know they have. So how do you know? To be honest it's not easy without access to an objective source of feedback who doesn't mind hurting your feelings. But if you are far from the ideal attitude to failure, then you should probably see it as a problem and start attacking it.

The ideal attitude is that failure is an absolutely integral and central part of any worthwhile endeavor and of breaking performance barriers in sport. Failure can and should be relished as a psychological tool to motivate, a practical source of essential feedback for those who don't have a coach and even the spice that makes eventual success taste so sweet when it finally comes. In cheesy American self-help book language; failure is your friend.



If you haven't thrown up yet, consider the next point:

In my opinion there is much confusion about the place and role of failure in western society that has spilled over into sport with poor consequences for its participants. It's become an increasing norm that failure generally is bad, unacceptable and even punishable.

If governments fail to meet targets, they are booted out. If football managers fail to win the league, they are sacked. Make a professional error, and your ass is getting sued etc. Watch a TV show like 'The Apprentice' and you see reams of smart folk keeping a straight face while they announce that they simply don't accept personal failure. I've explored this idea in more detail in my extra web article this month, but there is a fairly simple detail missed out here. It's fine to settle for nothing less than personal success *in the long run*. But *temporary failure* is the essential part of long term success. That bit gets dropped off in the edit. It wouldn't make good TV or a good headline sound-bite.

As always for any training intervention, the only way to solve this modern and common tendency is to attack it head on. This should happen first with a dramatic reorientation towards what failure means, followed by immersing yourself as pro-actively as possible in training situations featuring eventual success on top of repeated temporary failures.

Beinn Eighe: For most, the intimidation of big mountain trad crags and the tactics needed to climb well in them will always be on the steep part of the improvement curve. Even a little can go a long way to learning to be a good, confident leader and tactician. Mountain instructors are one group of climbers who sometimes have the opposite problem - plenty of confidence but lack of finger strength and fitness



The reorientation should centre around the idea that 'failure to fail' regularly in climbing, is the ultimate failure to realise one's potential. In fact it's failure to even stay on the road to success. The practical part is to actively seek out those situations that really expose you to your weakest, most amateur climbing limitations, publicly as well as privately. Tell people your goals. Make sure they know when you aim to have them completed. You won't manage all of them or maybe even any (it's normal!!). And make sure you admit publicly that you couldn't manage them (this time at least). Pick the climbing situation you'd least like others to watch, and climb with as many people watching as possible. If they are filming or taking photos too, that's even better.



Board training: Dave MacLeod training at home. Indoor training gives you a killer advantage in strength and fitness. But for some, it can be quite damaging to mental toughness. You get too familiar at your own wall as an 'expert', creating subconscious fear or failure to match your own expectations. Aggressively seek out new places. The worse you think you will be at them, the better training effect they will have

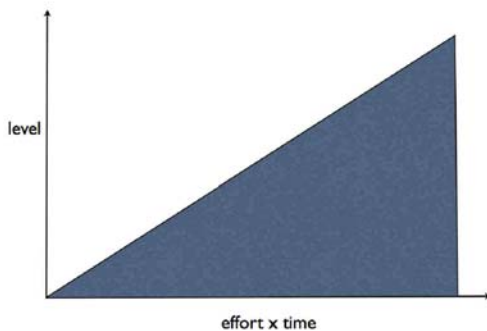
My own fear of failure buster is hot, humid climbing walls. I've found that my ability drops drastically compared to many others in this situation, and I'll get brutally burned off by climbers I could out climb in almost any other situation. So I make myself have a session in a busy warm bouldering wall with locals who have the problems wired at least every couple of months.

The psychological effect of this 'therapy' is to let go of the spectre of failure. You feel you have nothing to lose. You are not perfect, you make mistakes, you pedal your feet, wobble, shout 'watch me' in a high pitched voice and fall off. It's easy to forget that everyone does. But if this failure washes over you as it should, you can get on with the real tasks of understanding climbing better. Through failure you will learn your systematic errors, receive reminders about them and eventually overcome them. Through public failure, you will open yourself to nuggets of objective advice from friends, and learn something new about your own abilities.

