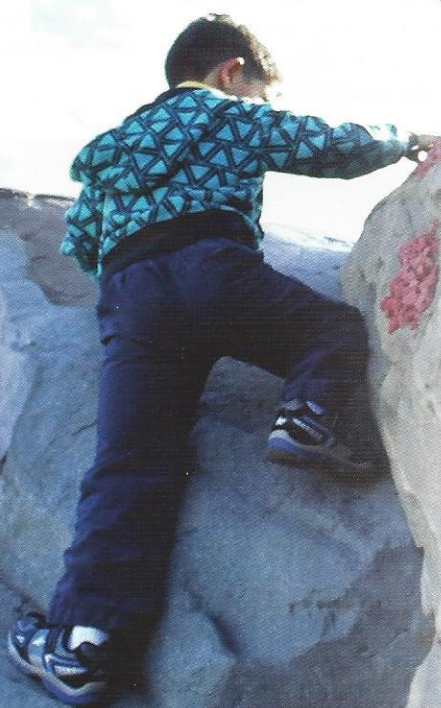


# Climbing is Looking Up

## Climbing in Playgrounds

by Andris Zobs & Ian Glass



AS ANY parent knows, children climb, anything. From the dresser drawers to the first time they awkwardly wrap themselves around a tree trunk. Teenagers scale walls and adults seek out remote mountaintops. When we are at our strongest and most confident, we climb.

The Outdoor Industry Association puts total participation in rock climbing in the United States at 4.7 million to 6.9 million people, and the Climbing Wall Association estimates that there are 600 climbing-specific gyms and thousands of climbing walls within larger facilities and camps.

While the popularity of rock climbing seems to have peaked in 2002 to 2006, there has been an explosive growth of nature-themed climbing in playgrounds and parks. With improvements in the



manufacture of climbing structures and sculptures, accessibility and safety has improved, making climbing a sport with widespread appeal across age groups and skill levels.

Playground designers and manufacturers have recognized that traditional post and deck structures and climbing events don't fully satisfy the urge to climb that we all feel. In recent years, the industry has stepped forward to meet the challenge with climbing sculptures that have added a new dimension to playground activity, with more realistic surfaces, more challenging athleticism, and creativity in forms. New technology has enabled complete creative freedom; climbers are no longer limited to walls and boulders. Playground designers can now create expressive sculptures that combine the health benefits of climbing while also providing a venue for imaginative play.

### Climbing is playing

Kids are all innately different; some are daredevils, others more quiet and introspective. Some create imaginary environments from their surroundings, while others try to conquer whatever is close by. Nature play and climbing provide opportunities for both by being both athletic challenges and adventure-filled landscapes.

Children also crave unique and compelling environments. Just like an adult in a cubicle, children recognize the encroaching sameness of the spaces we live and work in. Sculptural climbing gives designers the opportunity to make each play space unique with its own special nuance.

Climbing sculptures provide that diversity of experience by combining physical and mental challenges.

