A PRACTICAL MANUAL

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE FOR ROCK CLIMBERS OF ALL ABILITIES
How to Climb Harder

Mark Reeves
## Contents

THE AUTHOR ................................................................. 5  
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................. 7  
PARTICIPATION STATEMENT ........................................ 8  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How to Climb Harder</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LAZY CLIMBING</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Learning | 11 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safety First</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RISK: TOP ROPOING</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EQUIPMENT CARE</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RISK: LEAD CLIMBING</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RISK: BOULDERING</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Warming Up: Body &amp; Mind</th>
<th>57</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STRETCHING</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXERCISE YOUR MIND</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| The Basics: Footwork & Balance | 67 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Basics: Handholds &amp; Body Position</th>
<th>75</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CRIMPS</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUPPING</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLOPERS</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PINCHES &amp; SPRAGS</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAMMING</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORIENTATION</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLAGGING</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Hands-off Rests</th>
<th>91</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LEDGE REST</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLAB REST</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORNER REST</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARÊTE REST</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHIMNEY REST</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONE-FOOTED REST</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moving Up</th>
<th>99</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ROCK-OVERS</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORKSCREW ROCK-OVERS &amp; THE RULE OF OPPOSITES</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corners</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Layback</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mantelshelf</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aretes</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chimneys</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roofs</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overhanging Walls</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advanced Technique &amp; Bouldering</strong></td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Putting It All Together</strong></td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidebooks</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading Routes</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style of Ascent</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lead Climbing Techniques</strong></td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clipping Quickdraws</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organising Your Rack</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What's in Your Rack</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placing Gear Efficiently</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risky Leads</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single vs Double Ropes</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mind Games</strong></td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Falling</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training: Basic Principles</strong></td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Weakest Link</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Setting</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Training</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training: Strength</strong></td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Strength</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Strength</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum Strength</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosive Strength (Power)</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training: Endurance</strong></td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training: Fitness</strong></td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training: The Young Climber</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nutrition</strong></td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating Disorders &amp; Sport</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mark Reeves has been a rock climbing instructor since 1997, working throughout the length and breadth of North Wales. In 2005 Mark completed the Mountain Instructor Award whilst working for Plas y Brenin and has been a freelance/associate instructor for them ever since. Mark has sought to develop his coaching to the highest level through various forms of Continuing Professional Development, including BMC Fundamentals and Learning to Train courses, Plas y Brenin’s Coaching Processes course and finally completing an MSc in Applied Sports Science at Bangor University.

This book brings together the academic, practical and personal skills he has developed over the last thirteen years as a climber and coach; climbing routes of all different styles ranging from Diff to E5 in over ten countries. In essence this book is a shortcut to all Mark’s accrued knowledge over his long and successful professional and personal climbing career.
The Author and Publisher of this book agree with the BMC Participation Statement that:

“The BMC recognises that climbing and mountaineering are activities with a danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions.”

Every effort has been made to ensure that the content and instructions in this book cover all aspects of personal safety skills and techniques required in Rock Climbing. The Author and Publisher cannot accept any responsibility for any accident, injury, loss or damage sustained whilst following any of the techniques described within.

If you feel that you need additional instruction in order to use this book then it is advised that you employ a suitably qualified and experienced instructor.

The diagrams, photos and illustrations throughout the book are available to download as teaching resources for your own slideshow presentations.

visit: www.pesdapress.com/climbharder
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This book was born out of a personal challenge to improve my own teaching and coaching as a mountaineering and climbing instructor. I have been guided and influenced by many coaches in many disciplines and walks of life. In particular working on the Instructor Scheme and subsequent years freelancing for Plas y Brenin, the National Mountain Centre, I have come under the stewardship of many highly qualified and experienced instructors who started me on the path which lead to this book. In particular I would like to extend my thanks to the following staff at the centre; Martin Chester, Pete Catterall, Loel Collins, Si Colley, Mike Raine, Jon ‘Spike’ Green, Dave Hollinger, Stu McAleese, Neil Johnson, Carlo Forte, Louise Turner and Pete Firth as well as others who are too numerous to mention. I have been given encouragement, inspiration and knowledge by all. Some of you may recognise some of your teaching methods in this book.

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There will be people that I have forgotten to thank and for this I apologise, although the last people I should acknowledge are Franco Ferrero for believing in the project and agreeing to publish this and Pete Wood for turning my scribbles and photos into a book.
How to Climb Harder

This is a practical guide for rock climbers who want to climb harder. It includes exercises that can be carried out at your local climbing wall, crag, boulders or at home to improve all aspects of your climbing. The book is broken down into three parts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation – before you climb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technique – moving up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training – getting in shape</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To begin we’ll explore the basics of how we learn so that you get the most out of this book. Followed by ropework and safety considerations that every climber needs to be aware of before they start climbing, whether top roping, lead climbing or bouldering.

