

Kids Scale the Walls, and the Principal Approves



David H. Davis for The New York Times

The Rifle High School climbing team of Rifle, Colo., at Core Elements gym in Grand Junction, Colo. Rifle's climbing coach, Tim Carlin, 28, is second from left.

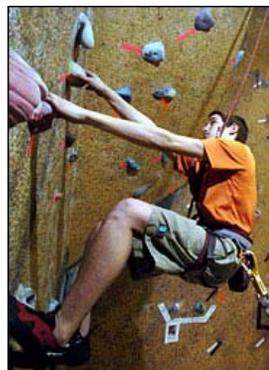
By **STEPHEN REGENOLD**

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WILLIAM FREDERICKS grew up in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, home to some of the best rock climbing in the country. But until last fall William, 15, a freshman at Adams City High School in Commerce City, Colo., had never tied into a climbing rope to experience the sport for himself.

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Brian Brainerd for The New York Times

William Fredericks, 15, climbs with his school team at the Rock'n and Jam'n gym in Thornton, Colo.

1970's. "When I was growing up, soccer was hardly on the radar, and then it blasted off," he said. "If the schools and parents get behind it, that's what could happen with climbing."

In 2004 more than 3.4 million young people, aged 16 to 24, tried the sport on indoor climbing walls, according to the Outdoor Industry Association.

Then William joined the Climbing Eagles, a competitive team at his school. In short order he quit track and field, wrestling and baseball to climb year round.

"I love the mental game in climbing," he said. His body high off the ground, fingertips on tiny holds, William found himself more excited than he had ever been playing traditional sports.

Private climbing gyms have always offered teenage climbers a place to compete. But now more than 50 high schools nationwide have established teams for serious climbers and newcomers like William. At least 15 teams have started since September, and roughly 1,000 students climb competitively on high school teams. The interest was sparked by teachers, many of whom took up the sport in the 1990's and founded the clubs to help teenagers master skills.

"In five years it's very possible that climbing could be a common sport at hundreds of high schools," said Duane Raleigh, 46, the editor of Rock and Ice, a climbing magazine. He compares climbing today with soccer in the

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The High School Climbers' Federation, a new organization, hopes to persuade some of these recreational climbers to join school teams. Another priority is to "make climbing a recognized and sanctioned sport," said Todd Mayville, the federation's adviser and the climbing coach at Adams City High.

Generally the teams have both male and female members and practice two to four days a week, training in school gyms, climbing gyms or outdoors on rock. Monthly competitions pit school against school on indoor artificial rock walls peppered with plastic handholds. The idea is to see who can climb the highest on the most difficult routes.

On high routes climbers are connected to safety ropes. Bouldering routes, which are often included in contests as well, are only 10 to 12 feet high and do not require ropes. Points are awarded to individual climbers and then added up to form team scores at the end of the competition.

Students at Karns High School in Knoxville, Tenn., can even letter in climbing by competing in a local series.

Granted, many young climbers are not cutthroat competitors. Nathaniel Gerlach, a freshman who is a member of a new team of home-schooled teenagers in Evansville, Ind., said he just likes getting a workout and being with friends at the climbing gym.

Even those like Lindsey Kirkland, 18, a top climber in the 15-team Knoxville league, say they also do it for the mind-body exercise. "Climbing works the whole body, all your muscles, your cardio and your mind," Lindsey, a senior, said.

Teachers who climb are the backbone of many teams. Most volunteer their time. Tim Carlin, 28, an outdoor education teacher, is the climbing coach at Rifle High School in Rifle, Colo. Erik Nickerson, 35, the coach at Fountain Valley School of Colorado in Colorado Springs, got his climbing legs on a mountain rescue squad in New Mexico. Kristy Campbell, 42, the coach at Karns High School, has climbed for 12 years. Matt Childers, 28, a special education teacher at Woodrow Wilson High School in Beckley, W.Va., has climbed in Mexico and Canada. "I want to share my passion for this sport," said Mr. Childers, who is starting a squad.

To help foster interscholastic climbing, members of the High School Climbers' Federation organize competitions, recruit instructors to start teams, help teams research insurance and are developing national competition standards. A Web site, www.hsclimbing.org, where teams will be able to post scores and calculate rankings, is in the works.

State athletic associations do not yet recognize climbing as a sport, so schools often do not finance teams, Mr. Mayville said. That usually means coaches are not paid, transportation to events is not provided and teams sometimes have to secure insurance independently of the schools.

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Receiving approval from the state agencies that govern scholastic athletics is not easy. The Colorado High School Activities Association has not sanctioned a new sport since it accepted lacrosse in the 1990's.

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Bill Reader, the commissioner of the association, said climbing is not likely to be sanctioned in the near future because there is no universally acknowledged set of competition rules. There are also too few schools participating, he said.

Still, with millions of young recreational climbers, Mr. Mayville said climbing would one day be recognized as a high school sport nationwide. Not all climbers love the idea. Joseph Healy, 52, of Portland, Ore., a technology consultant and a climber for three decades, views climbing as a personal pursuit that takes place in the wilderness, not a competitive indoor sport with winners and losers. "Climbing competitions, with their focus on route difficulty and ratings, impose the entirely wrong mindset and approach to something I consider sacred," Mr. Healy said.

Nor are students who climb universally in favor of teams. Mr. Nickerson, the coach at Fountain Valley, said feelings at his school are mixed. "Some of the kids are worried about overeager parents, a loss of fun in the sport, high stress placed on winning, or excessive competitiveness," he said.

Many high school teams have been nudged into existence by private gyms that hope to foster the next generation of climbers and customers. A gym called Climb Nashville recruited seven schools to start a league in November. For three months, 65 students were bused in twice a week for practice, and the gym staged monthly competitions. In Knoxville, about 350 students compete on 15 high school teams in events at the Climbing Center.

The Denver Climbing League, organized by Paradise Rock Gym in Denver, sponsors a series of contests, attracting about 450 kids from more than a dozen high schools.

"We've had steady growth each of the past four years, with more high schools and more kids," said Bryan Mallin, the owner of Paradise Rock Gym. "I'm not seeing any signs of it slowing down."

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