

# Hitting the wall

Ascending to lofty heights is 'way cool' and very calculated

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STAFF WRITER

Witnessing the wall climbers' painstaking ascents, a number of metaphors come to mind.

-Grabbing the devil by the tail captures the spirit and difficulty of wall climbing.

-At a snail's pace describes its cadence.

-But equate the climbers to Greek mythology's Sisyphus - a content, everyday fellow who spent a lifetime pushing a single rock up the same hill - and you come close to revealing the spiritual aspect of wall climbing.

"It's not about a thrill," says West Bloomfield wall climber Larry Mintz, a frequent visitor to Pontiac's Planet Rock climbing gym where the walls reach 55 feet.

"But it is fun," he says. "It's like anything that you succeed at, that you worked hard to get."

At least that's Mintz's interpretation. Other climbers, like the individual's approach to soaking up life in the face of the daily grind, have a different take.

On the wall  
Feetering 45 feet above the ground with only your toes and fingers anchoring you to the flat, scratchy wall, your thighs and biceps shiver relentlessly. Looking up, you realize the large, promising hand-hold that has the words "progress" and "relied" written all over it, rests solidly beyond your reach.

Frozen like a startled squirrel on the bark of a tree, you are now questioning the amusement value of wall climbing. The danger factor briefly comes to mind.

But, unfortunately, the thrill-seeker in you went to sleep sometime between learning to strap on all the requisite gear and the first time you fell from the wall. It was only a few comfortable inches down the rope and into the disposable safety of your harness. Not very scary.

Places to go, decisions to make  
Still stuck on the wall, you

look around for choices. They seem few. But, ironically, are endless.

On the one hand, you could try to grab one of the many, smaller hand-holds that offer minimal leverage. Another option might be trying to wrangle into a better body position on the wall. You could also: give up and come down, think for a few more minutes, do nothing, seek advice from the ground or take your best shot at the promising hand-hold and see what happens.

As in life, you make your decision and bear the consequences, good or bad. Both invariably come. And whether you reach the peak or acquiesce to your shaken muscles, your work and effort vanishes and becomes meaningless instantly. Like the quick descent of Sisyphus' rock to the bottom of the hill, fifteen seconds of repelling return the climber to square one.

Different takes  
For Mintz, who equates his after-work sessions at Planet Rock with being in training, rather than recreation or exercise, the draw of wall-climbing is the challenge it presents.

"It's all about being able to do harder stuff," he says. "It's constantly on my mind to get to that next goal."

Mintz also climbs outdoors, sacrificing other activities to road trip to areas where he can challenge his skills on real mountains. Fall is a hectic season for Mintz simply because he tries to fit in as many outdoor climbing expeditions as possible.

Others focus on the camaraderie and partnership that grows out of climbing.

In fact, wall climbing at the Planet Rock brought two couples together in marriage, according to Nick Cocciolone, who owns and operates the Planet Rock with his wife, Beth.

In fact, Nick, 32, proposed to Beth, 28, on a mountain ledge in Yosemite Park, 1,200-feet above ground.

"You get to know people more on a grass-roots level. If you're in



STAFF PHOTO BY DAN DEAN

**Satisfaction:** Veteran West Bloomfield climber Larry Mintz makes the final grab, reaching the top of Planet Rock's 55-foot, climbing wall in Pontiac.

a bar, everything is superficial," Nick says. "In here, you have to reveal all your trust."

But one of Planet Rock's oldest climbers, 59-year-old Jack Hall-

well, of Waterford, swears by the intellectual element of climbing. "It's sort of like playing chess-trying to problem-solve," he says.

"That's why women do so well. They have less body strength

and tend to rely on cleverness."

Once-a-week climber, James Vreeland, 16, of Bloomfield Hills, who prefers real rocks to climbing gyms like Planet Rock, marvels at the activity's spiritual component. "Outside, it's almost a oneness. It's being one with the mountain," says the teenager.

Making decisions, taking steps and facing challenges, climbing, like a life course, reflects outlook.

Like Sisyphus, we're all rolling a rock up a hill in one way or another, so while we're still doing it, let's find our way to enjoy it.



Playing anchor: Mintz watches his climbing partner's every move up the wall, always prepared to anchor a sudden fall or slip.

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