



Sports

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Rock stars

Climbing the walls at home? Hit these gyms instead.

By Jessica Herman

Rock climbing might look like innocent, healthy fun, but if you're thinking of giving it a try, proceed with caution. If you're not careful, you might end up hopelessly hooked on scaling.

"I first got into climbing when I was trying to impress a girl," says Nate Oyos, an instructor at the Lakeshore Athletic Club's Illinois Center location who says that everything he does—from running to eating—is influenced by his addiction. "From late February to the last week in November, I do nothing but think about climbing."

Chicago's relentlessly flat terrain doesn't provide much opportunity for scaling in the wild, but the city makes up for being topographically challenged with man-made climbing walls. Here are our picks for the top rocks.

Old Town Fitplex

1235 N LaSalle Dr between Division and Goethe Sts (312-640-1235). Although it won't blow your mind when you first encounter it, what this small wall lacks in size it makes up for in accessibility.

Since hooking up with Chicago Sport and Social Club, Old Town Fitplex has seen its wall become the busiest in the city, with beginner classes offered seven days a week. Classes teach climbing fundamentals, and cost \$100 (including shoes and gear) for six two-hour group lessons.

If you need a little more flexibility, sign up for a \$130 Accelerated Lesson package that includes five on-the-spot lessons from Fitplex staffers, along with five single-day passes to the gym. The rub? Instructors are on-site daily, but it's possible they'll be too busy to teach you when you're there.

And if you already know what you're doing, the club offers frequent open-climb hours, with reasonable prices for members and nonmembers alike.

Lakeshore Athletic Club Illinois Center

211 N Upper Stetson Ave at Lake St (312-616-9000). This enormous indoor wall makes a stunning impression, rising about 100 feet in the gym's atrium. It's a sight to behold, and can be a thrill to climb.

"Even to this day I get intimidated," says Oyos, who has put in his fair share of time on the wall. "If there is any ego, it'll be squashed."

But unless you're a member of the club or enrolled in a four-week class (\$110), having a go at this unofficial monument comes with a hefty price: You'll have to fork over the \$20 entrance fee for every visit. And with only six ropes, you may find yourself doing a lot of waiting.

Lincoln Park Athletic Club

1019 W Diversey Pkwy between Sheffield and Kenmore Aves (773-529-2022). Even though it's shorter than the wall at LSAC, the eight-rope wall at Lincoln Park Athletic Club has one appealing advantage: It's outdoors, stretching 70 feet into the open air.

That can be both a good thing and a bad thing, admits LPAC's climbing director, Jeremy Broomfield, who notes that even a small breeze can have a scary psychological effect on climbers.

"It's exciting and interesting and unique," he says. "But it does add a challenge."

And while climbers appreciate scaling in the summer sun, the wall is out of commission from late November until May.

When the weather warms up, LPAC offers instruction on basic rope climbing (\$85/member, \$100/nonmember), plus adventure racing, lead climbing and even ice climbing (on synthetic foam that mimics the feel of real ice—minus the cold, of course).

And if you just can't wait that long, check out the indoor rotating wall, known as the "gerbil wheel," which allows climbers to scale thousands of feet without stopping.

Lakeshore Academy

937 W Chestnut St at Sangamon St (312-563-9400). If the idea of dangling high off the ground freaks you out, consider starting off with bouldering, or tackling shorter walls without the aid of ropes.

Although you can boulder on any climbing wall, Lakeshore Academy's cavelike Hidden Peak specializes in it, with high-density hold areas no more than 13 feet above the ground. **Old Town Fitplex**

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