Next a series of movement techniques introduced through a progressive series of exercises that lead you from simple to more complex movements. Most of the exercises are intended for bottom roping or bouldering so you can drill the moves until they become second nature. The aim of these exercises is to help you climb safer, with more confidence and less effort than before. The technique section also covers both the tactical and mental techniques that you need for lead climbing.

(Above) Rebecca Williams eyes up the crux on Seamstress (VS), Dinorwic Slate Quarries. Two identical climbers of equal strength. One of them has good fluid technique, whilst the other relies on their arms. The technician will out climb the thug hands down. Our arms will never be as strong as the rest of our bodies.
Finally, the section on training starts with various ways to identify your weaknesses and target your training needs. With this in mind there are exercises and drills to improve aspects of strength and fitness which you can fit in around your climbing. The section on training young people will be of interest to any parent or coach – why an adult’s training programme shouldn’t be applied to a young person. The last chapter covers the basics of nutrition.

LAZY CLIMBING

The underlying ethos is that of ‘lazy climbing’, through which it is possible to improve your grade through being and staying relaxed, as well as making the movement of climbing as efficient as possible. If you adopt a lazy style to your climbing you will force yourself to be more efficient.

If you have ever watched a truly great climber then the one thing that you will notice above all is the apparent lack of effort that they put into it. Much of the time they will appear extremely relaxed.

An experienced climber uses all of their skill not to be fitter than you or me but to climb more efficiently. They don’t have to pull as hard because they are more in balance.

A great climber also draws upon a wealth of experience in the psychological warfare of lead climbing. By regularly stressing themselves, good climbers have developed a coping strategy to deal with those scary situations. This takes time to develop, but none the less you will become conditioned to becoming more comfortable.

You will become a lazy climber with good footwork, balanced body position, efficient weight transfer and a relaxed attitude. Broken down into their most basic elements these skills can be built up through a steady progression into more technical and dynamic movement.
The Basics: Handholds & Body Position

The lazy climber knows that the hands and arms are the smallest and weakest muscle group used in climbing; it’s vital to save as much energy as possible when we use them by using holds as effectively as we can.

Stay as relaxed as you can. The more relaxed in mind the more relaxed your grip. It is no coincidence that a scared climber is often described as being ‘gripped’. As anxiety increases so does your grip on whatever you can hold on to. Often even though you are in a position that when relaxed your hands might just be holding you in balance, you will be hanging on like your life depended on it.

To overcome this we need to learn not only how to compose ourselves, but also to know what it feels like to be relaxed, so during any of these exercises rate your grip on a scale of 1 to 5.

1 Very light – finger tips just touching the holds
2 Light – holding a cup of tea
3 Medium – a firm hand shake
4 Hard – holding a heavy bag
5 Very hard – you are totally maxed out.

As well as good foot work you also need to be able to hang on with your hands!

You can often trick your brain into feeling more comfortable by relaxing your arms, as the realisation dawns that you aren’t in as bad a position as you thought.
Try slowing your breathing down (a dose of adrenaline does exactly the opposite). By slowing everything down you are counteracting the natural fight or flight response your body has to stressful or fearful situations.

This is the start of the mental head game of climbing, and there are many theories as to how best to mentally prepare. This will be covered more fully in a later chapter.

### Handhold tips

- During all exercises relax your arms as much as possible.
- Slow your breathing, in through the nose out through the mouth.
- Make sure you have hold of the best part of the hold (the ‘sweet spot’). Search out the area around the hand hold, an inch to the left or the right the hold might be better.
- Keep your arms as straight as possible (so as to hang on your skeletal structure, rather than straining your biceps and shoulders).
- Try different foot and body positions, to move your centre of gravity.

**WARNING** – when climbing it is important to remove rings from fingers; failure to do so has lead to people effectively skinning their own fingers! If you look up ‘degloving injuries’ be warned, they are gruesome.

### CRIMPS

A crimp is the most instinctive way to grab a handhold (if you have ever climbed over a brick wall for example). There are three different types of crimp, the full crimp, half crimp and open handed crimp, all of which enable us to cling onto the tiniest of edges.

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**Why do we overgrip?**

One theory is that as we are overcome by a growing anxiety, we compensate for our reduced cognitive ability by increasing the effort we put into a task.
Preparation:
before you climb

Finger Injury Avoidance – The hands are prone to injury. We ask the smallest parts in our skeleton to support nearly all of our weight. After years of training the potential for injury is still high. The best way to avoid injury is to be aware of this and build up slowly to more ‘fingery’ boulder problems. To start with climb on fingery holds (a hold that only reaches the first joint, about 10mm) on vertical walls only, as this will limit the amount of force you can apply to the fingers. Over weeks, months and years slowly increase the angle of wall that you use with fingery holds. Listen to your body, a slight twinge or any acute pain is a precursor to injury, so rest your hands and fingers.

