



BANISHED!

A Rock-gym Survival Guide

By Michael Kennard • Illustration by Mike Tea

SNOW COVERS THE GROUND, THE LAST PERSON TO CRASH ON YOUR BOULDERING PAD WAS YOUR KID brother, and you don't have the foggiest idea where your significant other stashed your climbing gear. The climbing season is over. For most of us, this means renewing that rock-gym membership. While gyms have evolved a long way since the era of crack machines and mono-digit panel holds, they've also become magnets for all the stock characters, clichés, and assorted loafabouts orbiting the climbing world. With the first snows, these folks cluster at your local gym — usually around 5 p.m. each weeknight. Read on to learn how to survive a winter spent in suffocating proximity to these misfits.

Mr. Skin

IT'S JANUARY, YOU'RE IN A CAVERNOUS, poorly heated warehouse, and this guy is bare-backed, frolicking about like it's the land of Honah Lee. Every time he blows off a hold, he lets the entire gym know just how *freakin' pissed* he is, usually hollering that he was either a) warming up on this problem last week or b) bouldering serious horsepower during summer but is having trouble adjusting to the plastic. In his mind, the only thing that separates him from redpointing a 5.13 next spring is five more pull-ups, not footwork. He uses his feet to get *to* the wall, not *up* it. A consummate bully, he reminds you of that punk from the Cobra Kai Dojo in the first *Karate Kid*. Hollister shirts, a sticker-plastered Nalgene bottle, and ad nauseam quote-stealing from Will Ferrell/Borat have you praying the local college will soon build its own climbing wall.

NUISANCE FACTOR:

8 out of 10

SURVIVAL TIP:

Avoid eye contact, and if you must approach Mr. Skin, proceed with caution — never from behind. If he accuses you of hogging a problem, raise your arms above your head to appear larger than you really are, yell loudly, and slowly back away.

The Bumbler

THIS HAPLESS NOVICE SAUNTERS THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR, climbing shoes on, a chalk bag hanging from a lanyard with his car keys. Fresh off a NOLS course, he pieces together random bits of climbing vernacular without regard for context or correct usage, such as, "Sweet dynamtle, man. I saw some guy use the fantastic four on that route's crucifixion last week." Jar-

gon abuse aside, you wonder who in his right mind suggested he buy a belay device. Nipple-hugging Under Armour tees tucked into Umbro shorts from his intramural soccer days scream, "Tease me, I'm new!" As far as he knows, a "highball" killed River Phoenix at the Viper Room, and a "crimp" is a hairstyle that died with The Psychedelic Furs. His shoes, of course, will be board lasted, and he loves to boulder with his harness on and chalk bag clipped to it with a locking 'biner.

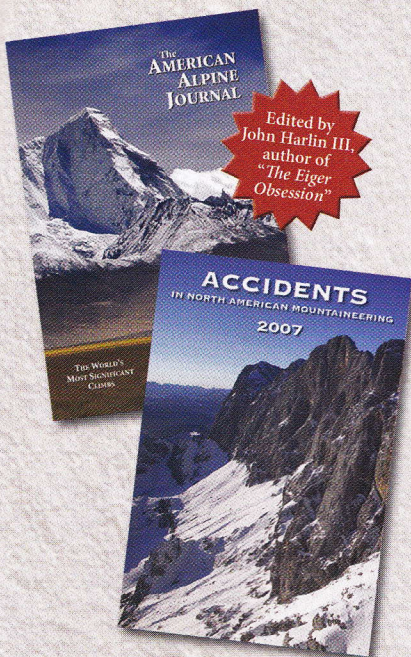
NUISANCE FACTOR:

1 out of 10

SURVIVAL TIP:

Curtail your heckling — this was you not so many years ago. Be a good Samaritan and help the Bumbler out when you can. Start by articulating the principle of route tape, and then explain the delicate art of not traversing under people while they're climbing.