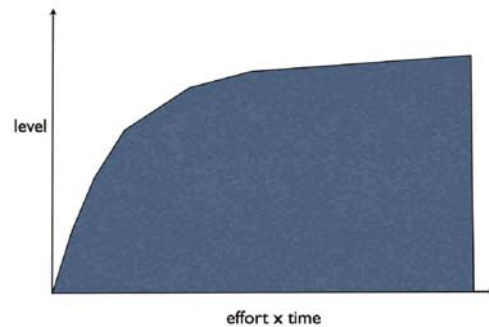
Summary: Try hard, fail often, and succeed next time

Think curves, not lines

Now I want to draw your attention to a poorly understood but critical element of the work your weaknesses principle; improvement curves. Now I'm going to hit you with two scary sports science graphs:



Graph 1



Graph 2

1. How it is in most people's imagination.
2. The real picture of improvement with effort and time. You can see that on the right side of the plot, not much result is happening despite pouring ever larger resources in to that aspect of performance.

The second graph above is how our improvement rate tends to derive from our effort we put into improving over time. You can use it to depict a global measure like 'overall climbing ability'. But it really becomes useful when we see that this relationship is occurring for each and every sub-set of abilities that make up general climbing ability; footwork, mental toughness, finger strength, move repertoire and all these very different things.

If we manage to put in enough time and effort to get onto the flat part of the ability curve in any one aspect of ability, we're going to have to pour vast amounts of hard work to get any more decent returns in improvement in that aspect. But instead, if we turn to another aspect, where we are still on the steep part of the curve (a nice way of saying we're rubbish at it, don't you think?) we can go much further with less effort.

So the goal is to continually find the parts of your climbing on the steepest part of the learning curve and get ready to refocus as soon as those returns start to peter out. It's been said that climbing is difficult to train for because there are so many different ingredients that contribute to a good climbing performance. But in fact this makes it easier with the approach described above, because only the real pro's ever need to be in that frustrating flat part of the curve in every aspect (I've never met a climber who fits this criteria).

This all sounds very easy, but the problem is that the flat part of the curve - being a relative expert in one area, say, fingery boulder problems or runout slabs, is a psychologically comfortable place to be. Your performance from week to week is stable and good compared to your peers. You feel good about yourself and confident. This is the dangerous place to be if you're serious about getting better at climbing.

Find a way to enjoy and relish finding new parts of the climbing game you are bad at, and you will keep climbing the ability ladder at full speed.

TOP TIP

Make the most of your own situation

One of the big practical problems that keep climbers from their goals is how the whole picture of their participation in the sport fits into their life and leisure time. You'll hear lots of people talking about how "climbing is not a sport, it's a way of life". In some senses this can be true, but as far as time spent doing it is concerned, work and family are the way of life, and climbing is the leisure escape. So let's make the most of it. Here are a few workarounds for reaching your big goals in climbing, that will suit different personalities:

The temporary athlete

Sometimes, people feel they simply have to achieve a certain goal in climbing, or anything. But after a few abortive attempts, they realise they don't have the 'bug' for the long grind of training and the athletic lifestyle. They desperately want to climb 8a or E4 or whatever, but not if it means an adult life of watching what you eat, missing social occasions, career opportunities, or even just having to try so hard every time you climb. People I've coached often seem very embarrassed to admit this feeling, even though it's totally normal!

I've seen some people manage to square this big deadlock of desires by being a temporary athlete. In other words, getting the athletic hard work 'out of the way' and then getting back to normal. This makes a lot of athletes happy when it works, and it definitely can.

Decide clearly what the goal is, the more defined it is, the better. Organise everything so you can literally drop out of life for however long it takes to achieve it, and go and do it. The hard work of training, dieting, no drinking etc won't feel hard "because it'll be over soon".

