

Coach Wise

Climbing Demystified

By Dave Macleod

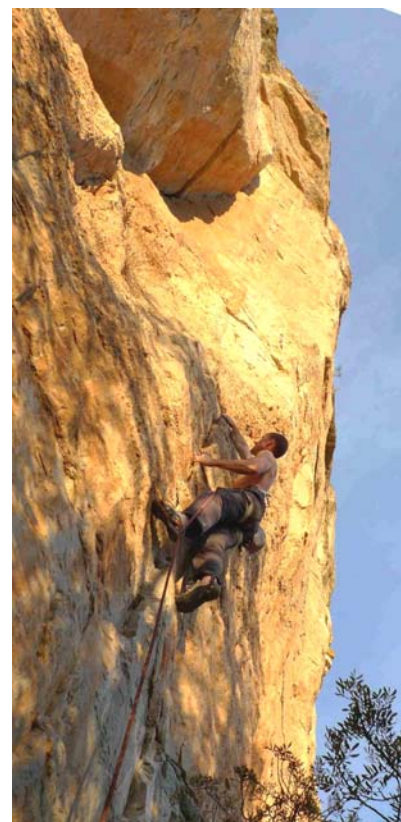


Part 6: Count your Battle Scars

For obvious reasons a lot of folks' 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 god-send to climbing in many ways. But it's also created some problems for getting good at climbing, believe it or not. The main article shows you how the presence of a local climbing wall can create enough problems to sabotage it's 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 in climbing, and how our habitual diet of climbing affects how we try to gain them.

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?
- 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 notice an overwhelming feeling of thirst and dry mouth because you've been hanging in there for over an hour, sweating and dry mouthed with constant concentration and/or fear.

What follows in this issues Top Tips are some solutions if your circumstances limit you to the climbing wall:

Top Tip 1

Workarounds for the climbing wall regular

We've just outlined how a regular diet of climbing wall routes can leave you open to a weakness in leading skills for your goal routes. The obvious solution to all this, if you have the freedom to do it, is to redress the balance between the volume of emotionally unimportant training routes indoors and your 'real' routes, whether they be indoor comps, or climbs you aspire to, or rock routes outside. So the old school method of doing ten E1s, then ten E2s, then ten E3s etc still has its place. In combination with climbing wall work it's the killer formula.

But for some it's not as simple as that. Due to work or family commitments, location or local climate, the climbing wall has to form 100% of the climbing diet for large parts of the year. It's not ideal, but it's not a big deal either, you just need workarounds.

Workarounds for the circumstantially challenged climber:

- Set up the conditions to place more value on the routes you do habitually. If you boulder indoors, have projects. Choose ones that will not get changed at least for a long time. Keep coming back to them. Take pride in your progress on them and bring out your finest weapons of psyche to see them off when you are getting really close.
- Compete with others. Make friendly competition force you to give that little bit more effort to finish the route this attempt rather than just saying 'take'. Once you get in the habit it doesn't need to be forced any more. Instead you'll love it!
- Compete formally - The more structured atmosphere of a climbing competition is a great arena for learning to get more out of yourself. Climbing competitions are notorious for seeing poor psychological sport skills in action. You can learn a lot just by being there and watching others at all levels. Watch how those who win the comps take their time, compose themselves, but in the moment of the performance they go for it with terrier tenacity. But if they blow it and fall, they are only angry for a second and don't lose their temper. The momentary outburst of anger is just a release of tension, not frustration - they gave it their all, and understood it doesn't work out every time. Those who are strong but somehow never in the top spot are the ones having tantrums and tearing up their scorecard. They are frustrated because they feel they have put the hours in with hard training, but not getting the result they deserve. They don't realise it, but they have been training the wrong thing - too wrapped up in finger strength to learn how to time, channel, prolong and enhance their delivery of all that power when it matters. They also struggle to screen out psychological distractions such as worrying about who is watching and might see them in a moment of weakness.



PHOTO: 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)* on Mucklehouse Wall, Rora Head, Orkney

Top Tip 2

Anticipation

In the main article this month I was looking at one of the most important skills of leading that allow you to make the most of your climbing ability; battle hardness. Another very general but critical climbing skill that climbing walls don't tend to teach climbers is anticipation.

In this article I'm talking about anticipation of how the climbing tasks/demands will pan out in acute timescales (the next few seconds to the entire climbing day or next few days). Climbers who have inconsistent success on climbs or less than they might expect given their level of fitness tend only to respond to new calls to action or tasks in climbing when they run right into them. Successful climbers have already anticipated them well in advance and either taken action already or have made the decision about what action to take immediately when the new 'problem' arises.

Anticipation of what exactly? Well, a vast array of decisions and actions affect how our attempt on a climb pans out, from what temperature our bodies and muscles are at to not making our attempt at the right moment in the day. Here are a few of countless examples of common issues that could be solved by anticipating the problem beforehand:

- Choosing lighter or heavier clothing to wear based on how we feel right now and not how we will feel shortly - like too hot on the climb we are about to do, or too cold on the belay we are about to be stuck on before our turn to climb.
- Clipping wires on the left side of your harness when you see the difficult crack above is on your left side.
- Managing the timing or order of attempts on climbs during the day based on thinking through forecasts, observing conditions, tides, physical effects of different planned routes on energy levels, skin etc.
- Talking the lead ahead through with your belayer so they know to give you slack for a clip quickly for the crux clip on your redpoint or so you are relaxed in the knowledge they know to watch you carefully at a certain section.
- Timing volume of climbing/rest days careful on a trip to make sure you are rested and feeling positive for your hardest route of the trip.

The general principle here is to constantly play through the upcoming climbing scenarios in your mind, and flagging up the potential problems that might get in the way of success before they are real. This might be a run through of the next five moves when you are resting at a good hold, or the rest of the day while you are walking in, or the next week if you are arriving for a trip. No dimension of the activity of going climbing should be untouched. The route, the rock, the gear, your partners, the conditions, your state of mind, your nutrition etc must all be part of it. Playing through every event in the entire climbing day before it happens makes sure that you have everything planned.

Failing on routes rarely comes down solely to lack of climbing ability to do them under ideal conditions. If it was you probably wouldn't be trying this route in the first place. It's usually down to some tactical or seemingly peripheral aspect of the game exerting its effect, however indirectly. The unpredictable element of climbing is part of its appeal for a lot of climbers, but it's always more fun to stay one step ahead of the little things that add up to get in the way of you and the top of your goal routes.



Freaky Abseiling! Good for the mind!