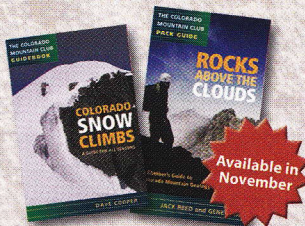
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The Chalk Cyclone

WHIRLING DERVISHES OF YOUTHFUL EXUBERANCE, the ubiquitous pack of birthday-party kids rampages through the gym like General Sherman through the South. Nothing is safe from the halo of chalk that shrouds these crazed chuckies; they even get chalk in the water fountain. As you head for the wall, parting the sea of moppets, you're plagued by macabre visions from *Village of the Damned*. Good thing birthdays come but once a year.

NUISANCE FACTOR:

9.9 out of 10

SURVIVAL TIP:

Use your gym's in situ slackline to thin the herd. Ensure proper tension, pull back on the webbing, and then toss a Go-GURT (recommended: Strawberry Splash) next to it. Twang the line when your quarry approaches, aiming for chest height with the webbing, and then cackle away like a supervillain as the child flies across the room.

Ginger (to Your Gilligan)

THE HOTTIE. SHE'S ROCKING YOGA PANTS SO TIGHT you consider giving your firstborn to prAna. This limber goddess is a greater liability to gym owners than frayed ropes: while she's gliding between the holds, every male spotter is dangerously distracted. You find yourself giving her unsolicited spots, which you can tell creeps her out a little. Try as you might, you'll never hold her rope. The kicker, however, is her flirtatious relationship with the Stud (see below).

NUISANCE FACTOR:

6 out of 10

SURVIVAL TIP:

Word on the mats is that she shacked up with a Bleausard named Pierre at Camp 4 a few summers back. Unless you're flashing 5.14, you've got better odds of spotting a Yeti at Boulder's Sport Park than getting her phone number. Stick, dear chumpski, to what the gym is truly for – climbing.

The Stud

COVER THIS MAN IN PLASTER, and you could auction him off at Sotheby's as Michelangelo's David. He somehow fuses methodical precision with gymnastic grace. You

suspect he does yoga. He probably drinks wheatgrass. And he sweats pretentiousness, as evidenced by his refusal to tie in with the "vulgar and common" figure-8. (He prefers a bowline with Yosemite finish, a knot he picked up during his "amazing spiritual journey through the Himalayas.") You loathe him like Inigo Montoya loathed the six-fingered man, yet you would trade your wife's wedding ring to wear his climbing shoes.

NUISANCE FACTOR:

7 out of 10

SURVIVAL TIP:

You owe it to the climbing community to take this guy down a notch. When in the company of female climbers, casually mention you once saw him drink an appletini. At a piano bar. Wait a beat, and then deliver the champagne toast – he drives a Cabriolet. Drop-top.

The Kid

THIS WÜNDERKIND (AKA PHENOM) IS THE BANE OF YOUR EXISTENCE. The prepubescent powerhouse will find you sprawled on the pads in defeat, ask which problem you failed on, and then cruise it. He doesn't get pumped, he's never hungover, and "what-the-f—k" crimps feel like Double-D jugs to him. He has long, flowing locks, and you secretly suspect that he is cooler, even in middle school, than you'll ever be. But the dagger in the back is that each and every Ginger in the gym finds him cute, cuddly, and adorable, mainly because he's not standing below her wheezing like Gollum while she trains.

NUISANCE FACTOR:

6 out of 10

SURVIVAL TIP:

After an après-climb Pabst, take a minute to remind yourself of all the tremendous things you enjoy as an adult: that 401(k), a mortgage, a lingering STD from college, car payments, a job you despise. On second thought, years of embarrassing voice cracks and acne don't sound so bad after all.