There are two ways to do this, either with a modest goal and going for it every few years or every season. Some people will take some months off between jobs, or a whole year, or just sacrifice other leisure activities for a while in order to focus. Whatever suits. It also works for really massive goals, done once in a lifetime. Some folk will take a three year career break and go and do 8c, and then never climb anywhere near this level again, completely satisfied with doing it once.

The focused weekend warrior

Beware the focused weekend warrior. At their best they can be among the fittest and most gritty athletes out there. They know exactly what they want, they know their resources and abilities really well, and their time is precious, so they're gonna get that next hold because they can't come back tomorrow.

The focused weekend warrior really wants to be the best sports person they can be, but they want a life too, a full life with a family and a good job. They can't give up either, but they've got a lot of energy and cleverness to throw at trying to have both. So long as you accept that it ultimately has a ceiling, this is a successful formula for many people.

Its advantages are that it does tend to focus the mind, not only in better thought out goal setting that sets you up for a motivation feeding series of cumulative small successes, but also in the moment of climbing, because the time is always now.

It's a demanding art form which only works when tightly managed by the organised. Keep things simple, don't pick goal routes that aren't in regular condition or a pain to get to. Get good reliable partners that think along the same lines and be a good team together. Help each other. Get a good routine of training that everyone, especially your family understands and is happy with. It all comes down to being an efficient manager. The rest falls into place really.

The local

If you are the type of person that can do it, one strategy that works to clock up the climbing hours and ability without quitting your job is to move right next door to a climbing mecca. It has to be really right next door to work. More than 15 minutes is probably going to backfire and become a motivational black hole rather than cornucopia.

The specialist

Another strategy is to become either a temporary or permanent specialist in a single climbing discipline, so it simplifies everything and you can go much further up the ability ladder than if you did a bit of everything like most people do. I know many people who have done this with great effect in Scottish winter climbing. A smart tactical move here - choosing a discipline that takes the least number of hours of training to get to a decent level and most of the high value training happens in the mind.

It doesn't matter what strategy you choose. Choose whichever will make you happy. There are countless more ways, it's down to your imagination to juggle the pieces into place. I just wanted to point out that there's more than one way to skin a cat when it comes to approaching long term climbing goals.

TOP TIP

The ‘work your weaknesses’ platitude updated

Work your weaknesses is one of those performance related points of advice that’s given so often it’s really lost its impact. I want to re-state it, but in the process bring in two associated ideas that might give it some more life and highlight some common errors while following it.

The weakness timeline

Obviously the first stage of working on the weak areas of your climbing is to identify them. Hopefully prompts in articles like this series will help highlight common ones that make lightbulbs go ‘ping’ and you suddenly realise you have a weak area to focus on. But sometimes it takes more. Looking back in time is one tool that can help shed light on things.

We often think back on past good or bad spells in our climbing while daydreaming. This exercise is just that but asking a few more questions along the way. Here are 2 examples:

1. How has your leading confidence changed during your climbing career? If it’s been a steady growth, maybe it’s pretty good now. But have there been any circumstances that suddenly or markedly changed it? Perhaps a fall onto gear that went OK was a major confidence booster? Or maybe a bad fall caused an extended period of poor confidence. Thinking about how your attributes have changed over time always gives you a better picture of where they are now. If it’s been a long time since you took a safe fall, maybe your confidence has plateaued, and you need that sudden stimulus again to kickstart things as before. Or maybe you’ve never recovered from that bad fall and your confidence has always remained below the level pre-fall.
2. Think back to a time when you were climbing really well. It doesn’t need to be your best ever in terms of grade, just good for your level at the time. What was it about your circumstances that helped. The benefit of hindsight makes it much easier to see looking back. Perhaps it was a spell when you could meet regularly with a good partner who had the same schedule and was keen for the same things. It might have been the available rock/climbing walls. It might have been a physical job keeping your weight down. It could be any number of things.

By reading from your own autobiography you can gain specific insights using hindsight about what you and your body responds well and badly to and what lingering weaknesses you might have or be prone to.