Under the age of eighteen bones are not yet fully grown. There is a record of permanent finger deformity among elite junior climbers (see p209).

A good warm-up will help prevent injury but there is no way to avoid tremendous strain on the fingers. On particularly hard ascents you might strap your fingers up with zinc oxide tape to support the soft tissue. Taping up every time can be counter-productive as it doesn’t allow your soft tissue to develop and strengthen as you climb.

Crimp exercise – Climb using only full crimps, then half and then open. Are some holds easier to hang with one of the three crimps? Try and make a move off the smallest crimp you can when open handed, half crimped and full crimped. Is there a difference?

Crimping tips

In the full crimp, you reinforce the fingers by locking your thumb over the top of the index finger.

Crimps are quite aggressive. It is easy to injure fingers, because our muscles grow stronger more quickly than the tendons, ligaments and pulleys in our fingers.

The bone, tendons, ligaments and pulleys of the hand and fingers can all be injured when climbing.

FINGER INJURY AVOIDANCE – The hands are prone to injury. We ask the smallest parts in our skeleton to support nearly all of our weight. At first our fingers are not conditioned to deal with these loads. After years of training the potential for injury is still high. The best way to avoid injury is to be aware of this and build up slowly to more ‘fingery’ boulder problems. To start with climb on fingery holds (a hold that only reaches the first joint, about 10mm) on vertical walls only, as this will limit the amount of force you can apply to the fingers. Over weeks, months and years slowly increase the angle of wall that you use with fingery holds. Listen to your body, a slight twinge or any acute pain is a precursor to injury, so rest your hands and fingers.

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tHe Basics: HandHolds & Body Position

When taping up the fingers you need to insure that the tape is tight enough to give support but not too tight so that the blood flow is restricted.

Cupping

A great technique for holding onto small spikes, it often can be used as it uses slightly different muscles to the crimp or sloper, as it relies more on the little finger and ring finger.

Cupping the hold. Mould your hand to fit round the shape of the hold.

**Taping up tips**

When taping up the fingers you need to insure that the tape is tight enough to give support but not too tight so that the blood flow is restricted.
SLOPERS

For many a sloper is the worst type of hold. It’s the equivalent of the foot ‘smear’, we have to use friction to enable us to hang on. On these, the most marginal of hand holds, hanging on often relies on us using not only hand strength but body position as well.

Sloper exercises – Find a sloper and experiment with different hand positions on the hold, whilst standing on the ground and try to find a ‘sweet spot’.

Now try hanging onto the sloper and experiment with different body and foot positions, like having your shoulder above and below the sloper, and then to the right and left. What feels easier, above or below? Is being in line easier to hang than having your body to the side? Try the exercise for both hands, when holding on with the right hand where is the best body position? What about the left hand?

Now traverse and climb up and down on slopers and ask yourself the same questions.

Sloper tips

- Stay low.
- Keep your arms straight.
- When moving on slopers, try pivoting around your shoulders with your arms straight.

PINCHES & SPRAGS

The opposable thumb is what sets us apart from most of the animal kingdom. It has given us amazing dexterity and arguably a foot up the evolutionary ladder, and for most it is an under used weapon in climbing.

It can be used to reinforce a crimp; by hooking over the index finger, change a hideous sloper into a satisfying pinch, and a lot more besides. The fact is that many people just pull down on holds, and don’t really think of improving
their grip. Look at and feel the hold before you take the final grip of it and usually you will find a better grasp than a simple crimp, often by finding a way to pinch and bringing the thumb into play (especially useful indoors as bolt on holds often allow you to pinch them).

(1+2) Whilst crimping a small hold in a corner or crack will be fine, pushing against the wall with the thumb (a sprag) helps makes the hold a lot more secure. (3) Pinching a sloping hold.

**Thumb exercises** – Climb up on either crimps or slopers on an indoor wall, without using your thumb. Repeat the exercise using your thumbs to try and pinch the holds. Which approach feels more secure?

Climb a new problem but this time look at each hold before you go to grasp it, then try and loosely grip it in three different ways, before finally committing to grip it in the best orientation you can find.

**Spragging exercises** – Now try spragging a sidepull in a corner and moving up on the hold. Repeat the problem just crimping the hold. Which felt easier on the arms? Which required more lay backing to hold? Which felt more secure?

**JAMMING**

Jamming is a dying art. Climbing walls encourage you to learn to use crimps and slopers but not how to jam; for most new climbers this is an outmoded skill. However, done well a jam is easier to hold than the biggest of jugs.

