



March 5, 2021

To Our Boulders Community:

We appreciate that so many post comments to our [three online comment boxes](#), and to our two physical comment boxes (one in each location). Many others reach out via email and social media. We do our best to respond as frequently as possible in a public forum; for urgent or easy-to-take-care-of matters, we often fix things on the fly, too! Keep the comments coming!

Meanwhile, it's time once again for our (almost) monthly feedback response. Here you go...

We can't thank you enough for contributing to improvement at Boulders. We really appreciate the comments. We're happy and privileged to serve each and every one of you.

Sincerely,

Boulders Climbing Gym

General Feedback - COVID Concerns:

Two Distinct Comments, Addressed Together: #1 - *Just an observation from the past few sessions. It seems like people are getting lax about leaving when their time slot is done (causing overcrowding during the first 15 min or so of each hour) and the 6 feet of social distancing feels like it's shrinking. I don't have any perfect solutions, but I've definitely left early a few times cause I don't feel safe.*

#2 - *I'd like to echo other sentiments regarding mask usage: The work Boulder's is doing is not enough, to put it bluntly. I have stopped climbing at Boulder's because the culture around mask usage is performative at best - you keep saying that you are enforcing mask usage, but every time I come to the gym there are people hanging out and chatting without masks on. Enforcement of the one-way hallway downtown has also been nonexistent. I don't feel safe at Boulder's unfortunately, and I know several others who feel the same way. You wrote in the Jan 12th response "Our goal has been to create a culture of voluntary compliance..." - That isn't enough. You need to ENFORCE the mask mandate. No mask, no service, no exceptions. I'm likely to cancel my membership because it seems like Boulder's doesn't care, and that's unacceptable.*

Response: Thanks to you both for reaching out and voicing your concerns. We will definitely remind staff to do floor counts on the hour, especially when things are busy. As needed, we can announce over the PA that it's time to go. We've also reminded all staff of the need to patrol the floor to make sure that people are maintaining proper mask protocols. We appreciate the heads up, and thanks for holding us accountable.

As it happens, your reporting is important to our goal of creating a culture of voluntary compliance. We need this sort of feedback to help us maintain our standards, and we value getting it in real time, too. If you ever see anyone not wearing a mask, or if we're over capacity, please point this out to staff. We'd rather manage the problem in real time than have to address it after-the-fact.

We take masks in particular very seriously. We can, have, and will eject people who do not comply. Those who refuse to comply in the moment or over multiple times will be banned for life. We can't address this if we don't see it, and so if you do, please help us all out by bringing it to our attention.

Generally, our experience has been that creating a culture of compliance in regards to safety measures has served us well. For 25 years, we've been in the life-safety risk mitigation business. This said, our policy has been that we expect people to act safely when they're in the gyms, we expect our community to be aware of what others are doing around them and to report things we don't see to us, and we intervene when and where there's an issue. We've kept this same type of enforcement policy in place over COVID because we've proven to ourselves over many years (and these past ten months) that it works: We believe we achieve 98% to 99% mask compliance throughout the course of the day, and - even so - this might mean that we get between 5 and 20 mask scofflaws per day. We catch as many of these as we can - and we believe we do it better than virtually all of the area restaurants, retailers, and grocery stores - but still a few get through. And for this reason, we need your help.

Repeating: ***If you see something, say something.*** We'll do the rest.

Regarding COVID mitigation overall, we recently lifted our cap on the Eastside gym, going from 14% capacity per hour (25 people) to 19% capacity per hour (35 people). (We announced this change via social media on February 1...) So if you've been to the Eastside since February 1, you might've seen the larger crowd there. So far, Downtown we're maintaining at less than 14% capacity (25 people), but in the coming weeks we may lift this cap. If you're ever at either gym and see this number creep, feel free to bring it up to staff, too. Note that briefly at the top of every hour we exceed capacity for a few minutes, as old reservations lapse off and new ones arrive. This is to be expected when we are operating at capacity. However, we do hourly counts and will broadcast on the PA if we have too many people in the space.

