

## Climbing like a girl: climbing for gold in 2021



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In their vertical urban playground, they navigate themselves up multicoloured walls, scattered with holds marked with dusty handprints. Friends stand below, shouting encouraging words and clapping their hands together, creating clouds of chalk.

Despite a difficult year, complete with isolation periods, compulsory mask wearing and the two-metre rule, 2021 was the year of the female climber and the year the sport took the world by storm.

A recent documentary film *The Wall – Climb for Gold*, which was filmed over two years, features four female Olympic climbers, lending the audience insight into the gruelling nature of top-level sport. The women battle through qualifying competitions, mental and physical setbacks as well as the global pandemic.

Previously a niche activity, competitive climbing made its debut in the delayed Tokyo Olympics, taking place in July and August 2021. Since then, the UK has seen a spike in interest in finger strength exercises, tricky routes to navigate and spider-like speed events.

Belinda Fuller, 33, is the director of Volume 1, a climbing centre in Kent. She explained that despite the pandemic, more people participated in climbing sessions. “I think with the confusion of Covid it has been hard to see the true effect, but the week climbing was on TV there was a very noticeable increase in new customers coming in every day.”

Requiring no more than a chalk bag and a pair of rubber shoes, rope-free bouldering has become a very attractive hobby. Participants combine balance and gymnastic ability with strength and stamina, solving problems set out by coloured holds. The progression is satisfying, with climbers ascending the grades of ability. There is an exhilarant sense of achievement in resolving the physical and mental challenge.

Shauna Coxsey, 28, one of the leads in the film, became the first Team GB climber to compete at Tokyo and has since become a figurehead for women’s climbing.

However, despite an increase in female participation, there are less women getting involved in climbing than men, at a ratio of around six to four.

GB climber, Hannah Smith, has recognised the increased interest. “I think there’s something really attractive about climbing – especially for young people. It is dynamic, colourful, and very different to other sports in terms of the variety you get when you turn up to the wall, both in difficulty and style.

“People don’t need to be strong to get involved and emphasising the social side of the sport will help newcomers feel more relaxed about getting involved,” added the 19-year-old.

A major attraction to the sport appears to be that there is less of a divide between men and women. In fact, women tend to be more gymnastic and have better balance and coordination than men, meaning they take quite naturally to the sport. Pound for pound, women can achieve the same difficulty level as their male counterparts even though they may not have the male brute strength.

22-year-old GB climber Gwyne Thuttley said: “there are more guys, but I would say it is better than most sports. Men and woman train alongside each other even if we don’t compete in the same category.”

Smith explained that given the biological difference in strength between men and women, separate gender categories allow for equal opportunities. “All competitions allow male and female entry; prize money is the same and the climbs in competitions are of the same high quality.”

“I grew up with a brother who has always competed in the same events as me. I have never felt he was able or allowed to do things that I wasn’t in this sport, and I’ve always felt the chances we’ve had to travel, compete even just climb have been the same.”

Despite the apparently gender-neutral atmosphere on the climbing wall, the sport is not free from thoughtless misogyny.

Smith had a disappointing experience in the 2019 British Bouldering Championships. “I competed on four boulders alongside the male finalists and when I watched the stream back, I was disappointed to see there was so much camera attention on the men and that some of my best climbs were missed altogether.

“This was really disappointing as my family and friends couldn’t follow my event.”

Thuttley has encountered directly inappropriate behaviour when a group of men commented loudly on her muscular figure. One experience of hers at a club stands out: “I had people come up and squeeze my biceps which is super inappropriate and not okay.”

This sort of behaviour is likely to discourage female participation, especially in mixed groups where climbers are trying to find their level and build confidence. Talented women could easily be put off from taking the sport further.

Steps can be taken to move towards a more balanced and more positive environment for female climbers.

Fuller is on a mission to do this. She strives to balance out the gender inequality by having ladies only sessions and female staff who act as role models for participants. In this way an environment can be created in which women feel less inhibited and more relaxed so that they can achieve their targets and build their confidence. “The staffing team is female dominant, and we have a strong female presence who follow climbing... We try to make everyone feel equally welcome and catered for.”

Thuttley explained that having more females setting the routes would be a positive step in the right direction. “That would mean less ‘reachy’ moves.” Men, often being taller and more muscular than women, can essentially pull themselves up the wall. Female climbers are mentally and physically agile, using technical moves to reach the top. If female setters design the routes, they could tailor them to suit the female climbing technique which tends to favour flexible and technical moves rather than brute strength.

Fuller agreed that if there were more gender-neutral routes, top level female athletes could match male climbers in competitions. “On the international stage most of the girls could give the boys a good run for their money if the routes were carefully set.”

The sport will be returning in 2024 for the Paris Olympics, albeit with a slightly different format to Tokyo with two events for both female and male categories: first, bouldering and lead and secondly, speed.

With three years before Paris, the sport has the opportunity to take its individual selling point of inclusivity and equality even further. More women may represent their country and, like the Olympians in *The Wall – Climb for Gold*, showcase the power of the female climber, ascending to the summit and effortlessly swinging from a hold by the tips of their callused fingers.