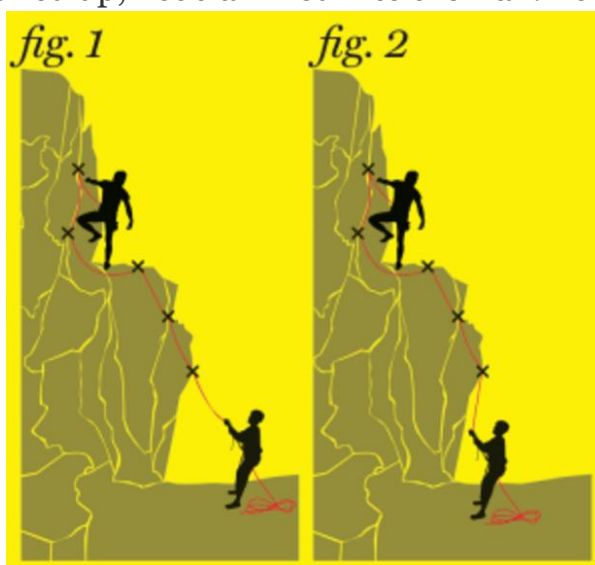


Common Indoor-to-Crag Mistakes

We're in the midst of a climbing boom. There are more than ever indoor climbing walls (or gyms), and that's great for the sport. What we're also seeing is a mass migration of first-timers from the indoors to outside crags. Although these plastic paradises make fantastic training and practice environments, they also facilitate or even reward some bad habits that can hold you back or be downright unsafe outside. We all start off clueless, but we don't have to—and shouldn't—stay that way. Observe, ask, and emulate the habits of more experienced climbers. Their practices are produced by years of experience and hundreds of days climbing outside, but you can jump-start your transition to outdoor master by avoiding these common mistakes.

1. Don't lead belay while standing far away from the base of the wall (fig. 1)

This “stand back and observe” habit is a function of wanting to view the entire pitch while belaying, and some gyms require that belayers anchor themselves into the floor, typically 10 to 15 feet from the base of the wall. At the crag, stand adjacent to the wall, directly beneath the first bolt or piece of protection and slightly to the side of the climber (fig. 2), moving around if you have to. In the event of a fall, you want to be pulled up, not slammed into the wall. As the climber moves up a few bolts, you can step back just a bit, but you should remain relatively close to the first bolt. You'll spend more than half your climbing time belaying, so it's important to develop your safe-catch skills as much as you develop your climbing technique.



2. Don't anchor yourself in at the base of the wall on single-pitch routes

Unless the route begins off a narrow ledge or your climber massively outweighs you, it's better to be mobile and able to step side to side or be lifted up off the ground in the event of a large fall, which gives your climber a softer, more comfortable catch. This mobility will help you avoid small falling rocks and ensure low-impact catches on marginal gear, two considerations that don't come into play when gym climbing.

3. Spot your climber before the first bolt is clipped

Gym floors are covered by huge mats of soft foam while crags are strewn with sharp boulders and tree roots. Falling from the start of a route outside, even just a couple feet up, can have devastating consequences. Until the first bolt or piece of gear has been clipped, don't consider yourself a belayer, consider yourself a spotter. Ensure that the belay device is rigged correctly and then feed out more than enough slack to allow the climber to reach the first piece of protection. As the climber begins, take both hands off the rope and belay device and focus on spotting the climber to mitigate a ground fall. The rope is useless until it's clipped to something anyway. As the first piece is clipped take up the proper belay position.

4. Don't walk around in climbing shoes

Rather than treading (relatively) clean flat floors, you'll be walking across gravel, mud, and desiccated guano. Your climbing shoes rely on pure contact between the rubber and the rock, so even a super-thin layer of dirt in between will reduce the friction. Over time, it will damage your shoes, and it coats the first few holds of the route in whatever you just stood in before starting up the wall, which not only makes holds slippery, but is also pretty bad etiquette.