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# Better Bouldering

*Second Edition*

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# Strategy

Most of us have had the experience of being burned off on the boulders by physically weaker individuals. Their technique seemed no better than ours, and damned if they weren't wearing the same shoes we were. We wanted the problem even worse than them, so what's the deal? Why did they succeed where we floundered? Because they used good strategy and they didn't make mistakes.

## Bouldering Strategy

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Bouldering strategy consists of decisions made before you get on a problem, or between attempts. Good strategy should be used on all problems, not just ones that trouble you.

**First off, find the descent.** There's nothing quite so embarrassing to a boulderer as styling some problem to the top of a boulder, only to find out he or she can't get back down. This is jokingly called a Rule One Violation. Walk around the boulder first to find the easiest way down. If it looks tricky, it might pay to climb up the downclimb first to familiarize oneself with the moves.

**Stand back from the problem and scope it from a distance.** What look like great holds from the base of a problem often reveal themselves to be sloping butter dishes when you get a true perspective. This is especially important if you plan to dyno

to a specific hold. You may also discover that a key hold is dirty.

**Check the topout from above.** Is there a hidden hold? Are the final moves dirty? Covered in wet leaves? Will you bonk your head on a tree branch when you step up on the lip?

**Previsualize a sequence.** Look at the problem and imagine yourself doing it. Where will your hands go? Where will your feet go? Which way will your body shift? Where will you land if you fall? Feel yourself doing the moves. Feel how your weight shifts, how that sideways move will twist your fingers on that knob. Climb the entire problem in your head before you grab the first hold. A plethora of chalked holds make it easy to get suckered into just reading the hand moves. Don't forget to look for the footholds and memorize their positions.

**Have a Plan B.** Previsualize an alternate sequence before you attempt the problem. Suppose you climb halfway up the problem and find that your initial previsualized sequence doesn't work. You can either downclimb or jump off, or you can make use of your ascent to that point and try your alternate sequence. In this way you don't burn up extra gas getting to the same spot a second time to try a different sequence. Have a Plan B for your feet as well as your hands.

*You don't want to make a mistake up here, so you can be sure Kevin Jorgenson has put a lot of thought into his strategy for this ascent of Mojo Risin' (V5), Hueco Tanks, Texas.*

ANDY MANN



*The descent from Classic Curl is an intimidating jump—a good thing to prepare for before you start up the boulder. Erin Fox, Joshua Tree National Park, California.*



*This boulderer may be young, but he's smart. He's checking the lip moves and brushing away the leaves in preparation for his attempt.*

**Anticipate your fall angles and discuss them with your spotter.** Tell your spotter how you plan to try the problem and at which angles and on which moves you think you might fall. After this step, forget about falling and concentrate on succeeding.

**Put everything in your favor.** Clean handholds and footholds. Clean your boots. If you won't be chalking up en route, leave your chalk bag on the ground. Make sure the sun won't be in your eyes.

**Be patient.** Cold conditions can be great for bouldering. Your hands don't sweat, boots stick better, slopers feel grippy not greasy. On the minus side your fingers can get numb, your body is more prone to injury, and all those clothes hide your finely chiseled physique. A good warm-up is your best defense against injury. It also helps to warm up the fingers. When fingers get numb during a problem, you've got a real problem. Sometimes dipping into a warm chalk bag can help, if only to get them out of the wind. Putting hand warmers in chalk bags also is effective.

**Make the most of suboptimal conditions.** Use warm or humid days to work moves in trying conditions—when conditions are good, those moves will feel casual.

**Develop a psyching-up routine.** This can be anything from peaceful meditation to kicking a punching bag, from screaming at your partner to whispering to the boulder. Find what works for you. My routine goes like this: I think of similar problems I have done. I think of how smoothly I will do the moves. I think of how it will feel when I latch on to the crux crimper. I remember that feeling from other problems. I give that feeling a one-syllable name: I call it “stick.” I think of the crux move and I think “stick.” I imagine how good I will feel pulling over the top. While I'm doing all this, I am relaxing my muscles. I feel my arms get heavy as they relax. I feel them pull down on my shoulders and gently stretch my neck muscles. By this time I have dumped all extraneous thoughts—I feel light and focused. I concentrate on the moves

as I rub chalk into my fingers. I run through my previsualized sequence one more time, thinking “stick” on the hard moves and imagining my lip-stretching grin on the summit. Finally, if it's a really hard problem, I'll spit just before I step on. That extra five grams might hold me back, you know.

