

Routesetters Working With Coaches: Part 1

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in [CWA Blog](#)



Routesetting in climbing gyms presents unique challenges, however, accommodating the diverse needs of all climbers is the primary concern. Gyms often cater to members who use the gym as their “crag” or are training for outdoor climbing.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Andrew Carter Smith, Head Coach at Triangle Rock Club in North Carolina. He specializes in content for both coaches and routesetters.
- **Who Should Read:** This article is for routesetters, managers of routesetting, coaches, and program staff.
- **What Will You Learn:** This is the first article in a series on how to build up to working together effectively, cross-departmentally, with coaches, and with routesetters.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** Don't miss our [upcoming Routesetter's Roundtable, as part of the CWA's Webinar Program](#). If you're reading this after October 2024, check out our upcoming events section to stay up-to-date on upcoming webinars.

They balance this with trying to push limits with modern movement, holding competitions, and setting climbing routes for those training for competitive climbing. Balancing these varied needs can be a daunting task.

Navigating Limited Real Estate & Member Interests

A major factor complicating routesetting is the limited real estate in most gyms.

For instance, commercial gyms can set more “outdoorsy” or old-school style moves with a denser hold spread, whereas macro-heavy hold sets or comp-style moves require lower density setting, resulting in fewer routes in a given lane. This balancing act requires careful planning and collaboration between routesetters, stakeholders, managers, and coaches. Some ways to deal with this are to have a variety of styles in each set, some have specific sections of the gym set aside as a “comp wall” or some gyms may have a rotating “set” that uses lower density.

There is no perfect way to do it, but one of the most important factors is to decide what the goals of the gym and team are.

For many gyms, having a strong youth team is a priority, so this may require more emphasis on comp/modern movement. Some indoor climbing gyms are designed to be less training focused and more “crag-like” and thus may want higher density and different vibes.

Understanding what different populations consider “cool” in an indoor climbing gym context is crucial. For example, regular members might be less inclined to spend time on a volume-heavy skate boulder compared to a crimpy line on a 30-degree wall. Catering to these preferences while ensuring the climbing gym remains challenging and engaging for competitive athletes is essential for maintaining member satisfaction.

Diverse Hold Brands, Types, and Textures

Competitive athletes benefit from exposure to a variety of hold brands, types, and textures. Familiarity with specific holds can be a decisive factor in high-level or high-stakes competitions.

While it is essential for “comp kids” to understand the basics, such as the difference between a crimp and a pocket, **exposure to different brands, shapes, and textures of holds is equally crucial.** Climbing gyms should strive to purchase and use a diverse range of holds creatively.

For example, the introduction of No-Tex holds at the World Championships last summer highlighted the importance of variety and experimentation. Climbing gyms should avoid letting larger profile or “weird” holds gather dust in the setting closet. Even though setting with these holds might be cumbersome, they offer unique challenges that are beneficial for competitive athletes.

Routesetters can (carefully) modify holds (or the wall) to use them in new, creative ways. Figuring out what balance of screw-ons, jibbing, and even “customization” of holds/volumes/walls is key to having a successful team and setting program.

Creative Positions and Tricky Route Reading

From my experience as a climber, coach, and routesetter, commercial routesetting often

features blocs or routes with hard moves, but the positions between them may be relatively “safe” or comfortable, especially on slab or lead routes. Whereas in a more modern or compy context, the positions themselves may not even be comfortable or “safe.” Examples include using texture to force a smaller range of acceptable stances (dual text foot chips requiring pressure more specifically) or using blockers to force specific angles of use.

To challenge competitive athletes, routesetters should incorporate creative positions and tricky route reading. This means designing problems that require climbers to think and solve complex movement AND stance puzzles.

Instead of straightforward sequences, include moves that force climbers to use unconventional body positions or discover hidden uses of holds.

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This trains athletes to become better problem solvers and adapt to the unpredictable nature of competition routes. For example, a boulder problem might require a climber to execute a tricky mantle or a dynamic move to an obscure hold, simulating the kind of challenges they might face in a competition.

At the end of the day, when each climb has a lesson that was intended to be taught it also benefits the greater membership and day-users as well!

As a routesetter, I challenge you to take all climbs seriously and ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is the goal of this route? What am I trying to teach or draw out of the athlete?
2. Where does this lie on the RIC scale?
 - Is this only high in risk or intensity but not complexity?
 - How does this spread of RIC land when compared to other climbs on this set or the gym as a whole?
3. How does this climb contribute or detract from the greater set (macro and micro level)?
 - How might this play into the experience of people training for different goals?

Progressive Lead Routes

Progressive lead routes are essential for competitive athletes. This is sometimes overlooked in a lead gym as we often end up setting crux-y or punchy routes. These routes should gradually increase in difficulty, allowing climbers to build endurance and develop the ability to handle sustained challenges. Progressive routes simulate the demands of competition, where climbers must conserve energy and maintain focus over a long series of difficult moves.

Including a variety of route styles is also beneficial. Endurance-based climbs, power-focused problems, and technical sequences ensure well-rounded training.

This variety helps athletes develop a broad skillset, making them more versatile and better prepared for different competition scenarios.

Collaborative Approaches for Effective Routesetting

To create an environment that meets the needs of competitive athletes and regular gym members, collaboration between routesetters and coaches is crucial. **Routesetters should regularly consult with coaches** to understand the training needs and goals of competitive athletes.

Coaches can provide valuable insights into the types of routes and problems that will best prepare athletes for competitions.

Involving competitive athletes in the routesetting process can be beneficial. Their feedback on newly set routes can help routesetters fine-tune the difficulty and style to match competition standards better. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership and engagement among athletes, enhancing their training experience.

Balancing the Needs of All Gym Members

While it is essential to cater to competitive athletes, it is equally important to ensure that regular gym members enjoy their climbing experience.

This balance can be achieved through thoughtful planning and communication. For example, designate specific areas or times for comp-style setting, while ensuring that other areas remain accessible and enjoyable for all members.

Regular members should not feel overshadowed by the focus on competitive training. By maintaining a variety of route styles and difficulties, gyms can cater to climbers of all levels and preferences. Hosting community events, workshops, and climbing clinics can also help integrate all members into the gym's climbing culture.

Looking Ahead

By understanding and addressing the needs of competitive athletes, routesetters can create an environment that prepares them for the sport's demands and enriches the climbing experience for all gym members.

The art of routesetting requires a delicate balance of creativity, collaboration, and an understanding of diverse climbing needs. By working closely with coaches and incorporating feedback from competitive athletes, routesetters can create routes that challenge and engage climbers at all levels. This collaborative approach benefits competitive athletes and ensures that regular gym members enjoy a fulfilling climbing experience.

The climbing gym is a unique space where the needs of various stakeholders intersect. By addressing these needs thoughtfully, we can create an environment that supports the growth

and enjoyment of all climbers.

In the next article of this series, we will explore strategies for balancing the needs of comp kids with those of regular members, ensuring that everyone can enjoy and benefit from the routes set in your gym.

Routesetters: Register For Our Upcoming Webinar

Don't miss our upcoming Routesetters Roundtable, just in time for discussions coming out of certification events at the Setter Summit.

Register for free as a CWA Member below. We hope to see you there!

About the Author



Carter Smith is a coach, routesetter, and outdoor educator. He is currently the Head Coach for Triangle Rock Club and lives in North Carolina with his partner and 2 dogs. Carter received his Masters in Experiential and Outdoor Education from Western Carolina University in 2022. Carter's passion lies in helping children and adults to use climbing as a vehicle for self discovery.

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