One other factor to consider is that we have [BPI technology in both gyms](#), which is an ultraviolet light in our air systems that kills airborne microbes. Other mitigation efforts include frequent professional cleaning, more frequent route rotation and hold cleaning, and - of course - the requirement that everyone wear masks.

We feel good about our efforts to mitigate COVID, and the math backs us up. We understand though that everyone has to draw the line for themselves in regards to how much risk is acceptable as it relates to this virus; the risk of transmission in our space is inherently not zero, but we feel that it's as close as we can get to this number. If we've missed the mark from your perspective, we understand that everyone has a different standard for acceptable risk, in climbing as well as in general health, particularly in

regards to this virus. However we have met and exceeded Wisconsin, Dane County, and Madison standards as well as our own standards, and we continue to see these standards supported, as the results speak for themselves.

And on this last point, we do indeed care. We care *a lot*. At the end of the day the bottom line is: We want to be safe ourselves, and we need to keep our families, friends, and community safe, too. So we do care, we assure you.

Thanks again for reaching out, and know that we are happy to have a more in depth conversation if you like! We encourage you to set your own standards for your personal safety. Know that we're doing all we can to mitigate COVID and our methods are working, but - again - please let us know if you believe that we're missing the mark.

Comment: *I would like to see stricter policies in place for individuals who remove their masks at the gym. I recently encountered a visitor who had completely removed his mask while running on the treadmill. I informed the front desk, and the employee quickly responded by going to check out the situation. Sure enough, the visitor quickly replaced his mask as soon as the staff member approached, but there were no consequences for the visitor. I was pleased that the staff member respected my concern and acted quickly. But, I would like to see visitors who remove their masks given a warning that they will be barred from the gym in the future if they violate the public health measures again. Otherwise, the policy is in effect that it is ok to take off your mask as long as you put it back on when an employee comes by.*

Response: We're definitely on the same page, here. We believe that we have 98% to 99% mask compliance, but even still that means we may get between 5 and 20 mask scofflaws a day. We've used your feedback to inspire staff to catch each and every one of them. It really helps also if you report these incidents in real time, as we can act on it in the moment with those who are not in compliance. We can, have, and will eject those who don't comply, and - yes, we agree - banning people from Boulders is definitely on the table. Thanks for providing a good mirror by which we can measure ourselves, as we'll encourage the team to be vigilant, direct, and non-compromising.

We also added signage by the treadmills that say that masks are required at all times, even while running indoors.

Two Distinct Comments, Addressed Together: *#1 - Is it possible to modify the reservation system so that members can see how many visitors are signed up for a particular time slot? It would make it easier for those of us who are not comfortable climbing when there are 30+ others signed up.*

#2 - I would love it if I could see how many people are signed up for a given time slot at the gym. That way I can at least try to pick a slot that doesn't have as many people in the gym at the same time.

Response: We looked into this, and the best we can do at the moment is to publish the available slots on our reservation system page, and so we've done this. There, you can see how many slots are available per hour, and how many have been booked, in real time. Ideally, we'd have a standalone widget that gave the current capacity in both gyms

to the minute, posted on our webpage and on social media. However, though we've seen other gyms do this we're still trying to figure out how it will work with our current POS system. We'll continue to look into this and hopefully find a solution.

Comment: *Have you thought about a "vaccinated" climb time? Some of us are still laying low but might be enticed out to the gym this way?? Miss you guys!!*

Response: *While it's an interesting idea to provide climbing time just for those that are vaccinated, we'd be concerned that this could lead to issues revolving around class, financial access to means to obtain a vaccine, and would exclude access to many folks that have thus far been unable to receive a vaccine for one reason or another. We couldn't in good conscience deny access to folks solely based on their access to vaccines, as the current circumstances to qualify to receive one are so varied. We're doing our best to navigate the COVID pandemic fairly and with grace. Our hope is that we can fast track access to vaccines for everyone, so everyone can feel comfortable climbing again. Everyone is itching to climb, and we truly can't wait until we can have all of our community back in our gyms.*

Comment: *I learned recently that the cap on reservations at the Eastside is up to 35, whereas it was previously 25. Did any communications about this change go out to members? I am concerned about the change, as 35 people in the gym makes it very difficult to maintain social distance, and I would have liked some explanation about how this decision was reached.*