**Rest long enough between attempts.** The tendency to jump right back on a problem after you pop off is great, but your chances of success increase if you rest until you feel like new. Give a buddy a spot, clean the holds on your problem, spit shine your boots, do some relaxation exercises . . . anything to give your body adequate rest before the next attempt.

**Don't wire in failure.** If you are getting tired and falling off a move you've already done, it's time to get off that move. You may think you're getting stronger by working your muscles to exhaustion, but at the same time you are training your muscles to fail on that move. Even if you go back fresh, your muscles will say, “We don't have to contract as far to do this move,” and you'll come up short again. It's a bitch trying to erase bad muscle memory.

**Dial in all the moves, not just the crux.** When you're too tired to work on the crux moves, work on the finishing moves. Get them wired while you're tired so they won't feel foreign when you finally do climb through the crux to them. Breaking a project up may mean working it in several distinct sections. But when it makes sense, say when working a sit-down start to a problem you've done before, don't work it in just the distinct sections, but practice overlapping the sections to build muscle memory for the linking moves. In short, use your mind to save your body.

**Practice reading the rock.** Reading the rock and sussing moves is an acquired skill. The more you practice, the better and faster you get at seeing indistinct holds and previsualizing tricky sequences. You can do this in the gym, but you'll get better at it outdoors where there are more options to consider. Gym routes are already mapped out, making the task easier—the same can be said of routes



***Marcie Puskarik and Hillary Haakenson practice reading the rock on this boulder at The Elephant sector, Fontainebleau, France. Neither has done this particular line, and since Marcie and Hillary are of roughly the same height and reach, the beta they are discussing could potentially work for both of them.***

outside where some lazy boulderer didn't brush off his or her tick marks. Practice reading the rock on problems with little or no chalk for maximum benefit. You needn't confine your practice to problems you're about to attempt. I enjoy seeing an incredible line and imagining how I would climb it if I could turn the injury clock back.

**Evaluate the performance of yourself and others.** If you can watch video of yourself, analyze your mistakes and make a plan to correct them. Are your hips too far from the wall? Are you

overdynoing? Also take note of what you're doing right, and build a positive mental association with those moves. If you don't have access to video, ask others to evaluate your performance. In turn, watch others climb and see if you can clue into things they could do better (only offer your assessment if it is desired).

## **Avoiding Common Mistakes**

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**Keep breathing.** Your muscles are begging for that good old O<sub>2</sub>, so don't forget to breathe while you're on a problem. This sounds obvious, but it happens all the time. Take deep breaths to calm yourself when the going gets scary. If you find yourself having trouble remembering to breathe on problems, it can help to start into a forced rhythmic deep breathing several breaths before pulling onto the problem, then maintain that breathing rhythm throughout the problem. Certain core strength-intensive moves make it hard to inhale during the moves—just as you previsualize a move sequence, you can also previsualize your breathing sequence for a problem and plan out which spots on the problem will allow you the best chance to inhale deeply and get oxygen to the muscles. Your spotter or other bouldering companions can remind you to breathe too. Practice deliberate breathing on easy problems and during your warm-ups.

**Avoid shortcuts.** Avoid shortcuts like not cleaning your shoes before warm-up problems. Clean them every time. Energy wasted on the warm-up won't be there for the send. Climb precisely and in good posture to the rock, and the energy savings will add up in your favor.

**Don't just grab the top of a problem and then jump off.** Go ahead and push out the mantels. Manteling may be out of vogue these days, but it works the triceps as few climbing moves do. Building up your antagonist muscles can help prevent tendon and joint injuries. It's no surprise that so many climbers have these injuries—they spend all day pulling and no time pushing.

***They call him “Pufferfish.” Mason Daly will explode if he doesn’t breathe soon here. High Plains Drifter (V7), Buttermilks, California.***



**Don’t be afraid to learn from “less-experienced” climbers.** The second you think you know it all is the second you cease to learn and improve. I’ve learned plenty from old sages, but I’ve also picked up a lot from climbers who weren’t even born by the time I’d cranked my 10,000th problem.

**Rise above the ratings game.** Time spent worrying about ratings or how somebody else is climbing is time wasted. Climb problems for their beauty, not for their numbers. Would you rather have someone call you by your name or a number? Climbers who chase numbers usually quit the sport as soon as they slip back a grade or formerly inferior climbers start outclimbing them.

**Don’t beg beta.** Unless you are a newbie and

at a complete loss, try figuring sequences out for yourself instead of just copying others’ beta. Problem solving is one of the great joys of bouldering. Good problem-solving skills separate better boulderers from average boulderers. Begging beta from someone who has already done the problem will retard development of your problem-solving skills. One caveat: Working out beta with another climber of your skill level when neither of you have been exposed to the problem can be a good exercise.

