

footwork

Article by Chuck Woodward

Great footwork comprises the basic foundation for efficient climbing. Learning to stand on your feet properly and to use them for propelling yourself upward is one of the most important skills for a beginner to master. However, there are several techniques that take full advantage of the versatility of your lower body. For instance, you can use your legs as counterbalance, or you can “hook” on to a hold with your feet to transfer the weight off of your arms. As with other areas of technique, your footwork may begin to suffer when you become fatigued mentally and/or physically. Often when the going gets tough, you only need to look down.

Rock climbing uses muscles in the foot that are not strengthened through normal everyday activity, so it will take some time to develop these muscles thoroughly. Beginning climbing shoes are made with a stiffer sole to help facilitate this transition. As your feet get stronger, a softer shoe will enable a greater level of sensitivity and control.

Unfortunately, indoor gyms are not the ideal places to explore this new faculty. It is difficult to develop a sense of how your shoes will perform on various types of rock when the holds in the gym are predominantly plastic. The footholds are clearly marked and you are not challenged to detect the subtle differences in the textures of the rock that can maximize the effectiveness your foot placement. However, practicing the precision of foot placement and intelligent body positioning while climbing indoors builds a skillset that translates to any climbing scenario.

Excellent footwork starts by opening your eyes and looking for solid footholds, so your body position becomes especially important. The most effective position for scoping out your feet is one that enables you to maintain straight arms while also creating space to allow a clear field of vision.

Learn to place your feet precisely. It is important to cultivate an attention to detail when placing your feet. Each foothold has surfaces and textures that provide an array of placements with differing levels of effectiveness for making your next move. Develop a discerning eye for these differences and learn to use them to your greatest advantage. Mindlessly banging the wall with your foot or blindly pawing at the footholds wastes valuable energy (and shoe rubber). Quiet feet are a sign that you are taking enough time to address where you are placing your foot.

Practice placing your foot exactly where you want it the first time. Develop this skill during your warm up while noticing how the sequence influences and even dictates the most effective placement. Which direction do you need to push off? Which part of your shoe should you use to gain the greatest friction?

Learn to “smear” or friction step. Failing to move your feet up often means that either you cannot reach the next hand hold or that you have to overextend your reach, compromising good body positioning. Many beginners are reluctant to trade a secure foothold for blank wall though utilizing a friction step would put them within reach of the next move.

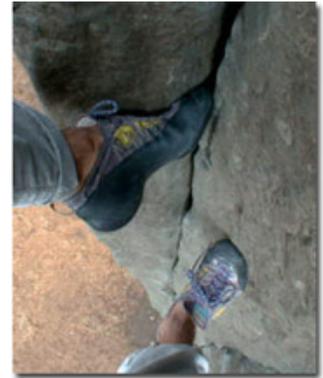
Practice smearing on the wall and focus on how your body position can affect the friction you are able to achieve. Challenge yourself to climb using only the features or texture of the wall for your feet. How high are your feet when you feel the most solid? How does this differ as the angle of the wall changes?

Learn to “flag” for counterbalance. Climbing on steep terrain, reaching too far to one side, or just unevenly loading your limbs can cause your center of gravity to swing away from the wall, or “barn door,” when making a move. This undesirable momentum can be minimized or eliminated by flagging a foot out to balance your weight or by placing it against the wall to push against the swing. Flagging is also an integral part of body positioning when used in conjunction with turning your hips.

Practice flagging with either leg both in the middle of problems and also at the start. How often can you use flagging to improve your body position? Do you have greater results when pointing your toe?

Learn to heel hook and toe hook. Your feet can be used to take advantage of holds in more ways than simply standing. Hooking utilizes your heel, the top of your toes, and even the top of your foot to provide friction and stability. A heel hook or toe hook can help maintain body tension and transfer the load of your weight onto your legs, which reduces the strain on your arms and fingers. You will need to engage your abdominals in order to “unload,” or release tension, and transition through these moves.

Practice these techniques on overhung boulder problems or on problems that traverse an arete. You can also have your spotter actively support you until you have the technique worked out. Become comfortable hooking with either foot, and learn to trust your legs while paying close attention to the process of unloading the hook.



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