Yoga Mom

SHE'S HERE BECAUSE SHE LIKES THE OUTFITS: fleece hoodies, skimpy camis, and organic-cotton Capri tights. She'll never take to the

sharp end outside, but she enjoys regaling her book club (and life coach, and therapist, and Pilates instructor) with stories of “epic” 30-foot topropes. Ask her how she got started climbing, and she’ll probably say, “Well, they had this rock wall on the cruise ship. ...” That silly “double-back your harness” thing routinely baffles her, and she belays like she just found a red sock mixed in with the whites. Still, she’s core — she participates in an extreme sport, and that makes her the raciest mom in Los Ranchos Estates.

NUISANCE FACTOR:

3 out of 10

SURVIVAL TIP:

Compliment her on her chic apparel, and then ask if she has a daughter of legal age. Away from the prying eyes of strangers, hit her up for some tips to improve your hip, thigh, and groin flexibility.

Grumpy Old Men

THESE DUSTY DINOSAURS REMEMBER WHEN hemp ropes and back belays were *de rigueur*. Spiderwebs of pixie-stick veins wrap their sinewy calves, their vice-like grips could shame an orangutan, and they haven’t had flappers since the days of Lycra. While you prize their John Wayne toughness and harbor the utmost respect for their skills, you can’t get over their appearance, or more appropriately, their lack of concern with it. Gramps, c’mon — pulled-up, ugly black tights, tube socks, and high-topped lace-ups? You wouldn’t step onto a bocce court looking like that.

NUISANCE FACTOR:

4 out of 10

SURVIVAL TIP:

Not if, but *when* they trap you in small talk, embellish tales of harrowing climbs and *never* admit that you’re mainly a clip-n-go climber who doesn’t own a single TriCam, much less possess the acumen to place it.

Winston, the Nappy-headed Rasta

PIG PEN’S LONG-LOST STONER COUSIN wanders aimlessly about the gym, trailing a rich bouquet of patchouli and da dank. The scent triggers memories of the lot scene at

a String Cheese Incident show... in August. He wears shoes only when he climbs and regularly waxes poetic on his holy trinity: Lisa Rands, Yoo-hoo, and splitter cracks. He is a kindhearted buffoon, and you can’t help but love him. Still, fearing for his safety, you wish he’d give up on the slackline. Winston, like Jägermeister, is a spirit best enjoyed in moderation.

NUISANCE FACTOR:

2 out of 10

SURVIVAL TIP:

Make a note of where the gym’s fans are and always climb upwind. Avoid Winston’s baked goods as well... unless Netflix just delivered and you’ve got nothing to do for the next eight hours.

Lunchtime Lurkers

HIGH ENOUGH ON the corporate food chain that their four-hour lunches go unremarked, these fixtures are often fit, motivated professionals: doctors, entrepreneurs, magazine editors [*Editor’s Note: Not!*], etc. When they’re not whipping laps on climbs they’ve wired ruthlessly, they’re off under the shadowy overhangs, firing up another rock in the CrackBerry, ogling Yoga Moms, or assessing the climbing skills of fellow Lurkers. While you don’t envy their manic schedules, which allow only one “opportunity space” per “quarter” to “synergize” with real rock, you see them so often you’ve begun to wonder if they aren’t actually trust-funders, drug dealers, jobless loiterers... or demonic, cannibal space aliens sent from the antimatter moons of Planet Czulu (Galaxy Xanthor) to harvest human DNA from the climbing holds, and then beam our souls into blackest space via CrackBerry deathwave.

NUISANCE FACTOR:

3 out of 10

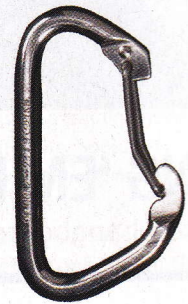
SURVIVAL TIP:

As Hollywood has taught us, the best defense against an alien invasion is to become an alien yourself.

Michael Kennard lives in Tempe, Arizona, a city known for its mild (read: no-rock-gym-required) winters. He climbs exclusively with Gingers.



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