

Perspectives on Spotting

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As a supplement to our previous bouldering article, this document will address the topic of spotting. Spotting is the subject of ongoing industry debate and the intent of this article is to present multiple perspectives in an effort to foster conversation and investigation into spotting practices at CWA member facilities.

As with any operational practice, facility managers should take specific facility circumstances into account. Flooring, wall design, fall zones, and other facility-specific items should be considered when determining the implementation of spotting and any other procedures. The goal of this article is not to influence the audience, but rather to provide resources for informed decision making.

In order to examine spotting in its proper context, we must first understand its purpose. When asked, our industry experts unanimously defined spotting as a means to protect a climber's head and neck from impact with the ground/floor.

"... Spotting is for the purpose of protecting the head and neck area. In 25 years of operating climbing gyms I have never seen a head injury in a gym while bouldering. For the life of me I cannot figure out why you would need to spot anyone with 12 inches of foam as the landing surface. Spotting will never eliminate broken ankles and wrists. It is not designed for that."

- Rich Johnston, Vertical World

Spotting practices are more prevalent in outdoor settings where uneven, smaller, and rocky landing surfaces exist. For the purposes of this article, we will discuss spotting only in the context of indoor climbing. Utilizing this definition and context, we can infer that spotting in an indoor bouldering environment is not primarily intended to prevent ankle and wrist injury (two of the most common indoor bouldering injuries).

"With the exception of specific circumstances, systematically spotting boulderers is not recommended in facilities properly equipped with new generation bouldering flooring systems that offer bouldering gymnastic falling technique orientation and instruction for the following reasons:

- 1. Bouldering onlookers crowded in close proximity to a climber's landing zone may cause pinning resulting in deactivation of the flooring system's ability to properly absorb the impact force of a falling climber.*
- 2. The presence of a spotter introduces the possibility of a collision with a hard foreign object, which is one of the leading causes of injuries in bouldering areas.*
- 3. Spotters who are not properly trained (similarly to gymnastics coaches & martial arts instructors) may potentially cause more harm than protection to a falling boulderer."*

- Futurist Climbing Bouldering Techniques (excerpted from The Art of Falling – bouldering orientation video)

Though its primary purpose is to mitigate head, neck, and spinal injury (which are less likely in an indoor setting), there are some instances where spotting may be appropriate for alternate purposes. Timy Fairfield of Futurist has provided several examples:

“It is advisable that specific circumstances requiring spotting should be considered before attempting every boulder problem to determine if having a spotter is preferable. Bouldering participants should identify potentially dangerous moves that could result in joint locking, over rotation or inversion in the event of a fall before spotting or attempting a boulder problem. Potentially dangerous moves that could result in joint locking, over-rotation and possible inversion of the climber in the event of a fall include:

- 1. Horizontal Roof Climbing*
- 2. Overhead foot placements*
- 3. High heel hooks/heel hooks on in-cut holds*
- 4. Foot cams/toe cams between 2 holds”*

Now understanding the primary purpose of spotting and some of the special cases, we must examine the depth and topics needed to create an effective spotting orientation.

“... In most climbing gyms, there is not a spotting program that goes far enough in teaching how to spot a climber adequately. There are only a few situations in a bouldering area, such as a steep cave that is low to the ground, where someone can safely spot someone. Once a climber is higher on wall, it’s safer for the spotter to stay out of the way, unless they are very skilled at spotting. It’s a lot more than just catching someone coming off the wall. It’s a matter of redirecting them to land on a safe part of the body.”

- Mike Palmer, Cascade Specialty

Possible topics covered in a spotting orientation may include, but are not limited to climber preference for a spotter, flooring type, fall zones, technique, awareness of the climber, awareness of difficult moves on the boulder problem, height of climber, and pitch of the route. Proper orientations should leave the climber with knowledge of why to spot, when to spot, and how to spot properly. If orientations do not achieve this, the opportunities for injury may be larger than if the orientation were omitted altogether.

Most gym managers will weigh the facility design, flooring, time/staff commitments, efficiency, customer perception, and implications when considering the implementation of a spotting orientation. While the omission of orientation can be permissible for spotting, it does not apply in top rope or lead climbing scenarios.

In our experience, the many considerations involved in spotting orientations implementation frequently result in their omission based on the risks versus the benefits. Even when spotting is used in the correct context, there are many effects to consider. Can the climber’s momentum injure the prospective spotter, adding to facility liability? Aaron Stevens from Climb Iowa weighs in:

“In an indoor climbing facility, I think it is FAR more important to talk about how to fall properly than how to spot. People don’t really spot even when you take the time to tell

them about it. Most bouldering accidents can be reduced from a falling demonstration rather than a spotting demonstration. In my opinion, by teaching and telling people about spotting you are increasing the likelihood that someone will get injured. By teaching proper falling techniques, you are decreasing that risk."

Alternatives

If you choose not to introduce spotting to new climbers, then what should be implemented in its place, if anything? The near unanimous recommendation from our panel is to introduce proper falling technique. Mike Palmer of Cascade Specialty advocates for mandatory falling education for new climbers:

"On the practice of an orientation in the bouldering area, I think it should include falling instruction. This will also reduce injuries, and hopefully shield gyms from some liability. I also think spotting is very overrated. There are very few people qualified to spot properly. Letting a novice spot someone is dangerous to the climber and the spotter. The effort would be better spent on falling education. Why not require it like a belay test?"

Conclusion

Per our industry experts, the practice of spotting in indoor bouldering areas should be reserved for special cases in which spotting may be favored over climber ground falls. Given the brief nature of most facility orientations, it could be inferred that these special cases may not fall into the scope of mandatory orientations. This leads us to two possible methods of addressing this topic:

1. Implement a robust spotting orientation that addresses all of the purposes, considerations, and special cases involved in spotting.
2. Omit spotting orientations from facilities on the grounds that spotting may not be necessary except under special circumstances.

When implementing any new process, the CWA encourages gym owners to understand the purpose, commitments, and implications of such processes. If implementing a spotting program, facilities should ensure that the orientation meets its intended purpose: minimizing injury and facility liability.

If omitting spotting orientations, facilities could choose to include bouldering orientation language covering falling technique. This was the most popular recommendation from industry experts for the purposes of minimizing liability (not adding a second person to a potential fall situation) and addressing the most common types of indoor bouldering injuries (ankle and wrist).