The methods for an effective jam are as extensive as the variety of cracks that it is possible to climb, from the tightest of finger cracks to the gnarliest of off-widths. Jamming involves wedging part or parts of your body into a crack or fissure. This can be painful and uncomfortable
to start with so you may wish to consider taping up your hands or fingers, your tolerance of the pain will develop. Typically the harder you apply your jam the less likely your hands or fingers are to slip. The slippage is more painful than the jam.

Finger jamming

The thinnest of cracks can be jammed with the smallest tool you have – your fingers. The width that you can jam easily depends on the thickness of your fingers, thinner cracks are better suited to thinner fingers.

**Finger jamming exercises** – Find a crack you can just fit your fingers in, with the little finger at the top and thumb at the bottom. Then twist the hand down, this should lock the finger into the crack, most commonly onto one of the finger joints.

At first just pull down on the lock with increasing force then, when happy, step off the ground and finally make a move up on the jam. If it is a continuous crack can you make a series of jams up the crack?

Finger jamming relies on your fingers being wider in one orientation than the other. 1. Place them in the crack vertically. 2. Then twist them to lock.

**Finger jamming tips**

Remember to try both hands.

Cracks are very rarely totally uniform, so try and find a natural tapering, the sort of wedge-shaped space in a crack that might take a wire for protection.

Different fingers and joints have different widths.
... and more in this chapter

Ring-locks

Off-hands

Hand-jams

Fist jams

Off-width jams

body + hold Orientation

Flagging
layback, the 106, 107
lazy climbing 10, 91, 139, 169
lead climbing 44, 45, 47, 139, 154
learning curve 11
leg loops 38
lock off 35
lock-offs 190
long term development 209
lower-off 35
lunging 124, 197

M
maillon 49
Malcolm Smith 187
mantelshelf, the 108–110
Mark Twight 168
matching 71
mental rehearsal 165
metabolism 181
micro wires 146
mind games 159
mind map 179
Moon board 187
multi-axled cams 147
multi-pitch 48
muscle memory 12

N
nuts 145

O
OBLA level 182, 199, 203
off belay 47
off-hands jams 82
off-width jams 85, 86
one-footed rest 97
on-sight 136
Oscar Eckenstein 117
over cammed 33
overhangs 115, 116
overlap, nuts 29
overloading (training) 183

P
peak height velocity 207, 208
pegs 31
performance profiling 176
periodisation 184
persuasion 166
phosphate 181
phosphocreatine 181, 182
pike 193
pinches 79, 80
placing gear 153, 154
power 196
process vs outcome goals 179
proprioception 13, 65
pull up bars 189
pump, the 58, 91, 185, 199, 203

Q
quickdraws 149, 150, 151, 158

R
rack 143, 144
racks 152
reading routes 134–136
recruitment training 195, 196
redpoint 137
redpointing 127–129
relaxation 171, 172, 174
resting 91
retrievable abseil 50
rigging rope 23
ring-locks 82
ritual, climbing 173
rock-overs 99–101
rocks 145
rock shoes 40
Roland Pauligk 146
roofs 113, 114
rotpunkt 128
RPs 146
rule of opposites, the 102–104

S
safe 47
School Room, the 187
screwegate karabiners 144
scripts, imagery 162, 164
seating a nut 29
second 44
self efficacy 159
self talk 167, 168, 174
sequencing 184
sewing machine leg 194
shake out 91
sidepull 87, 88
single vs double ropes 155
slack 46
slider nuts 146
slopers 79
slow twitch muscle fibres 182
SMART goals 178
smearing, feet 68, 79
solid 20
spikes 30, 31
spotting 53, 54
sprags 79, 80
staged jams 86
static vs dynamic 123
strength 185
stretching 60–64
style of ascent 136, 137
swapping, feet 71, 72
systems training 187

T
take 46
take in 35
taping up, fingers 78
tat 49
that’s me 47
threads 30
Todd Skinner 43
toe hooking 119
top roping 16, 58
trees 32
tri-cams 30
twist-lock 189
typewriter 189

U
undercut 87, 88

V
visualisation 165, 166
VO2 max 181, 203, 204

W
warm up 57–60
watch me 46
weakest link 176
wire gate karabiners 144
wires 145
Wolfgang Güllich 175, 187

Y
Yosemite glove 84
yo-yo 136

Z
d zone, the 172
Want to take your climbing to the next level? Here are the things you really need to know. From simple techniques (which can help erase bad habits) to training for the hardest climbs.

In each section there’s a series of exercises from simple to more complex movements that you can practise at your local climbing wall, crag, boulders or at home to improve all aspects of your climbing.

Climb harder, more safely, with more confidence and less effort than before. Whatever your climbing goals, there’s something here for everyone to focus on in order to become a better climber.