

Bouldering training

Introduction

In the immortal words of Ben Moon, “technique is no substitute for power”. You can never have too much power (though you can be using too much power...). If you’re failing on a problem, you can blame conditions all you like, but you can only ever change how strong you are and how good you are. Both of those can take a while to improve, so you might as well work on both all the time.

Training for bouldering (by going bouldering) always feels a bit ad-hoc. You just go and try hard-for-you problems, right? This approach can certainly work, indeed, I encourage everyone to go and do just that; but it can be difficult to monitor your progress and tweak the session so that the intensity is just right.

So, in the interest of giving things a little bit more structure, here’s a few ideas to spice up your bouldering sessions (one of them is just to go and try hard problems). If this isn’t enough for you, have a look in the sport climbing doc for some more ideas. The most intense session involves trying problems that you can do the moves of within a session – this is personal preference – some people prefer (and get more gains from) trying problems where they have to try the individual moves for several sessions before doing them.

As an aside, the eternal quest for power often isn’t a straightforward one. You might go a while without improving then suddenly ‘level up’ and start crushing that shit. In addition, supplementing your bouldering sessions with some fingerboarding (and maybe even campussing) can give you the extra boost you need.

A word on injuries and warming up

Bouldering is pretty intense. Where fingerboarding is nice and controlled and reasonably safe, bouldering is wild and often injurious. When bouldering you’ll often be moving dynamically between poor holds and you probably care more about doing a boulder problem than hanging for another second, so you’ll probably try a bit harder bouldering than fingerboarding, which adds a bit of risk of injury.

So, make sure you warm up properly before these. Ideally a warm up will get your whole body moving to raise your pulse etc, mobilise your relevant body parts, activate your core, then gradually warm your fingers up. Often you won’t have time for all of this and you’ll have to settle just for the last one, but that’s fine because easy climbing will accomplish the other things to a degree.

The sessions

Max bouldering

Pretty simple really, pick 3 problems and try them each for ~20-30 mins.

The problem should be hard, but you should be able to do the moves and link a couple.

If you do the problem before the time is up, just move on to the next one, but next time you do the session find a new, harder problem to replace the one you did.

Boulder reps

This is a bit higher volume than the session above but the moves are still pretty hard.

1. Pick 6 problems
2. You have 6 minutes on each problem and you must try each problem from the ground at least 3 times.
3. If you do a problem twice, then it's too easy – do a harder one next session.
4. Have a few mins rest between each problem.

Tips:

- The problems should be quite hard, maybe a couple grades below your max.
- If a problem is extremely cruxy and you're falling in the same place the whole time, then consider adding an extra foot or hand hold to make it a bit more sustained.
- If a problem has a very hard start, which you keep falling off, then make the start easier so that you get to do more moves.

Using a board

Boards are a great tool for getting stronger for two reasons. Firstly, they are really intense and basic. Secondly, they don't change very often and are often set fairly systematically. This allows you to have long term projects, benchmarking problems, and problems of many types at different levels of difficulty.

They can be a bit intimidating and inaccessible at first. Indeed, some boards (like the Motherboard at the Works and the Eden Rock 55 degree board) are deliberately set to exclude weaker climbers – sounds brutal, but many of those climbers don't need a board to get stronger. Anyway, politics aside, if you have access to a board you should persevere with using it because once you get the measure of it and know where all the holds are then you'll be able to get a lot out of it.

Systematic training on a board

You can do this to a degree even without a systems board

Perhaps the greatest strength of most boards is the potential to make problems that work certain types of moves or holds.

1. Try making up easy, medium and hard problems using crimps, undercuts, pockets, pinches, gastons
2. Then experiment with making the moves wider or longer – observe your weaknesses

3. Then experiment with wide, close, high, and low feet.
4. Then experiment with making the moves that challenge your body – cross over, hold tension.

It is quite a skill to make up a variety of problems of the same or similar difficulty. Especially for point 4, it is difficult to make easier problems.