

# THE HISTORY OF BOULDERING

or, Historical Fragments About Climbing at Jumping Height

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This is an attempt to trace fragments of the development of the “small, technical art of climbing, where victories over gravity are measured in millimeters and achieved directly above the ground, free from equipment and the fear of falling a long way down, with scrunched-up fingertips, nail-biting scrapes, and acrobatic contortions with the calculated leaps of spectacular dynos.” We know about some things, but there is a lot we don’t know about. What distinguishes bouldering, both fortunately and unfortunately, is that it can be practiced away from the public gaze; and apart from climbing shoes, chalk, and a crash pad, it doesn’t require much—all you need is a boulder, a piece of rock, and an idea...

Somewhere deep in the forests of the Swiss Jura, a 15-year-old boy spent his days finding his way across the different features of a traverse at the foot of a 25-meter (82-foot) rock face. If he slipped, he looked up at the spot he fell from, cleaned the holds, and tried to reach it again and again. He had no inner peace until he succeeded in climbing the rock from beginning to end without touching the ground. In the mid-1980s, the youthful Fred Nicole was doing what climbers, mountaineers, and alpinists have been doing for generations—at least, that is, the most determined of them. They just kept practicing and practicing.

How to go about writing and tracing the history of bouldering? Should I base it on achievements, degrees of difficulty? Dates? The use of “objective,”

comparative ratings with numbers and grades is a relatively recent invention. Dates give us only limited information about the history of bouldering, because, strictly speaking, people have always been bouldering. Bouldering is exactly what every child does naturally, and is nothing more than the playful, safe surmounting of a rocky obstacle to get a better view. Here, however, I am talking about serious bouldering. Nonetheless, let’s not forget that, despite all the accomplishments that have been made and all the professional aspects of bouldering, it is still a game.

For this journey into the past, I have only a few pieces of writing and early photos to refer to. We most likely know only a small proportion of the key events. Climbing at a height from which you could jump down safely was mainly practiced as training for higher, extended rock climbs. It is therefore unsurprising that, at the end of the 19th century, the first evidence of this “training method” comes from the motherland of alpinism—the United Kingdom. The Englishman Oscar Eckenstein (1859–1921) can probably rightly be called one of the first climbers who specifically engaged with the climbing of any rock as an end in itself. He was both pioneer and alpinist: one of the first to explore the possibility of climbing the 8,611-meter-high (28,251-foot) K2. On the boulders in the Lake District in northwest England, he worked on tried-and-tested ways of moving the body and rejected traditional climbing methods.

Richard Signer,  
Greina Hochebene,  
Graubünden, 1987.

