

Crafting Comps: Step By Step Guide For Climbing Gyms

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Posted By: **Jesse Safford** in [CWA Blog](#)



Photo: Front Climbing Club.

Every year, indoor climbing gyms of all sizes are dreaming bigger to put on their best citizen's competitions. While some gyms have been built in recent years to accommodate large events, smaller gyms find ways of creating space for finals or bringing in guest setters to elevate their competition.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Jesse Safford, head routesetter for Terra Firma Bouldering Company in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They're presenting their first session about routesetting for first-time gym-goers at the 2025 CWA Summit!
- **Who Should Read:** This article is for program managers, coaches, and senior managers who have oversight and duties related to competitions.
- **What Will You Learn:** A step-by-step guide to planning competitions and the questions you should ask.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** If you're interested in competition climbing, [we have this story on the unique setting involved in comp climbing.](#)

As the indoor climbing industry has grown and evolved, the landscape of the indoor competition has been transformed.

When your climbing gym is ready to host their citizen competition, consider these factors to

maximize the impact on your competitors and attendees.

Checkpoints for Building your Event

- Deciding who you want to participate
- Inventorying your resources
- Picking your scoring system
- Communicating expectations to your setting team
- Readyng your gym for the participants
- Hosting an amazing competition!

Who are your competitors?

Deciding as a climbing gym staff, “Who is this event for?” will help you find direction for the event.

A competition for a facility with a large youth team may have a different tone than one with mainly casual climbers. If you’re looking to gain publicity and out-of-town competitors, the setting and advertisements will be key.

If you’re able to use apps to track what routes are being logged the most, you could use that information to know the abilities of your members.

You also need to consider how long the competition routes will be on your walls, and take into consideration the impact that will have on your general membership. If they’re climbing well below or simply different to a comp-style, and your comp set is half of your gym...

Questions for your team -

- Who is this competition for?
- How many participants do we want?
- Why will they be excited about this event?

What Resources Do We Have?

Once you know who you are setting for, you can line up your elements to build the event. It’s helpful to decide beforehand if your gym can bring in guest setters, order any new holds or volumes for the event, or even borrow resources from another facility. Building a budget for your event ensures guest setters and staff are aligned in the hours of work it will take to achieve.

Time is also a resource.

Some gyms do “rolling wall closures” to allow members to climb while setting for events, or close certain days leading up to the competition.

Having clear communication with your members about closures leads to a more positive impact on your non-competition audience. Another piece of the competition puzzle is the layout of your event. Your walls are one of your greatest resources. Leading up to the competition, find the

space for finals. Mapping out lanes can also keep you on track.

Will you be allowing spectators? To avoid climbers feeling crowded during the competition, limiting spectators depending on the size of your facility is something to consider.

Questions for your team-

- What do we have on hand for this event?
- How do we want the participants to move through our space?
- What resources do we want to acquire before the event?
- How many days will our walls be closed?
- Do we want to allow spectators?
- If so, do we limit that number?

How Will We Score Competitors?

Now that you have your resources and competitor base solidified, you can begin crafting a setting and scoring plan for the competition.

These are ideally built together. You have a few options for scoring systems like redpoint or modified redpoint. You also have options for flash bonuses or tracking attempts, and you can talk about those with your setting team.

Staff and competitors should know ahead of time what scoring looks like. Your team can also decide on using paper scoresheets, or an app to track the competitors' climbs. Some climbers prefer to use a physical scoresheet and will ask either way. It's good to know what will be easiest for your participants to use.

Questions for your team-

- What system are we using?
- What will competitors be using to keep track of their scores?

What is Our Routesetting Plan?

The overall energy for the event will be felt through the routes. Take information your team has gathered about the "who" and bring that to your setting team. If you are bringing in an outside routesetter to chief your event, make sure they know your event's audience.

For example, our gym's Halloween competition had route names like "The Mummy's Curse" and "Haunted Forest" that the climbers could see on the Kaya mobile app. The tone of the competition was light-hearted, and less serious.

The setting was playful and created space for novelty moments. **That encouraged more members and youth to participate**, who normally are intimidated by the intensity of other competitions.

You can also discuss adding a finals round to your competition. This can be an exciting and show-stopping spectacle for members. Consider the additional work for setters and staff, as it can add an extra day of setting for the crew, and the competition day will be a bit longer.

Your setting team can decide on how many finals boulders there will be, which categories will have finals, and where they will take place. Allow time in the day for turnover to put the finals' boulders up and to make space for the spectators.

Chatting with the head setter and crew as you plan the event will give you opportunities to work out these logistics that affect the staffing for comp weeks.

Interested in Routesetting?

Check out Jesse's education session, "The Rec Round: Setting A Climber's First Rodeo" at the 2025 CWA Summit. This session will explore how to be conscious of and set for a gym-goers first experience with climbing. **You can see more about the session [here](#).**

Don't have a ticket to the event? Purchase before the price goes up!

You can communicate with the setting team if you're willing to bend the "normal" gym rules like having routes with multiple color holds. If you have notes from previous years about challenges the setting team encountered, you can give them to your crew.

Depending on how long the competition routes remain on the walls, talk about the impact on day pass clientele, and what you hope your gym looks like on the days following the competition. Clear intentions for the routesetters will make better use of your resources, and the labor of the crew you are bringing in.

Questions for your team-

- What are your goals for this event?
- What information does your setting team need?
- How long will these routes be up?
- Do we want to have finals?
- What will the walls look like after the event?

Is Our Team Ready?

After routes are set and categorized, step into the participants' perspective. Think about the flow of traffic through your space and look for benches or obstacles that could create bottlenecks. The routesetters and desk staff should be aware of the rules so they're ready to help participants with questions about routes or guidelines.

Make sure you communicate with members if the gym is open during the event for them to use

training boards or the workout space.

Questions for your team-

- Is our space available for members during the event?
- Are the routes marked clearly?
- Does our staff know the rules for the event?

With these events being so important and costly, it's best to have management, the setting crew, and desk staff on the same page.

If you can have conversations around the intended audience, the resources on hand, and the setting plan, then teams can navigate the pressure of the week together.

Members get the most out of these events and will return to compete again when the experience is fulfilling for individual competitors as well as the community.

Interested in Routesetting for Competition Climbing?

Bring it up in the next **Routesetting Quarterly Roundtable**, free for members, on March 31!

About the Author



Jesse Safford (they/them) is the head setter at Terra Firma Bouldering Co. in Grand Rapids, MI. They started climbing while studying art at Montana State. Their interest in building community and connecting with other setters has taken them to Tennessee, Texas, Florida and Illinois to set competitions. They also coach the youth climbing clubs and teach adult technique classes at their home gym. They hope to build a welcoming community for LGBTQ+ setters and climbers.



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