

Training for sport climbing

I'll try and keep this brief, but it should be enough for most people to have something to get on with and think about. If you want some more detail check out:

<https://www.trainingbeta.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/1.-Alex-Barrows-Training-Doc-V2-for-training-beta.pdf>

Introduction

Although this is titled 'training for sport climbing', it's actually 'how to get fitter for sport climbing'. For most people and most routes, though, this distinction doesn't really matter because you just need to be able to climb for longer without getting pumped, be able carry on for longer when you are pumped, and be able to recover when you do get pumped.

For those that don't know, being 'pumped' is the delightful feeling of your forearms burning, aching, filling with god-knows-what, which is usually followed by some emotive language and a fall, then more emotive language. It comes in many flavours, but apparently all are an acquired taste. No doubt you'll become familiar with it shortly.

The basics

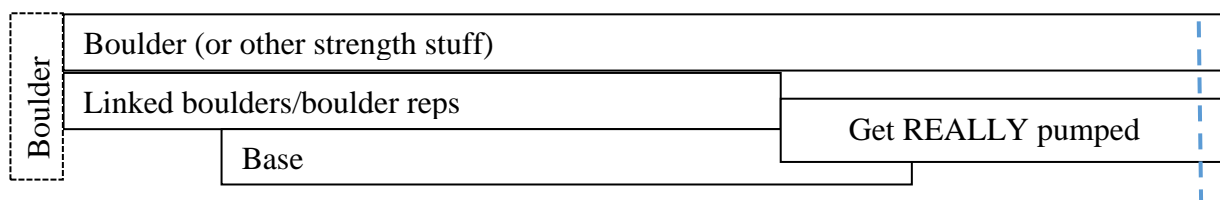
Getting fit for sport climbing is pretty simple. There's loads of stuff out there on how to do it: some of it seems complicated, some of it is unnecessarily complicated but it will all work for someone (remember the individuality thing I mentioned?).

Some key points:

1. The more you do, the more you get
2. Build a big base first, do high intensity stuff later (mostly)
3. Boulder all the time (unless you're a bouldering superstar and a route punter)

Seasonal structure

This is how I like to structure my endurance training. I've done it differently in the past, and that worked too, and I'm sure others will do it differently again. So if you don't like the look of it, then feel free to take the sessions below and put them together in a structure that suits you.



So, in order:

1. Work on strength all the time unless you're absurdly strong and ridiculously unfit. It can also be a good idea to do a chunk of bouldering before starting any fitness stuff.
2. Then start putting a couple of those boulder problems together. You'll need to start with the easier problems and have a little rest between them. Then build up to the harder ones with no rest.
3. Build your base of low(ish)-intensity endurance by doing LOTS of routes/long circuits.
4. ~2/3rds through, give it beans on routes at your limit and laps of stuff a bit below max.
5. In the last ~week (after dashed blue line), drop the volume, maintain the intensity. Rest. Get psyched to crush.

Something to bear in mind:

Getting the balance of base to linked boulder stuff within a season and within each week can be quite important. In general, if you're unfit/get pumped easily and/or the routes you're psyched for are long, then prioritise base. Otherwise, prioritise linked boulders/boulder reps. I do not recommend doing more than two sessions a week of the latter though, as it's pretty damn intense.

The sessions

Linked boulders/boulder reps

These are pretty self-explanatory, but here's a few sessions to have a go at, some tips for getting the intensity right, and some ways to make it harder.

First though, I reckon these are best done on a bouldering wall or on a board. It's possible to do it on a campus board; indeed, finishing with a few campus sets can be a good way to thoroughly smash the fingers and forearms for those that are up to it.

Session 1: linked boulder/short circuit

The bread and butter of this type of training and a must do for anyone wanting to mix up their bouldering training, get prepped for short routes, or those building up to high volume stuff.