Response: Yes, it's true that we lifted capacity at the Eastside location to 35 in order to accommodate our youth programs as well as member traffic. In December, we created youth-only hours to manage this same issue, and we received a lot of feedback that this wasn't a well-liked policy. Further, we also received feedback that the 4pm to 6pm time slot for youth-only hours wasn't ideal for kids, and they need 5pm to 7pm, which would significantly increase the user conflict we've been experiencing. So we decided to lift capacity from 25 to 35 at a time at the Eastside location in order to provide access both for our members as well as our youth program members.

Both values - 25 and 35 - are significantly below the Dane County Public Health guidelines; we're allowed to operate at 50% capacity, which according to fire code is about 95 people at a time at the Eastside and 87 people Downtown. We're not comfortable with these numbers, so we decided to start both locations at 25 people, largely because it "felt right" to us. 25 people is 13% to 14% capacity, depending on the location. With ample room by ordinance to lift our own self-determined cap, we decided to do this in order to solve the access issue we've been having between our members and youth program participants on the Eastside.

We feel comfortable lifting the cap because we have not had a single case of community spread of COVID reported in either gym, and our other mitigation policies are quite stringent and - we believe - effective.

Regarding communications, we published an announcement on FB and IG on 2/1, followed up by broadcasting stories from both platforms about this several times since, and sent this out in our monthly newsletter in February.

In retrospect, we could've added a title to [the image we posted on 2/1](#), though the stories we posted all mentioned "Expanded Capacity" and similar. We had planned to get the monthly newsletter out early the first week in February, but it was delayed. Our objective is to communicate as clearly and as effectively as possible in the moment, and we may have missed this here and for that we apologize. We decided to increase capacity late in January, so Feb 1 was the best time to announce the new policy. We will create better banners for our informative content to mitigate this going forward.

General Feedback:

Comment: *I am a regular weekday morning climber downtown. We have a pretty great little community. One point of feedback I'd like to provide is that at times the staff ends up vacuuming first thing in the AM. It seems very off-putting and in the way of climbers. Perhaps the opening staff could come 15 minutes early to vacuum, or do at a less busy time, say 8 or 9am when many of the early climbers leave.*

Response: Thank you for bringing this up! Yes, we understand that the vacuum sucks! (Har-Har! #dadjoke) But we do agree that it can be a bit off-putting.

This said, we've recently added cleaning shifts to our schedule, and we'll encourage openers to vacuum later in the morning, or at less busy times. This is a good suggestion and one we can certainly accommodate, ASAP.

Two Distinct Comments, Addressed Together: #1 - *Since the prices have increased on the Eastside and the \$9/visit punch card is no more, single-day climbing prices are prohibitively expensive at both locations.*

#2 - *The membership prices should be income dependent. Membership fees is a MASSIVE barrier to entry.*

Response: We hear the concerns about pricing from those who feel excluded, and we share the concerns. While pricing reflects our financial reality as well - rent and payroll are both expensive, and have disproportionate impact in our two small gyms - we don't want to turn away anybody because they can't afford to climb at Boulders.

We've recently launched our Climb4Community initiative to address this, and this effort will be a significant part of our platform going forward. We're mission-driven, which means we get up every day to "Improve the world in which we live, work, and play, one climb at a time." So inasmuch as we can mitigate costs for those who need support, we will do so.

Stand by for more details on the Climb4Community platform, and in the meantime watch for our monthly Climb For A Cause sales on day-passes, our frequent sales of punch passes, and ask staff about Early-Bird membership options.

Comment: *Can you put Yerba Mate in the vending machines?*

Response: ORDERED! Thanks for bringing this up!

