

1st Draft: June 11, 2008, Climbing Wall Committee
2nd Draft: July 7, 2008, Climbing Wall Committee
3rd Draft: February 12, 2009, Climbing Wall Committee
Approved: March 2, 2009, AORE BOD
4th Draft: July 15, 2009, Bill Zimmerman edits
5th Draft: July 21, 2009, Jason Kurten edits
Approved: August 6th, 2009, AORE BOD
6th Draft: October 5, 2009, Jason Kurten edits
Final Approval: October 8, 2009

The Future of Indoor Rock Climbing: A White Paper
Association of Outdoor Recreation and Education
Climbing Wall Committee

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Manufactured Climbing Wall History

Artificial and indoor climbing walls have been manufactured in Europe since the 1960's. In America, the 1980's and 1990's brought the boom of artificial climbing walls (Burbach, 2004; Long, 1994). Since that time the industry has grown to include community recreation spaces, commercial operations, military installations, camps, and universities and other learning institutions. Initially, these structures (hereafter referred to as climbing walls) were built to provide a controlled environment in which outdoor climbers could hone their craft to bring outdoor (Long, 1994). This controlled environment began to be seen as the perfect way to introduce newcomers to the sport.

Conflicting Models of Risk Management

In the recent past, there have been some accidents associated with artificial climbing walls . While the potential consequences of a fall are high, the majority of climbing wall injuries are minor. Unfortunately, these minor injuries are often overshadowed by a few extreme cases paired with the non-climbing public's mistaken notion of climbing as an extremely risky sport. At its worst, a climbing accident has the very real risk of injury to a participant. The same cannot be said for traditional sports such as basketball. Attempting a layup is not overtly dangerous; tying in to a climbing rope can be (if the belayer fails in their job or if the climber incorrectly ties a knot). Climbers have the potential to get hurt, because they are climbing at height and their

safety is reliant mainly upon the training and skill of another person as well as, to a smaller extent, on the maintenance of the facility. The level of perceived risk is also very high among the non-climbing public. With advertising, motion pictures and pop culture embracing rock climbing as an “extreme sport,” the public has in turn begun to use that label whether it is deserved or not. The perceived danger and risk of the sport are exactly what make it so inviting to people. The perceived risk and the excitement of participation are what keep our climbing walls and classes full of participants.

In the end though, the real risk is much lower than either the perceived or the potential risk. Other than the occasional athletic injury (muscle pulls, scrapes, and joint sprains), climbing walls do not produce a significant number of injuries when compared to other sports such as basketball, indoor soccer or even fitness classes. As managers of these facilities, it is our job to make sure that indoor climbing walls have the same or better safety record as a pool, gymnasium, or racquetball court. Beginner climbers should expect that the facilities they climb in are well maintained and monitored to industry standards, that the instructors working at them are well trained and competent, all climbers should know the risks that are inherent in their sport and all should be taught the best ways to negotiate these risks.

Professionalism, Training, and Certifications of Climbing Facilities

The general public has become accustomed to deferring to the guidance of experienced and professional staff members at recreation facilities as well as in other aspects of their lives. The government, likewise, often relies on an industry to regulate themselves. If that proves ineffective in preserving the public’s safety, then the government has no problem mandating or regulating the operations of the industry. Even then, effective regulation aside, the government will sometimes step in and regulate industries any way. The bottom line is this: in highly specialized or dangerous (perceived or real) situations, we are accustomed to deferring to the experience and training of a professional.

In our own facilities, we already do this; certified personal trainers teach our participants how to work out without injury, certified aerobic instructors provide safe classes for our participants, trip leaders must demonstrate competence and hold a certification that says they are capable of providing first aid and lifeguards watch over our patrons swimming. It is important to note that age and pay grade have little to do with the expectations that the public places on the duties of the staff member. The expectations are formed based on the level of technical expertise needed and the perceived or real risk of the endeavor. Whether we think it or not, when our undergraduate staff attends to our climbing facilities, they are expected to perform in a professional manner.

So, the question becomes: how do we as a concerned facility owner or manager ensure that our staff is meeting the inexperienced public’s level of expectations at the same level that the other members of our industry are? The answer is through standardized practices and trainings. Standardizing practices, creating professional trainings and a peer reviewed core body of knowledge for instructors and climbing wall attendants will help to raise the level of professionalism of our employees to a level that meets with the public and governmental expectations of today.

