

The benefits of getting to the top: Indoor centres have made climbing ...

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The Globe and Mail (1936-2017); Jul 18, 2011; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail

pg. L3

The benefits of getting to the top

Indoor centres have made climbing more accessible and popular, for rehabilitation as well as for recreation

GARY MASON

Seconds after sneezing, Chris Considine's world began to go dark.

A piercing pain slashed through his head. His face went numb. He threw up. Soon he couldn't walk.

What he didn't realize is that a ski accident he'd suffered three weeks earlier, on the slopes of Whistler in late February 2003, had caused blood clots to form in one of the main arteries leading to his brain. When he sneezed, the clots were dislodged, travelling to his brain and producing the searing pain and other symptoms of the major stroke he was suffering.

Often, stroke stories don't have happy endings. Chris Considine's does, thanks in large part to an unusual rehabilitation regime that helped him to claw his way back to good health: climbing.

Climbing, indoor climbing in particular, is one of the fastest growing sports in North America, and climbing centres have been popping up all over Canada and the United States in recent years. In May, Canada was awarded the 2013 World Youth Climbing Championships, to be held at the Boulders Climbing Gym in Saanich, B.C. It is the first time the championships will be held in North America.

Climbing, of course, is instinctive. The inclination to climb trees as children inspired the installation of monkey bars in playgrounds. In recent years, climbing has become a popular form of rehabilitative therapy as well as a source of physical recreation. Today it is used to assist everyone from children with autism to adults with brain injuries.

And it's what Chris Considine decided to do when he felt well enough, post-stroke, to begin some form of rehabilitative exercise.

Even though he was an accomplished climber pre-stroke, Mr. Considine's decision to attempt to scramble up the rock faces at Boulders seemed wildly ambitious if not a bit risky. But the respected Victoria lawyer, who in the early 1990s represented ALS victim Sue Rodriguez in her landmark legal fight for the right to assisted suicide, thought it was exactly what he needed to get back to his old self.

"I wanted to try different things to reconnect my neuro pathways in order to give me a better



Indoor gyms such as the one at The Boulders in Saanich, B.C., attract fitness-seeking climbers of all ages. CHAD HIPOLITO FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

chance of rehabilitation and recovery," Mr. Considine, now 58, recalls of his decision, adding: "I knew it would help my co-ordination and help build up strength. But it would also help with socialization, which is another fundamental part of recovery. It also takes enormous concentration. That was good for me too."

Andrew Wilson wasn't surprised that climbing accelerated Mr. Considine's recovery.

"There are ways through climbing to hit pretty much every broad part of fitness that you would look at," says Mr. Wilson, director of Competition Climbing Canada. "From a cardiovascular standpoint, you use all of the big muscle-movers in your body. Studies show that your heart rate goes into at least your aerobic zone and sometimes higher when you're climbing."

"But the thing that works for me and most climbers is the fact

your brain is engaged at the same time," he adds. "You can have a three-hour workout and you're still engaged in the activity two-and-a-half hours later because of the problem-solving aspect to it."

"Climbing is growing rapidly in popularity amongst all age-groups," says Kimanda Jarzebiak, chair of the Boulders Climbing Gym Society, and manager of Canada's national climbing team. "The number of users at our facility has more than tripled since we opened in 2005."

At the climbing gym, people have the option to use ropes, which allows them to go to greater heights, or traverse the wall using only their hands and feet. This is known as bouldering – the climber tries to get to the top of the wall (usually three to four metres up) navigating a route of foot and hand holds set by the gym staff. Falls are softened by padded floors. Different routes are marked by colour. Getting to

the top is like solving a problem.

The Boulders, which will soon be opening a 60-foot wall to go with the existing 5,400 square feet of climbing terrain, has become a popular destination for people of all ages and all needs.

Carinna Kenigsberg, adaptive program manager for the adventure therapy organization Power to Be, says the Boulders has been providing services to people with a range of issues, from spinal chord injuries to autism.

"When you take them climbing, there is a metaphorical piece where they are climbing to new heights and facing challenges and barriers and reaching new goals," Ms. Kenigsberg says.

She said the climbing program has been particularly successful with autistic children: "Children on the autism spectrum are very hands-on, and they learn best through experiential modes of recreation. They like the challenge of figuring out the different

routes to the top."

Mark Dickinson, 65, began climbing at the Boulders two years ago after being challenged by a friend. Now he climbs two or three times a week. "I'm the oldest person here," Mr. Dickinson says. "But no one seems to mind. It's just an exceptional workout and it requires so much focus. It's a wonderful way to forget work and other things going on in your life for a while."

Mr. Considine has long since recovered from his stroke. In the summer of 2005, Mr. Considine and a small group of friends climbed Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps at 4,810 metres. He climbs almost every day near his home in Victoria, for mental therapy as much as physical exercise.

"I love climbing," Mr. Considine says. "It's a wonderful way to see the world. And it's a terrific way to stay in shape. I highly recommend it."