

Unique Experience Of Being An Indoor Climbing Coach

March 4, 2024

in [CWA Blog](#)



Credit: CityRock

I am going to start by expressing a potentially contentious opinion: I love *The Catcher in the Rye*.

While not everyone familiar with the novel may have enjoyed it, the story always resonated with me: a coming-of-age tale where the protagonist struggles with his perceptions of adulthood, 'phoniness,' and the loss of childhood innocence. All children run around blissfully in a rye field that abruptly ends with a cliff edge, sending them tumbling irrevocably into maturity. The main character, Holden, aspires to be a "catcher in the rye" who stops wayward youth from the edge of the field, sending them back along their blissful way into the fields of childhood. Spoiler: Holden ultimately decides it is not ideal to prevent a kid from "growing up," focusing instead on what trajectory this change takes.

Article At A Glance

- **Writer:** Christopher Oshinski, [Sportrock Climbing Centers, VA.](#), and writer with the CWA for two years. Chris focuses on social justice issues, coaching and training, and management.
- **Who Should Read:** This is for coaches, programmers, trainers, and all those who appreciate what they do for the indoor climbing industry.
- **What Will You Learn:** What impacts coaches have on people's lives, and how those people have a great impact on the coach's lives, too.
- **Tie-Ins, Resources, or Further Reading:** This pairs nicely with Chris's [earlier work on the intangible benefits of working in a climbing gym](#).

In this light, I have found working with youth to be a tremendous privilege, one that—like parenting—carries with it a great weight that must be addressed thoughtfully.

As a coach, I get to share in this developmental journey for not just a single year, like many traditional educators, but often for several years. This entails the possibility of building long-lasting relationships with these kids during crucial stages of their lives, with more opportunities to impart positive and constructive learning. The didactic responsibilities inherent in these interactions are a source of great joy for me, and I relish the chance to be an impactful character in their stories. To be clear, I am not extolling my greatness or suggesting I am a worthy role model; I am merely embracing the occasion to be one.

Climbing, as we all know and love, involves a good deal of physical and mental challenge, and like any sport or endeavor, is replete with teachable moments concerning adversity, effort, and conceptions of success.

The idiosyncrasies of indoor competitive climbing impose a host of mental challenges for an athlete, including (but not limited to):

- On-sight format, where you only have one attempt on a climb
- A timer, meaning you have a finite window to find and execute beta
- Isolation, restricts the athletes from observing other climbers before their attempts. An extension of isolation restricts competitors from interacting with anyone else during the competition, most notably, perhaps, their coaches.

This means that a lot of preparation and individual ability is required to navigate all the nuances in competitive climbing, including how to ‘reset’ or handle a setback.

This atmosphere, to me, really encourages heuristic learning, where the athletes ought to be instructed in how to manage themselves during a competition, from reading and executing movements to dusting themselves off after perceived failures.

Since we as coaches are not permitted to actively involve ourselves during competitions, a significant amount of prep work must be done during practice. Beyond simply “being a good climber,” concepts of sports psychology and character building play a key role in helping athlete attain their performance goals, and represent a more impactful opportunity to help nurture and support their development.

I contend that most—if not all—positive qualities of an individual teammate translate to some degree to the team, meaning **that healthy, supportive, and empowered athletes will generate a healthy, supportive, and empowered team atmosphere.** In turn, this creates a positive feedback loop, where the team and its components mutually benefit from character building.

Practice is an excellent venue for learning how to set and meet positive goals. We learn to win and lose graciously; to always support efforts (ours and our teammates), and to be reminded of why we climb in the first place—it is fun.

Such an environment requires intention and a high level of effort to create.

Much of this starts with us coaches, whose actions and words can carry meaningful weight for the athletes. While I certainly believe many of these qualities stem from the team itself, especially as each athlete brings with them their own wonderful qualities, it does mean that we should be ever mindful of what we say, how we say it, and how we behave around the team. Just as strengthening an individual component of a team bolsters the greater whole, so too do the coaches and athletes benefit one another.

The exchange is priceless as each kid on our team is a learning and growing person, with their own exquisite lives, and so are we.

Beyond the training plans and the workouts, the competitions, and the climbing, there is a rewarding sense of responsibility to be a positive and constructive force in their lives. We can teach someone what it means to dig deep; we can help set someone back on their feet; we can counter negative thoughts; we can reinforce positive self-talk, body images, and attitudes; we can provide a space for them to thrive; we can, we can, we can.

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About the Author



Chris Oshinski is the assistant director for [Sportrock Climbing Centers](#) Sterling, VA location, passionate for teaching youth and addressing inequalities. Having obtained an MA in Public Sociology in 2018, Chris loves to explore the myriad forms of agency vis-a-vis individual and collective efforts at fostering social justice and human rights.