Comment: *I live in Iowa. Boulders is the closest climbing gym to where I live. However, the last time I checked (after driving 100 miles to get there!), I found out that there are no auto-belay routes to climb. That sucks, because I don't have any climbing friends and am forced to spend my climbing gym workouts on the auto-belay routes. I can't help but think that you are missing out on a lot of potential climbers, like me, who don't have someone to belay with/for... and therefore are going elsewhere, or just missing out on the opportunity to enjoy climbing.*

Response: Thanks for driving from Iowa! You'll be happy next time you come! We added auto-belays to the Eastside last summer as part of our COVID mitigation. Our new gyms will also have them, but more on that later. ;)

Comment: *I'm just reaching out to know if you guys have considered implementing anything to assist colorblind climbers at your bouldering gym (multicolor taping system, colorblind friendly color system, etc.) I went for the first time recently and had a spectacular time, but there were a lot of times where red/green or blue/purple holds were really quite hard to distinguish. Roughly 10% of the population is color blind in some degree - and I'm sure I'm not the only one at your gyms. I love what you guys are doing and it's incredible to have such a sweet bouldering gym in downtown Madison, but I just wanted to raise my thoughts and hear what you guys had to say. It is best if you respond via email - and thank you for reading my message! :)*

Response: Thanks for reaching out! Glad you liked climbing Downtown, and thanks also for the conversation off-line. We're looking into this and will hopefully have a solution, soon. We appreciate you lifting this to our attention.

Comment: *We're on 3+ months since I asked you to replace the brushes Downtown and at the Eastside. More people will help keep routes friendly if the brushes don't [REDACTED!]*

Response: Friendly reminder that we're real people answering this, and a family-friendly community, too! Please watch the language. We ordered new brushes three months ago, and they've only just arrived. There's a world-wide pandemic and some goods are harder to get than others; brushes were on the short-supply list but we got 'em now! Thanks for your patience :)

Comment: *I missed the quarterly Community & Culture survey. Next time can you put how long it will remain open? Also maybe an obvious link to it on the homepage.*

Response: Thanks for asking about this, and we're glad you value the Community & Culture survey as much as we do. We used the same marketing methods to promote the survey this time as we did the first time, and the closing date was listed in all communications. Generally, we'll have it up for a couple of weeks and promote it a few different ways. We'll look into improving how we get the word out for our next survey, which will go live in April. Stay tuned!

Comment: *The workout/back room at the East side is way too cold. I guess "cold" is an understatement. I checked the thermostat in that room the other day, it read 44 degrees. I would workout downtown where it's warmer but there is no workout equipment there. Is there any possibility of turning on the heat in the back room on the East side?*

Response: WHOA! Thanks for letting us know! We knew it was cool, but - dang! - yeah, that's COLD. We had our maintenance team look at this, and discovered that one of the furnaces wasn't working properly. We've had this repaired and hopefully this solves the issue. Please also feel free to take these types of concerns to the front-desk staff, and ask them to alert the management team so we can get right on it.

Comment: *It seems as though the climbing team is valued more than general members. It's quite literally impossible to reserve a time slot during my available hours due to the climbing team automatically having spots reserved for them.*

Response: As noted above we increased capacity at the Eastside to 35 people for all hours to help address this problem. If needed, we'll lift the capacity again as the pandemic allows. This is a general challenge - and a difficult one - that we're trying to manage, and during peak hours we can only do so much because demand exceeds our ability to meet it. We don't value the climbing team more than other members, we simply recognize the reality that kids need to be in the gyms at certain times. They don't have transportation, can't adjust their schedules, and don't have personal agency to make changes in their lives in the same way that most adults can.

At Boulders, we don't want to turn any kids away from our programs; for many, we're the only outlet they've had through the pandemic. Given all considerations, we've had to make the best decisions we can. In this respect, we feel we made the right decision for managing this issue, but understand why some might disagree. Hopefully it won't be as significant of a problem going forward, now that vaccines are on the horizon. Thanks as always for your patience. We'll all get through this together.

Comment: *The climbing team swarms the back room with absolutely no regard for social distancing. I have seen team kids clustered together and personally experienced them invading my personal space. I had to stop my hangboard workout and move to a corner to have any kind of social distance from the team kids. I feel that coaches need to enforce social distancing (or general etiquette) with the team kids.*

Response: Thanks for the reminder to reinforce the social distance protocols with our youth team, and ask the coaches to remain aware and mindful of these limits. This said, during certain hours the team will be using the training room, and we've posted notice of this on the training room doors. We're deliberately clustering the team there in order to reduce impact elsewhere, so those-in-the-know should consider using the training room at other times. In order to help folks plan, we have posted a schedule of times you can expect youth athletes to be utilizing the training room. For maximum social distancing and - a minimum of running into COVID-related constraints - we suggest that you might also want to consider installing a hangboard at home. (We sell hangboards in our proshop, or you can find them online!)

