



# Bouldering

*Often referred to as “the purest form of climbing,” bouldering is a form of rock climbing undertaken without a rope or protective gear, normally limited to short climbs on natural boulders or artificial boulders in gyms. Unlike traditional climbing, the focus is on individual moves or a short sequence of moves. Bouldering, which is especially popular in France, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada, is about problem-solving, movement, and climbing with purity and simplicity.*

**Keywords:** boulder, cliff, rock, climbing, nature, purity, power, strength, dynamics, agility, flexibility.

**B**ouldering—the discipline of ropeless climbing on small cliffs and boulders—celebrates the joy of movement over stone. Bouldering is all about movement, and climbing with purity and simplicity, usually without any protective gear.

## The Urge to Boulder

Bouldering is one of the fastest growing variants of climbing. Some reasons for its popularity are that it can be done safely, there are rocks for every age and level of climbing, and not much equipment is required.

When climbers are asked to reflect on their passion for bouldering, they often refer to a special or “pure” experience with nature. Bouldering has been referred to as “the purest form of climbing.”

Although climbers can be competitive, the activity itself is very much an individual experience. As boulderer Bobbi Bensman describes it: “Climbing with others is great, but you can go bouldering solo—no partner, no gear, just you and the rock, and a pair of boots. I love the purity of the sport” (Bensman 1999, 8).

## History and Evolution

Although bouldering became an international sport in the early 1970s, the origins of bouldering go back much further. Climbing boulders continues a long tradition of climbing, in particular gymnastic climbing. Ropes, ladders, masts, and poles have been used in physical education for centuries. Some of the early-nineteenth-century handbooks of the European pioneers of physical education contain illustrations of equipment similar to modern indoor climbing walls. Friedrich Jahn organized climbing competitions within his famous Turnplätze at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Some climbers will argue that the history of “artificial climbing” is unlike that of bouldering, which is all about the direct experience with unspoiled nature. Within the history and evolution of bouldering, several phases can be distinguished in which the “natural” and “artificial” play different roles.

Bouldering on actual rocks, without the use of special gear, can be considered the first phase. Although initially not a sporting activity, this way of climbing is as old as human existence. Phase two—climbing on artificial walls—also has a history going back more than two centuries (as described above).

A third phase is the manufacture of artificial boulders of different sizes and levels of challenge. Indoor climbing is considered an ideal way of practicing.

One can even define a fourth phase, namely climbing on buildings—“buildering”—which has become an extreme sport activity in itself.

## Equipment, Ethos, and Technique

Boulderers usually need climbing shoes, chalk, a chalk bag, and a crash pad that functions as a cushion in case of a fall. Some protection can also be provided by a

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spotter—a person who accompanies and assists the boulderer.

The use of ropes is controversial within the bouldering community. According to John Gill—one of the main pioneers of bouldering who began practicing and promoting bouldering in the mid-1950s—a defining characteristic of contemporary bouldering is that ropes are not to be used. Chipping “holds” within the rocks is even more controversial than the use of ropes. Doing so can fundamentally change the rock as an existing “problem.” Another controversial trick is the use of “cheater stones,” placed on the ground to allow a climber to reach the first hold of a problem.

Climbing techniques do not depend so much on height, but more on the texture and difficulty of rocks. Every rock has its own character and specific difficulties and challenges. Experienced climbers can explain what the particularities and differences are when climbing in famous bouldering sites, such as Fontainebleau, in France; in the United States, Yosemite and the Buttermilks (both in California) and Hueco Tanks (in Texas); Stanage and the Peak District, in the United Kingdom; or Dover Island (Nova Scotia, Canada).

It is impossible to discuss all climbing techniques, but what follows is a review of some of the main ones.

“Crimping,”—an essential technique—is grabbing the rock with bent fingers. This is a technique that requires a great deal of strength in a climber’s arms and hands. Other hand techniques include the pinch grip and the open-handed grip.

The ways in which the hands, fingers, legs, or feet are able to carry the weight of the climber can vary and will of course depend on available holds and grips. Eventually, the coordination of the whole body is crucial. One technique in which the whole body is directly involved is called a *dyno*—one of the most spectacular, free aerial moves. A dyno is a specific technique that enables a climber to get to a hold that is beyond his or her reach. Using the power of the legs, the climber “jumps” to the next hold. With the so-called *double dyno*, both arms and legs come off the wall at the same time.

Since leg muscles are usually stronger than arm muscles, it is important to have the legs do most of the heavy work. Some

footwork techniques are *smearing* (putting the rubber of the foot sole against the rock to create friction), *edging* (putting the edge of the boot onto a rock ledge), or *heel-hooking* (raising your foot over your head, and using it as a claw).

## Levels and Qualities of Climbing

There are several grading systems that are used to indicate the difficulty of a climb. The most widely known systems are the V-grade system (ranging from V0 to V16) created by John Sherman, and the Fontainebleau system, ranging from 1 to 8+. A climber needs the right balance of strength, agility, and flexibility, combined with certain mental abilities to stay cool under extreme circumstances (in particular when free soloing).

Watching and listening to experienced climbers are good ways to get acquainted with the talents that are needed to climb difficult rocks. The documentary *Stone Monkey*, for example, gives a nice portrait of British climber Johnny Dawes. When talking about climbing the Indian Face (one of the most dangerous climbs in Great Britain), Dawes emphasizes the intense memory of the climb. “I can still feel the movements, the rocks are still under my hand.” According to Dawes, “You don’t get it by thinking, you get it by being instinctive.”

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*See also* BASE Jumping; Buildering; Bungee Jumping; Cave Diving; Caving; Climbing; Diving, Free; Extreme Media

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