

SMART CLIMBING

On a climbing workshop in Snowdonia, Sarah Stirling discovers there's more to climbing than just raw power.

ON FACE VALUE CLIMBING EXPERTISE MIGHT APPEAR TO BE ALL ABOUT PULLING POWER. DON'T BE TAKEN IN. OFTEN DESCRIBED AS 'VERTICAL CHESS' OR COMPARED TO BALLET, THERE'S A LOT MORE CLEVER STUFF BEHIND SCAMPERING UP ROCK.

Remember what you thought on your last route. Was it "How will I reach that hold?", "What if I fall?", "Will that gear protect me?", or perhaps all three? Climbing presents a range of physical, mental and technical challenges that balance against

each other. So, if your climbing isn't progressing, don't assume you've peaked or you need to do more pull-ups. Learn how to climb smarter.

The physical aspect of the sport isn't just about strength: developing your agility, flexibility, balance and footwork precision can progress your climbing in leaps and bounds. Having slicker gear and rope-work skills at your fingertips will enhance your confidence. Don't underestimate the importance of mental strength either. If you can manage your fear of falling, think more logically about movement, and breathe calmly, you'll climb better and enjoy it more.

So how do you learn all these skills? Traditionally, climbing instruction focussed on solid gear and rope-work and you figured out much of the fluffier stuff yourself. However, in recent years the popularity of both training on artificial walls and ropeless 'bouldering' has begun to broaden the outlook of climbing instruction. 'Movement coaching' is a new watchword, a wide-ranging beginner skills accreditation system (like kayak stars) that was launched last year, and more developments will follow. Right at the forefront of this instruction renaissance is 'Smart Climbing' Director and 'Instructor/Psychologist', Rebecca Williams.

'Smart Climbing' courses weave tailored instruction from a physiotherapist, a professional climber, a top-level mountain instructor and mountain rescue team member, a climbing-specific yoga specialist and, of course, a climbing instructor and psychologist. Workshops cover a broad range of physical, mental and technical climbing skills across both indoor and outdoor climbing. What's more, because the focus is fundamental techniques rather than grade-pushing, all levels of climber can learn

the flexibility of our arms, wrists and fingers ready for our movement workshop with Britain's top professional female climber, Lucy Creamer.

At the Beacon Climbing Centre, Lucy kept us all moving with some climbing wall traversing. With each circuit the group gained a new skill. We began with energy-saving techniques such as keeping our arms straight when possible. "I almost feel like I'm cheating when I climb like this," said Lucy. "Because it requires so little strength or energy."

Next she worked on improving the precision of our footwork, and explained why we should avoid crossing our feet over: it compromises balance. Then, on a section of the wall with tiny holds, we tested our new Spiderman skills. "This is the reason I climb," called Helen, exhilarated, as she reached the top.

We ended Lucy's session by climbing routes and progressed to the workshop we'd all been dreading: Fear of Falling. Yes, we were scared! "Why?" asked Rebecca as she

spread a sheet of A3 on the climbing wall matting. "I might hurt myself," replied Anne. Rebecca handed her a pen. "My belayer might not be watching me," wrote Anne, and the diagram grew into a web of emotional insecurity about losing grip.

Next, we organised types of falls into order of scariness. Then (gulp) we tied in to try the sequence for real. The slow progression from slumping on a top-rope to whipping-off on lead worked a treat. Steve suffers from climbing panic attacks but he was diving off with the rest of us. Helen, who doesn't like others judging her climbing, was yelling with gusto while plummeting.

Day One warmed down with a session on injury prevention and management. Physiotherapist Lizzie offered invaluable insights, including what causes climbers' arms to get 'pumped' and their legs to 'disco'. We finished by sorting myths from facts for treating strains and sprains (heat or ice?), then headed to climbing shop V12, where Rebecca had organised cake, coffee, discounted shopping and discussion.

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together. I booked a place on the Smart Climbing annual 'open weekend' in North Wales' climbing Mecca, Llanberis.

The weekend warmed up suspiciously gently with calm breathing flat on a mat. Yoga instructor, Victoria Howell, is adept at adapting poses to the needs of climbers. She explained that yoga is perfect cross-training for climbing because it improves balance, flexibility, strength and mind control. That morning, we concentrated on developing





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“It was so emotional watching Lucy climb,” said someone. “Both from the sheer aesthetics of watching such a consummate technician move and a slight poignancy over a sense of lost opportunities.” We all agreed. However, later that evening an illustrated lecture from climbing veteran, Colin Goodey, made us see differently. At age 72 he regularly puts up new climbing routes!

Sunday (Outdoor Day) began at the RAC Boulders with a climbing psychology clinic. Of all the climbing disciplines, bouldering focuses most on how hard you can pull. Rebecca turned this on its head: we played games, exploring the simple logic of climbing movement. Next we learned the psychological triggers behind ‘fear’ and tested practical ways to manage it on rock. For her last trick Rebecca produced raisins. We focussed on them entirely, noticing texture, shape and smell. Rebecca

encouraged us to transfer this ‘mindful’ technique to the rock – enjoying each moment of climbing, rather than thinking: “what might happen if...”

If something does go wrong while you’re climbing though, you need to know what to do. In the afternoon, we had a self-rescue and ropework problem-solving session at picturesque climbing area, Lion Rocks. MIA-qualified instructor and Mountain Rescue team member, Bryn Williams, encouraged us to brainstorm worst-case climbing scenarios, and patiently taught us how to solve each one. He had loads of slick tips and tricks from prussiking up a rope to backing off a climb safely.

The weekend ended back in the hands of Victoria for some recuperative yoga. “You’ve been given a lot of information over the weekend,” she said, coaxing us into restful Supta Baddhakonasana pose, which encourages suppleness through groin and hips. “And now you need to relax and take it in.” “I didn’t need telling twice – I was soon fast asleep.

After yoga, the group gathered outside the bunkhouse accommodation for tea and cake. For some, the workshop had been emotional; sharing stories of fears, falls and rediscovering reasons to climb. For others, it had been life-changing. “Since I learnt to climb in 1977,” someone said, “no-one has ever talked to me about how to climb. Just what to climb.”

For everyone, the workshop had refired

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Sarah Stirling took part in a Smart Climbing Open Weekend. The annual two-day course takes place in Llanberis, Snowdonia, and costs £130. Private coaching costs from £55 per person for four people. 07917754338, www.smartclimbing.co.uk

Course Workshops:
Fear of Falling and Climbing Psychology (Smart Climbing Director, Rebecca Williams)
Climbing-specific yoga classes (Victoria Howell) www.yogasnowdonia.co.uk
Movement and Footwork Skills (Lucy Creamer) www.lucycreamers.com
Rope-work Problem Solving (Bryn Williams) www.dragonmountainskills.com
Climbing Injury Prevention and Management (Physiotherapist, Lizzie)

Ben’s Bunkhouse
 Located at the foot of Snowdon, Ben’s Bunkhouse) offers wonderful views and is well-equipped, clean, and comfortable all for £15 per night. Local amenities are within walking distance. (0750 0513765, www.bensbunkhouse.co.uk)



our enthusiasm and reminded us what rock climbing is about: exhilarating fun and a challenge that (if we’re smart about it) we can keep enjoying long into our old age.