Comment: *Dane County COVID numbers seem to be on the decline and the county health department is relaxing some restrictions. Are there plans to increase capacity at Boulders? People like me who don't know their evening schedule 24 hours in advance have a really hard time scheduling slots in the gym. I'm finding you need to reserve 2-3 days in advance if you want to climb between 5 - 8 pm weekdays.*

Response: We recently lifted capacity at the Eastside, which has gone well. Dane County just updated their capacity guidelines as well, so we'll likely increase capacity at the Downtown gym at some point soon, also. This is an actively evolving situation, and we're stretched between those who want us to maintain or reduce capacity (see above), and those who want us to increase it. When in doubt, we're going to default to our mission - "Improving the world in which we live, work, and play, one climb at a time" - and then probably do what feels best to us as individuals, too. We climb in the gyms with our friends and family, and we work here too, and at the end of the day we also need to feel safe. But to your question, given the relaxed restrictions and the general trend for COVID here in Madison and nationwide, we'll be revisiting this, soon.

Comment: *climbing iz fun! <3*

Response: Glad you noticed, and we agree!

Route Setting Feedback:

Comment: *I would appreciate more updates on when route-setting happens. Over the holidays the routes stayed the same for a VERY long time. I understand that you may be short staffed, but I would have appreciated communication and transparency around this. I don't necessarily mind if route setting isn't changed as often as it has in the past, but I do appreciate feeling valued as a customer and member at boulders by hearing about when it will happen.*

Response: We value ALL of our members, and our apologies for not communicating the long holiday hiatus. We definitely could've been more proactive about the setting schedule change during that time. We know that route-setting is an important part of what we deliver on behalf of all members and visitors, and we're proud to be one of the only gyms who have maintained our regular route rotation during COVID, cycling through ~35 to ~50 new routes or problems each week at both gyms.

On this note: On March 8th and 9th there will be no new Downtown problems set, because our setting team is taking a retreat to Arkansas this weekend. Regular setting cycles will begin upon their return on March 11th at the Eastside, and then again on Monday March 15th Downtown. [We already posted about this on social media](#), and will do so again while they're gone.

Comment: *I feel that route setting is catered for higher level climbers.*

Response: We hear this perspective and understand; it's sometimes hard to find fresh problems in the preferred grades, yes. However, we do have metrics we try to hit, and ways to measure this. At any given time, over 50% of our boulder problems are set at V2 or below, and over 50% of our routes are set at 5.10 and below. We use Kaya to manage

our overall inventory against how climbers self-report their onsite and project grades for both bouldering and route-climbing in our quarterly Community & Culture Survey.

We want these to align pretty closely, as we strive to match what we set with what our members want. Now that we've converted to 100% consensus grading via Kaya, we'll also review what we intended to set versus how hard our community feels the grades are, so we can adjust as needed!

Comment: *I was wondering if there were a way we could introduce community feedback for route grading. I have absolutely no problems with the setting (y'all are great!), but I think the grades are pretty inconsistent (even with the updated color range). A few of the orange tag climbs set downtown are harder than the yellows, while a few of the greens are easier than the oranges! I know climbing is somewhat subjective, but I think it could be helpful for us as climbers to be able to say "this feels harder than it was graded" and if enough people feel the same way, have the tag be updated. I also am interested in moving away from the colors and posting the V-grades on the wall (the app is nice but it's hard to quickly find the climb you're looking for), but that's a different issue.*

Response: We're really glad you like the problems we set! Thanks for saying so. However, as we've already mentioned, we've expanded circuits for boulder problems to the Eastside, and have gone to all consensus grading via the Kaya app. So while we're not going to be tagging the problems with their V-grades like you asked, we are encouraging community feedback, as you've requested. We're going to try this for a while and see how it goes.

