



over the years, local climbers have voiced their desire for a more modern approach centered around the common drive to train and improve.

Three leaders in Western Colorado climbing established the Grip Bouldering Gym this spring as a means to that end. Cody Abshear, Mike Kimmel and Ben Rueck have formed the backbone of Western Colorado climbing culture throughout its development. Grip now gives their efforts a solid platform to stand on and grow from.

Each of these founders bring their own unique experiences in climbing to the table. Abshear handles day-to-day operations at the facility and sees his place in the blossoming community as one of all-around support. As the father to three competitive climbers, he knows how to bolster big dreams from behind the scenes.

"I try to take part in all aspects of climbing culture whenever possible, as I really enjoy getting to know others in the climbing community and support those who are pushing hard and giving back," Abshear explains. "I like to think that Grip can be a positive support to the community in that way too, from both a training and social aspect."

Rueck, marketing manager for Grip, walks the floor. "My aim is to provide a clear understanding of the programs and communal space that our members need," he says, which

he's cultivated after 18 years in the outdoor industry and as a professional climber. He knows first-hand what it takes to get newcomers in the door and keep veterans coming back.

Grip then gets its color — literally and figuratively — from Kimmel as head route-setter and program director at center stage. His creative vision decorates the walls with attractive and effective challenges for climbers of all levels.

"I'm focused on making Grip a hub for the community of climbers and climbers-to-be," emphasizes Kimmel. He divides his time between nurturing the energy that already flows through the gym and welcoming in fresh faces to make it even stronger.

These different perspectives round out the role that Grip plays as the glue connecting the local climbing community. They see their audience as a mixed bag of climbers who could use a hand in finding common ground.

"There are a lot of experienced climbers," Kimmel clarifies, "but many who may have only climbed in gyms here and there and many others who know of climbing as 'a thing' from living around here but have never actually tried it." The scope of outdoor climbing options in the surrounding area means that even the more experienced climbers come from various backgrounds in terms of climbing style, which adds its own degree of diversity.

The toughest part of Grip's intention to unite the climbing community under one roof is finding a way to bridge all those gaps without erasing the distinctions. The team focuses on creating a positive atmosphere where "mixed levels of climbers play together and encourage each other," as Kimmel envisions.

Grip manages to foster this kind of environment by offering a little something for everyone — a big ask for a relatively small space. Difficulty options cover the whole spectrum from introductory climbs to intricate problems that have even the most advanced athletes thinking hard and breathing harder. Classes both on and off the wall help beginner climbers find their footing and build their fitness, while coaching assessments and customizable training tools give experts insight into their subtle weaknesses. Tables and benches give climbers room to relax, talk out their efforts, chow down after a tough session or even catch up on work between goes. The end result is a compact package of resources that makes sure no climber gets left behind.

The dedication to efficiency and engagement pays off in the eyes of local climbers. Britta Smith, Grip member and Western Slope climber, has already felt a change in her relationships with other climbers.

"It's brought the community together by drawing a lot of the people that have always just climbed outside. Now, we have somewhere to commune together." She appreciates how the Grip team works to "bring the outdoor vibe and style inside, so that people who enjoy climbing outdoors around here can now also enjoy a shared space."

Climbers will always follow the rock, and the rugged Western Slope landscape dangles a tantalizing carrot all on its own. But, no matter how it looks from the outside, climbing is far from an individual sport. Every climber needs a support system to prop them up with encouragement and guidance. Thanks to Grip Bouldering, the climbers of Western Colorado now have better access to a priceless asset: camaraderie. +

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WESTERN COLORADO CLIMBING COMMUNITY FINDS COMMON GROUND

GRIP BOULDERING

Words by Lucie Hanes | Photos courtesy of Grip Bouldering



Climbers are simple creatures at heart. To spot them in the wild, just follow the law of attraction: where there are rocks worth climbing, there will be people to climb them. There's no shortage of quality rock throughout the Western Slope, which means that climbers have flocked to the area from all over the state — and country, even — for decades already. From some of the most notoriously difficult sport climbing spots in Rifle Mountain Park, routes all along the Elk Creek cliff lines and multi-pitch journeys up clean splitter cracks in Escalante, to the acclaimed Ice Park in Ouray and a bouldering metropolis in Unaweep Canyon, there's hardly a blank slate to be found.

Climbing as a lifestyle might be old news around here, but the climbing community is getting a facelift. The new Grip Bouldering

Gym in Grand Junction offers climbers a fresh watering hole to gather around in between adventures.

Because outdoor climbing destinations can be so remote, indoor facilities like Grip bring climbers together in a central location. Gyms not only provide a hub for all the grunt work that goes into preparing for outdoor endeavors but also add even more value to the sport through opportunities for social connection.

Facilities including Eagle Climbing + Fitness and Monkeyhouse in Carbondale have found success in forming strong climbing communities a bit further east, but those west of Glenwood Springs needed their own source of unification closer to home. Grand Valley Climbing, the gym already in Grand Junction, has gotten a good start on that goal. However, as the sport has grown