The history of public and private pools provides a good working example of how and why standardized practices and certifications are beneficial to an industry. In the early 1900's as public pools were built and opened, people were introduced to a new form of recreation; public bathing and swimming (Branche and Stewart, 2001). What started as a means of promoting public health through a readily accessible bathing area led to more and more people taking up swimming as a pastime (Wiltse, 2007). With increased numbers of participants came increased numbers of deaths through drowning. To avoid these deaths and in fear of government regulation, the pool industry formalized their training processes and established criteria for the training and certification of water safety instructors and life guards. By the late 1900's, one could receive training and certification in the skills necessary to teach people to swim and be safe in the water, as well as to monitor swimming pools with an eye for risk management (Branche and Stewart, 2001). With modern filtering and water treatment techniques, came the need to also monitor and operate the complex machinery involved in keeping pools in running order. Today's Certified Pool Operators do just that (NSPF, 2009).

What is both daunting and interesting about climbing walls when compared to pools is that normally, today, we ask our climbing wall employees to teach, supervise, and monitor facilities, often at the same time. It is not uncommon on one shift for the staff at a university indoor climbing facility to teach someone to belay and tie-in, to monitor the wall for safety, and to have to tighten panel bolts or check climbing ropes for wear. Wall staffs are being asked to perform a variety of duties that are all exceedingly important for proper risk management. There is now in place an agreed upon set of industry wide practices developed using a consensus standards setting process. The document has gone through three editions and had input by climbing wall manufacturers, climbing wall operators, climbing equipment manufacturers, and the public. The CWA's Industry Practices document (2007), as well as the three existing climbing wall instructor certification course providers, provides a core body of knowledge that allows climbing wall managers and staff to make educated decisions.

One current situation that might better illustrate this point is the example of the artificial climbing wall industry in Massachusetts. The precipitating incident was a death on an inflatable wall in Worcester operated by an amusement operator. The legislature did not move to do anything initially (Goldstein, 2005). The Massachusetts Department of Public Safety, which regulates amusements in the Commonwealth, rewrote their amusement regulations to incorporate sport climbing facilities and challenge courses. In other words, the legislature empowered the DPS to regulate amusements by passing an amusement licensing statute, the DPS used the amusement licensing statute to regulate all artificial climbing (both portable and permanent) and challenge course activities (B.Zimmermann, personal communication, July 28, 2009). This is a perfect example of how a governmental body will often step in on behalf of the general public and regulate an industry that for whatever reason has not done so themselves. This type of move has been countered in many states by the Climbing Wall Association, acting on behalf of artificial climbing walls and CWA members and it is a matter of settled law in New Jersey where it was litigated and the Department of Community affairs lost. Nonetheless, this is a process and continues to be attempted in other states, recently in Iowa and currently in Virginia (B. Zimmermann, personal communication, July 28, 2009).

It is the mark of a true profession that holds the members liable for maintaining a baseline of performance. Industry standards (or practices, or protocols) do just that; they ensure the uninformed and inexperienced public that a profession as a whole has deemed a specific person or a specific facility as having met a minimum standard of training or operations.

One caveat should be mentioned in any discussion regarding certifications: certifications do not guarantee perfect performance by the holder. A certification is only evidence that a person received training to a minimum standard, and that the person passed a test measuring their knowledge. Certifications are not foolproof; but paired with consistent training they are the best way to prevent incidents. Certifications represent proof of training.

Current Legislative Environment

As of the time of this writing several states are taking up measures to determine the course for future licensing of artificial climbing walls. Massachusetts and Missouri facilities currently require licensing for climbing walls, Ohio has agreed that recreational facilities are outside of the ambit of the amusement licensing statute, and Virginia is in a rule-making process now that may affect climbing walls (B. Zimmermann, personal communication, July 28, 2009), . The Departments of Safety in many of these cases are categorizing climbing walls as “amusements” and placing the authority to license (and therefore to also refrain from licensing) these facilities in the hands of a civil-service appointee, often with no experience in the climbing or outdoor industry.

One must deconstruct this example to fully appreciate it: due to the incompetence of one of the members of the artificial climbing wall industry, an industry that we are all members of in the eyes of the public, a person was killed (so far, these deaths have been limited to the amusement industry incorporating portable or inflatable climbing walls into their offerings with under trained or poorly trained operators). Fearing public outcry for regulation, the state legislatures are moving towards regulating the climbing industry. Rather than spend money to invest in consultants with climbing experience, legislatures are willing to place the future business interests of climbing walls in the hands of someone who knows regrettably little about the true nature of the climbing industry (an amusement park and carnival inspector).

The Executive Director of the Climbing Wall Association, Bill Zimmermann, successfully lobbied the Massachusetts state legislature on behalf of the climbing wall industry and the CWA membership under the stipulation that the climbing industry be allowed to participate in the rule-making process in a meaningful way and that the Commonwealth adopt CWA standards by reference in their regulations (B.Zimmermann, personal communication, July 28, 2009).

Essentially, the argument for self regulation can be reduced to the following points:

- The public relies on professional businesses to be regulated and monitored by the government or the industry that the business serves in.
- Climbing walls have a high degree of perceived risk associated with them.
- Deaths and accidents on some inflatable and portable climbing wall amusements have caused some states to begin making progress towards grouping together and regulating all artificial

climbing walls.