One word on the circuits: Yes, there are Orange problems that are harder than Yellow problems, but this is also by design. We have some overlap here within the circuits so that there's (among other reasons) an abundance of problems in particular grades (see our answer above about having more easy problems for one reason why.)

Between Kaya and the circuits, there should be the right amount of the right information for everyone, at any time. The circuits get climbers in the right zone generally, and then Kaya can fill in details for those who want them. We've found that we surprise ourselves sometimes by pulling down problems we might not have tried if we had known the grade at the start. We encourage everyone to give everything that looks fun to them a go!

Comment: *So I should start by saying, I really like the circuits downtown. I feel like it's brought me more enjoyment in not knowing what specific grade a climb is. That said, I got on KAYA and immediately felt shut down on my climbing, and I realized that my climbing hadn't improved since Boulders closed last year. I would say I'm a solid V3 climber based on my outdoor climbing but I struggle to climb V2's according to what is a V2 on KAYA. I find myself going from flashing problems to hitting a wall with no intermediate in between the two. I just wish there was better progression for climbs between V1 and V4.*

Response: We're really glad to hear that you like the circuits, as we do too and that's why we're using them at both locations now. The same is true for us: We enjoy climbing better when we don't know the grades, so we want to foster this approach with our members. Thanks for giving it a go.

As far as grading goes, we hope that consensus grading will help the grades on our problems align with what climbers might experience elsewhere, and so perhaps that feeling of being shut down will be mitigated for you somewhat. Please let us know how it's going for you, as this policy gets more established.

You bring up other issues with the rest of the comment, and it's difficult to address all of what you're asking about in one response. "Hitting the wall" at a certain point is a situation that's inherent to climbing, not just in ours or other gyms but in the real world, too. There are very real reasons for this, and finding solutions for this isn't simple.

We've had a number of conversations about this internally, and it's a challenging thing to talk about progression from V1 to V4. These grades span a known barrier in climbing that also exists in route grades from 5.10 to 5.12. (We like [this chart from REI](#) that compares bouldering grades to routes...)

The differences in difficulty across these ranges are about more than just numbers. These days, it's often (but not always) the norm - for new climbers to make rapid progress getting to the benchmark grades of 5.10(+) and V2(+), and from there progression varies widely. Frankly, it can take a long time for many people to climb most 5.11s and V3s and above with any consistency.

Then, even when one can climb most V3s, that doesn't guarantee that they'll always climb every problem that's V3 or lower. Climbing is so individual and subjective that it's not realistic to expect at any given time to be successful on all grades that have been mastered prior. When we climb at our limits, small variations in conditions, in our bodies, in our moods, and too much more to list here, all of these things can make a big difference and lead to success or failure.

As much as we like to push ourselves, we're also aware that it's important not to expect so much of oneself when the world is challenging enough. We all came back from quarantine having to regain lost ground..

Gee, do we know that climbing can be frustrating! However we want to encourage you to believe that this is a feature, and not a bug. The challenge of climbing is that the medium stays the same even as the body changes, sometimes day-to-day, other times week-by-week, month-by-month, year-by-year. We've found that if you challenge yourself every day to do your best, climbing is fun no matter what the rating is.

Comment: *It looks like one of the setters has a second Kaya account under [another name]? This climber is always one of the first to grade routes and this seems inappropriate.*

Response: Thanks for letting us know your concerns. We've confirmed that none of our setters have two accounts. We've already asked our setters to refrain from posting grades for the first week that a problem is up, so as not to have an impact on the consensus grading. We're not sure why any of our setters would ever be motivated to put a thumb on this scale, but please know that it's not happening so far, and we agree that we'd find it to be inappropriate.

We also looked into the account you reference and discovered that this climber is a well-known member (who is not a setter) and is very prolific on Kaya. For some reason, they're using an image from one of our recent Instagram posts as their avatar picture on Kaya, and it features one of our setters. We also confirmed with the setter in the picture that they only have one Kaya account, and they only post under their own name.

Comment: *Really enjoying the new lead routes up in the Eastside. Great job!*

Response: Thank you!