

EXERCISE

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

A woman with blonde hair tied back is climbing a bouldering wall. She is wearing a white t-shirt and dark shorts. The wall is covered in various colored climbing holds (blue, red, yellow, purple). In the background, other people are sitting on a red crash pad. The gym has a modern, industrial feel with concrete walls and wooden beams.

BOULDERING PROVIDES A FULL-BODY WORKOUT AND TESTS YOUR THINKING SKILLS. HERE'S WHAT WE LEARNT ABOUT THIS LATEST EXERCISE TREND (AND NOW OLYMPIC SPORT!)

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

AS someone who only ever climbed a tree once as a kid, I was more than hesitant to try bouldering. No ropes and just a crash pad to protect you against an inevitable fall? It seemed like asking for an injury. But after the third suggestion that I give it a try, I decided I had to see what the fuss was about.

The bouldering gym Bloc11 in Cape Town offers a free beginners' class on Saturday mornings, so

off I went. Manager and coach Tiffany Wells showed me the proverbial ropes.

THE INS AND OUTS

'At one stage, everyone was rock climbing, and then this thing called bouldering appeared,' Tiffany says. A form of free climbing, you scale small rock formations or artificial rock walls. 'The general idea is that you're doing a short, intense climb – essentially the hardest part of a long climb.' It's thanks to this

intensity and physicality that bouldering has been growing in popularity among those looking for a fun and exciting alternative to their normal exercise regime.

Climbing involves the use of ropes to protect you from falling, and in bouldering, pads are there to protect you from injury. Don't worry: for the most part, you don't venture very high, which is also what makes it more accessible. Other than chalk and climbing shoes, which you can rent at most gyms, you don't need fancy equipment and knowledge of rock-climbing knots.

INDOOR VS OUTDOOR

You get different styles of bouldering, but the basic types are done either indoors or



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outdoors. ‘You do get highballing, where you’re climbing into the no-fall zone [essentially, you’re high enough that you don’t *want* to fall], but there’s a niche group of people who enjoy doing this,’ Tiffany says.

An indoor climbing gym’s bouldering walls feature ‘problems’, a series of holds that are colour-coded to indicate the level of difficulty. Route setters like Tiffany are in charge of coming up with problems to keep climbers on their toes. And, of course, you have the benefit of plenty of crash pads to break your fall at a gym.

Outdoor bouldering is an entirely different beast. Most of the popular outdoor bouldering destinations have a route guide. This will tell you the difficulty level of each boulder and the route to best climb it. Because you don’t have the colour-coded holds to guide you, it does involve a bit more exploration. And you have to have a spotter with you. ‘Essentially, it’s a spotter’s job to ensure that, if the climber does fall from the boulder, they land on the crash pad you’ve brought,’ Tiffany says.

Rocklands in the Cederberg, Western Cape, is one of the most popular bouldering destinations in South Africa. Climbers from around the world visit during the peak season (it’s too hot in summer) and spend up to three months climbing the sandstone boulders. If you feel ready to level up your climbing experience by trying outdoor bouldering, then this is a great place to start.

Bloc11 manager Tiffany Wells demonstrates how to tackle some boulder problems, including an overhang. There’s a Bloc11 gym in Paarden Eiland and another in Diep River.



THE BENEFITS

Bouldering is not only fun but also offers a range of mental and physical benefits.

STRENGTHENS MUSCLES:

Where climbing is about endurance, bouldering is about strength. ‘I find bouldering is a fun way to work out your whole body – every single part of the body works really hard,’ Tiffany says. You use the large muscles in your arms and legs to pull your body up the wall, and your abs work to keep you stable and balanced.

INCREASES MOBILITY: As you stretch and twist your body to reach the next hold, you also improve your mobility and range of motion, which further helps tone your body.

KEEPS THE HEART RATE UP:

The high-intensity climbs will have you breaking more than a sweat. It’s hard work, and it’ll push your heart rate up from the first hold.

IMPROVES COORDINATION:

Bouldering helps to improve spatial awareness and hand-eye coordination.

BOOSTS MENTAL ABILITY:

There’s a lot of mental agility that goes into bouldering. You need

to plan your climbs, figure your way out of challenges and fight your body’s natural instinct to stay grounded. Your mind is constantly focused on what to do to avoid falling. Research has shown that bouldering can help to treat depression and anxiety. ■



FINAL THOUGHTS

After my 45-minute class at Bloc11 and a few practice sessions, I can tell you that bouldering isn’t for the

faint of heart but it is a lot of fun! The climbs take a lot out of you, but with practice it gets easier. The great thing about bouldering is that each time is different, so it’s never boring.

‘The more you climb and meet other climbers, the more you’ll become involved in the community, and from there you’ll be hooked,’ Tiffany says.

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