- Climbing wall managers have the power to participate in self-regulation processes. If we do not do this, the government may do it for us and in a much less informed way due to incidents and fatalities.
- Universities, colleges and the military are accustomed to this model. Our pools, weight rooms and fitness classes already follow it.

Standardization of Industry Practices

The members of AORE who manage and program manufactured climbing structures comprise a large portion of the artificial climbing facility market in America. As such, we are poised to set a baseline for what are acceptable practices in the management and operation of artificial climbing structures. As professional peers, AORE members can agree to adopt a set of standards that meet all of our needs. As peers, AORE members already provide each other feedback at conferences and through informal conversations. Now, the expectation by the public and by courts is that we will do this in a much more formal way via standardized, agreed upon industry practices. It is not enough to change our operations for the better, we must instead prove through documentation that these changes are what the industry as a whole is moving towards; this is our opportunity to bring the industry into alignment.

Other professions have a history of protocols. For example, doctors have practice guidelines that are followed when giving treatments. Lawyers have rules in place that dictate their actions and sanction them when they act inappropriately. Even long haul truck drivers have mandated rules about driving and behavior behind the wheel. As outdoor recreation and education evolves to the next level of professionalism, AORE needs to work with other organizations to agree on a set of standards that set an acceptable bar below which no reasonable member program should operate.

What does this mean for AORE member climbing programs?

Taking the CWA's currently adopted industry practices for the operation of manufactured climbing walls as an example; if they and other suitable sets of standards are adopted as the accepted standards, most AORE programs will not fundamentally change (Climbing Wall Association, 2007). A few will need to update training procedures or documentation protocols for staffing and risk management, but overall very little will change. At Texas A&M, upon reviewing the guidelines provided by the CWA, a few minor operational changes were made to better meet the needs of the constituency. One example of the level of change that was needed is that when conducting skills checks at the climbing facility, the proposed standards require wall staff to hand the participant the belay device and the locking carabiner independently. The participant will need to put the belay system together on their own, without the help of a staff member to demonstrate their competence. This simple action along with the sample test procedures in the annex to the Industry Practices will provide a solid base in determining the competency of the participant seeking to climb at Texas A & M's wall.

For other organizations, the changes may be larger. One question remains, are peer expected changes inherently bad? Should a fellow manager who is operating their facility in a way that could prove dangerous be expected to change and improve their operation to keep the

participants safe? We need to hold ourselves to a standard of practice. An incident at one wall due to lax practices reflects poorly on all walls in the country. In the eyes of the non-climbing public and government, all climbing walls are lumped together in terms of recognition even if the wall is not used for recreation but for entertainment. Any action, by any industry member, can bring about ridicule, criticism and sanctions to all.

Suggestions for AORE's Course of Action

It is the Climbing Wall Committee's recommendation that the AORE Board of Directors endorse a set of published standards for the operation and management of indoor and manufactured climbing walls. In an effort to be non-partisan and following the model set forth in the wilderness medicine industry, the Committee suggests that the Board of Directors endorse any set of standards that meet AORE's approval. This could be the CWA's current standards or any others that achieve a similar purpose of setting a baseline for responsible and prudent operations for artificial climbing walls. AORE should reserve the right to retract the support of any standards that deviate from this original purpose or that become so prescriptive that the operations of the member schools are severely constrained.

Furthermore, the Climbing Wall Committee recommends that AORE encourage participation in a climbing wall manager and instructor certification program by AORE member schools. Again, there currently exist three models for this training (the Professional Climbing Instructors Association's Climbing Wall Instructor Course, the American Mountain Guides Association's Climbing Wall Instructor Course and the Climbing Wall Association which is in the process of circulating its proposed certification standards for public review and comment) and AORE should remain non-partisan (as they are with wilderness medicine providers) and support all models that achieve the same general purpose.

By encouraging participation in a training and management program in the manufactured climbing wall industry, we would create an employee base that is competent and educated to an acceptable level and whose certification would be transferable from program to program. Just as we accept any wilderness medicine provider's word that a certified WFR is capable of administering first aid in the backcountry, a climbing wall certification could provide assurance that one of our employees is capable of competently teaching top rope belaying or monitoring a climbing wall with an eye for risk management.

In the end, like standards for operation, having a highly trained and certified staff establishes to the public and government that we are an industry capable of self regulation and organization. In addition, it forces us all to re-evaluate our programs and to, when necessary, make changes to bring our operations up to the level of our peer organizations.

Amendment:

The Climbing Wall Committee and the AORE Board of Directors have endorsed the Climbing Wall Association's (CWA) Industry Practices as written, but reserve the right to retract the support of any standards that deviates from the original purpose or that become so prescriptive that the operations of the member schools are severely constrained.

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