Make up a 10-20 move circuit/long boulder	--	useful to do this in the warmup, and learn it.
Do it ~5 times with ~3 minutes rest between each	--	the longer the circuit, the less rest (but the easier the moves)

~5-10 min rest

Repeat once or twice more

Tips:

1. It's smart to make your first session a little easy – longer rest, easier moves. Then make it harder each time until you're failing at the end of each block of ~5.
2. To make it harder, make the moves harder – this can be hard, so also try this: each session with the same circuit reduce the rest by 15-30 seconds. Every 2 or 3 sessions make it harder, but lengthen the rest to the original time (or more). Then gradually reduce the rest again.
3. Don't wait for it to feel easy before making it harder – it'll never feel easy!!
4. To begin with, you'll probably get quite pumped doing this. That's okay. But as you progress, you'll (hopefully) find that instead you get powered out (not pumped, just unable to move!).

Session 2: Boulder laps

A slightly more intense version of the previous session and is also a bit more flexible. Also a good way to mix up your bouldering training.

Pick two or three boulder problems	---	I suggest that these should be a few grades below max
Total no. moves <~20		
Do the problems back-to-back with no rest. Then rest ~3 mins.	---	Don't be afraid to adjust the rest between problems or sets.
Repeat 4-6 times		

Rest and repeat.

Tips:

1. Again, it's smart to make the first session a little easy and build from there.
2. You can do this in an 'on the minute' style if you want, but make the problems harder
3. Aim to set the intensity such that you fail near the top of the last boulder (or two) of the last couple sets.
4. To make it harder, make the moves harder – this can be hard, so also try this: each session with the same circuit reduce the rest by 15-30 seconds. Every 2 or 3 sessions make it harder, but lengthen the rest to the original time (or more). Then gradually reduce the rest again.

Session 3 – campus circuits

Only for those that have campussed a bit before and can do 1-3-5-7 fairly easily. This session is great if you're in a rush or if you want to add a bit on to one of the above sessions. Also try it on problems if you fancy a change.

On the balls, big rungs or medium rungs
Do 1-3-5-7-9 (and match)-7-5-3-2-1 (and match)-3-5-7-9
(So, go up-down-up using every other rung plus rung 2 on the down-campus)

Perform 6-12 sets
Have ~2 mins rest between sets.

Tips:

1. If 1-3-5-7 etc is too hard, then give 1-2-3-4-5 a go.
 2. If 1-3-5-7 is too easy, then try 1-4-6-8 match- down every other rung -1-4-6-8
 3. If down-campusing is too hard or hurts your elbows, just drop off and go up a few times instead.
 4. Aim to set the intensity such that you fail on the last couple moves of the last few sets
 5. If you're elbows hurt at all, consider stopping.
 6. If you start sagging and your shoulders start disengaging, then go home and get stronger (or rest!!)
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Base endurance sessions

This stuff is famed for being endless, endless fun. If you like boring, monotonous things that go on and on and on. Unfortunately (or fortunately..) it's probably the thing that will improve your sport climbing the most.

This stuff essential for keeping the pump at bay and being able to recover when you do get pumped.

There seems to be a bit of confusion about how hard this should be, which I'll try and clear up here. My view is that you need to stress the system to get a training effect, so you should probably be tired after these sessions. If you're not, it's probably not doing a lot.

Having said that, these sessions can be placed on a spectrum of intensity from 'pretty much no pump' to 'barely in control'. Working anywhere on that spectrum will improve your base endurance. Now, "what is the best intensity to work at?" is a harder question. The 'on-the-fence' answer is that it depends – so I suggest that you start with low intensity and build up, but whilst doing so, pay attention to what works, and do more of what works and less of what doesn't.

- I want to stress that just doing the same session at the same intensity over and over again probably won't make you fitter overall!! Mix it up.

Session 1 – low intensity, continuity

The ultimate in boring monotony. It's not even hard climbing, so as well as having uninteresting move you also have plenty headspace to think about how bored you are. But it can be pretty useful, so stick your headphones in, get the techno or psy-trance or radio 4 on and start pottering.

Pick a bit of wall suitable for climbing around on for 10-30 minutes.

Climb round for 10-30 minutes...

Repeat until you can't take it anymore.

Tips:

1. The great outdoors are a pretty suitable place to do this – think traversing around the bottom of Stanage.
2. This can also be done well by climbing up and down easy routes.
3. You might as well think about footwork and balance to distract you from the boredom. If you don't you'll go through your shoes pretty fast too...

Session 2 – higher intensity, continuity

A step up in uncomfortableness and a step down in boringness from the previous session, and the kind of session that seems to work for many.