**Don’t get stuck on bad beta.** If your sequence isn’t working, try something new. Rule out moves that won’t work; for example, a reach you can’t make or a knee bar you won’t fit.

**Don’t rely on the sequences of others.**



Unless that other climber is your identical twin, chances are your body is better suited to a different sequence. Go ahead and experiment.

**Don't be afraid to fall.** Falling is not failing. It is an integral part of the bouldering game

***To surmount the sloping lip on U-Turn (7b), Cresciano, Switzerland, Olivier Charles has no choice but to toss his heel over and burl out the mantel.***

## ***True Combat Story #88: The Real Victory***

I don't care if you're John Gill, Fred Nicole, or Lisa Rands—if you're a devoted boulderer, it's likely that your list of desperate problems you couldn't do is nearly as long as the list of desperates you did crank. The Brits call V0, V-naught. I jokingly rate any problem I can't do as V-not. Most of my V-nots were problems I'd give up on after a few days, planning to return to them when I was ready. When it came down to it, I always preferred climbing something I could do than flailing on something I couldn't. Nevertheless, I wanted one problem at Hueco Tanks so bad that I returned day after day. It was a beautiful sit-down start to *Lip Service*. I dubbed it *Full Service*.

Feeling territorial and insecure, I asked other climbers to stay off my prize. Some were stronger than me, and I was afraid they'd bogart the sequence I'd worked so hard to discover. Days stretched into weeks, winter gave way to spring, and still I could not link the first two moves with the rest of the problem. I was so obsessed that I would wake in the wee hours and watch the sun rise as I drove into the park. I would have an hour to try the problem before it got too hot. Every time out I felt sure I'd crank it. Every time I'd gag on the same micro-toe hook.

I returned the next season with *Full Service* at the top of my list. By this time the mental block was firmly in place. Every time I tried to link it, I'd yank my toe off. It was as if I needed this problem to fail on, to teach me some kind of lesson. I was plenty strong enough, but I'd tuned my muscle memory to fail on this one move. My frustration built, as did my conviction that I'd found the only sequence that would work—hence I didn't try new sequences. I was climbing stupidly in more ways than one. Bob Williams watched me fail time and again. He watched me practice failing. He warned me that "practice makes permanent," and he was right. He also bluntly added that being first to do a route is no big deal if nobody else is trying it. Harsh but true.

I started to hear rumors that someone else had climbed it and was staying mum so as not to blow my buzz. I wondered whether those rumors were true or merely made up to blow my buzz. Maybe both.



(unless you're high bouldering or cranking above a bad landing). If you aren't falling, you aren't pushing yourself. If you don't push yourself, you won't improve.

**Remember the footholds.** Tired of hearing about footwork? Well, I'm tired of writing about it, but it can't be stressed too much. If it were advantageous to climb with just our arms, we would walk on our arms too.

**Avoid target fixation.** Don't obsess on the hold you can't reach; concentrate on finding a new sequence.

**Can the excuses.** Too often, boulderers will tell themselves they'd crank the problem "if I was just a bit stronger" or "if I was five pounds lighter." This may or may not be true, but before telling yourself any of the above, consider if there are weaker or heavier climbers than you doing the problem you can't. If so, what's holding you back is not your strength to weight ratio, it's your technique to ego ratio. Identify the weak technique (footwork, posture, triple-pumping dynos, etc.) and find similar problems (or set some in the gym) to work on that weak link. Errors are cues for improvement.

I was ripped to the gills and down to 161 pounds, my lightest in ten years. Nevertheless, I had a ton of garbage in my head.

Later that season Dale Goddard climbed it, claimed it, and renamed it *Serves You Right*. The name was pointed but appropriate. Had I respected others' rights to try it too, perhaps they would have respected my desire to bag it first. What's more, Dale had found a much easier sequence. My own stupidity had cost me the first. Had I not been so pigheaded, I might have discovered that sequence or the even easier moves discovered later.

Though I didn't climb it, I learned more from *Full Service* than from any other problem. Perhaps that mental block existed for my own benefit. Perhaps it remains there for the same reason. Had I bagged the first, I might not have learned the fruitlessness of territoriality, the "practice makes permanent" principle, and the ugliness of disrespect. Scores of boulderers have climbed *Full Service* now. I doubt anybody gained as much from it as I did.



**Sonny Trotter on Full Service (V10), Hueco Tanks, Texas.**

**ERIC ODENTHAL**

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