1. Pick a bit of wall that you can climb round continuously for 2-10 minutes.
2. Climb round it for 2-10 minutes
3. Rest $\frac{1}{2}$ to the same amount of time you were climbing
4. Repeat for a total of 30 – 60 minutes climbing

Tips

1. I find the autobelays, the bleaustone wall, and main wall at the foundry are pretty good for this. True beasts may be able to go round and round the board too.
2. Having a bit of pump is fine – it should be uncomfortable and you should be tired at the end
3. Some people like to keep the intensity the same throughout, others like to get a bit too pumped, then bring it back under control, then get a bit too pumped again...
4. Mix it up. Change your pace to get a bit out of breath and train your forearms for different contraction times, do artificial (or real) clips, don't allow shaking out, try multiple set lengths in the same session. Go crazy!

Session 3 – interval style

Okay, so this definitely overlaps with the smaller reps in the above session, but the focus is on making the intervals a bit harder. The idea is that it'll build a base for the harder stuff, so you should set the intensity such that you're not failing, you're in control, but you have some pump and you're getting tired.

Caveat: I've barely done any of this, so can't vouch for it based on personal experience, and won't be able to provide much guidance on how it should feel, but I know others who rate it, so give it a shot and see what you think.

Do a circuit lasting 20 seconds to 2 minutes --- obviously adjust the intensity accordingly

Rest $\frac{1}{2}$ to the same amount of time you climbed

Repeat for a total climbing time of ~10 mins

Rest 10 mins
Repeat 1-3 more times

A variation of this session is to climb up a route on top rope as fast as possible, lower off, and repeat several times. You'll get quite tired and out of breath.

Get REALLY pumped

Finally, something fun. This is where it's at. This is the stuff sport climbers dream of. Busting out moves when you are fully convinced that you should be off, and surprising yourself every time you don't fall off. Taking and letting go are not allowed. These are the sessions where you'll get to see what you're made of.

There are two broad types that are useful at this stage.

- (i) Your standard get really pumped type session by doing reps on circuits
- (ii) Proper high intensity, max redpoint-intensity, with hard moves when you're tired (you don't actually get that pumped on these, sorry)

Type (i) session examples

Session 1 – basic circuits

This is the bread and butter of training your body to carry on when it's pumped, and of course to deal with that pump. It's nice, simple and painful.

Make a ~30 move circuit --- use a set one or make it in your warm up (or use a route if you're doing the same sesh as someone else)

Rest the 1-2 x the climbing

Time (so ~1-3 mins)

Repeat 4-8 times

Rest 10 mins

Repeat once or twice more

Tips:

1. This session is most simply and efficiently done on a circuit board, but can effectively be done on routes (indoors or out), or on a campus board.
2. To do the session on a campus board, I suggest making a set sequence and repeating it for a certain length of time, rather than number of moves.
3. To make it harder, adjust the difficulty of the moves or reduce the rest.
 - a. If you needed more rest than I suggested above, then reduce the rest.
 - b. If you're in the window of suggested rest times, then make it harder.
4. Aim to set the intensity such that you're failing (not giving up!) near the end of each set (i.e. after 4-8 laps).

Session 2 – pyramid of pump

This is pretty similar to the session above, in that you're repeatedly getting right up to the ragged edge, but the rest and climbing times vary throughout, just to keep it interesting.

Make a circuit/problem about
10 moves long

Do it once, then rest ~15 seconds

Repeat 1-3 more times.

Tips:

1. This is really intense, so only do the session once or twice a week.
2. If you can, do a couple sets in the morning and a couple more in the evening
3. The above session is just an example, feel free to chop it and change it
4. Short rests between the sections are allowed if necessary, just gradually reduce them
5. To make it harder, make it harder! (or reduce the rest between sections)

Session 2 – boulder reps on steroids

This is the ultimate for getting powered out and doing hard moves when you're fatigued. As with the session above, it's pretty intense, so don't do it more than a couple times a week.

Pick 6 boulder problems --- as hard as you think you can manage.
I suggest 2-3 grades below max

Do them all back to back, no rest. --- You should fail

Rest 20 mins
Repeat 3 more times