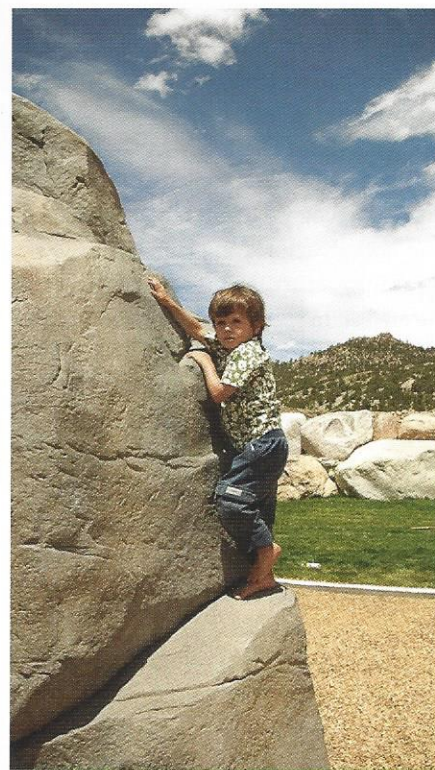
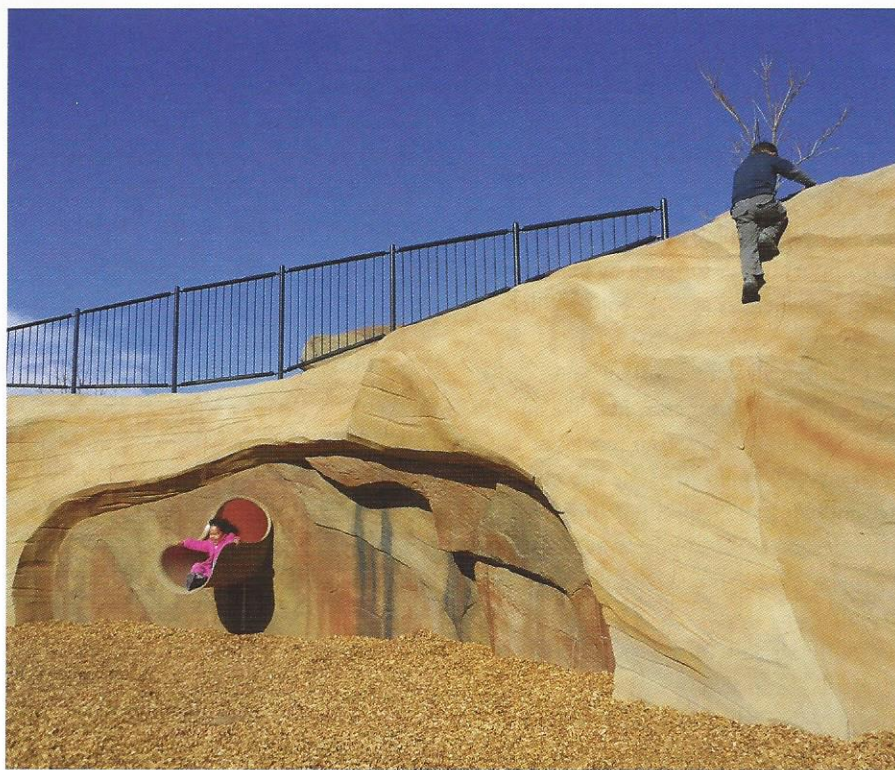
Manufacturers of custom play sculptures consider the physical activity to be only one component of a well-designed play feature. Each piece should provide aesthetic and sensory aspects that give children and adults a foothold into imaginary landscapes and act as a canvas for their imagination.

### Climbing never gets old

As those in the playground industry know, most structures have a life expectancy of 20 years or less. Aesthetic tastes change, user groups change, and children exhaust the play value of traditional structures. What was once a source of pride for the community quickly becomes destined for the landfill. This life expectancy is contrary to the general trend of the construction industry, which is to design for lasting durability. Playgrounds should be







timeless by offering opportunities for ever increasing challenges. A well-designed playground climbing feature should include routes for all types, ranging from scrambles for young children to advanced over-hanging problems for adults. As skills and strength grow, so should the challenge.

### Anyone can be a climber

For most climbers, climbing is a life-long sport. One of the joys of rock climbing is that you can spend your entire life as a climber and never master the sport; in fact, few ever do. Because climbing has become safer, younger children are being introduced to the sport by the parents, making it a sport that multiple generations can enjoy together.

### Climbers are healthy

Climbing, by its nature, combines physical power with mental fortitude. It builds strength, resolve, and control. Climbers tend to have an uncanny awareness of the body and movements, using efficiency of motion to overcome physical challenges.

Rock climbing increases aerobic and anaerobic endurance, strength, and flexibility. According to "The Outdoor


Athlete," climbing short, steep, and over-hanging routes enhances anaerobic endurance, while climbing longer, sustained routes promotes aerobic endurance. Both aerobic and anaerobic exercises improve cardiovascular function and body composition. The process of climbing itself involves stretching your limbs to reach hand and foot holds, increasing strength and flexibility.

Physical and mental strength are not the only benefit of climbing. You also can enjoy a reduction in stress and stronger emotional health. Many people feel a sense of peace and freedom from everyday pressures when participating in activities that bring them closer to nature.

### Climbers have a personal connection to the natural environment

As a climber, you are forced to look at a route at every scale, assessing both the overall strategy and individual handholds, down to the minute texture of the rock. Artificial rock brings that intense scrutiny to the playground, building essential problem-solving skills.

As playgrounds have become standardized, synthetic materials have proliferated. Meanwhile, our affinity for natural materials and its effect on well-being has been

well documented in a variety of other fields such as health care and office workspaces. Well-designed climbing sculptures bring the textures and materials of nature back to the controlled environment of the playground by creating connections to the outside world. Material and sculptural advances in artificial rock fabrication mean that playground users can experience actual geology, feel the warmth of rock, and explore its layers of detail. 

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Founded in 2005, Integrated Design Solutions (IDS) designs and fabricates custom sculptural landscapes and play features using a specially formulated polymer concrete shell that provides a durable, realistic surface suitable for both indoor and outdoor use. Driven to increase the play and climbing value of artificial rock, IDS has pioneered new material and sculptural techniques that bring an unprecedented level of realism to the market.*



# Four Great Climbing Events

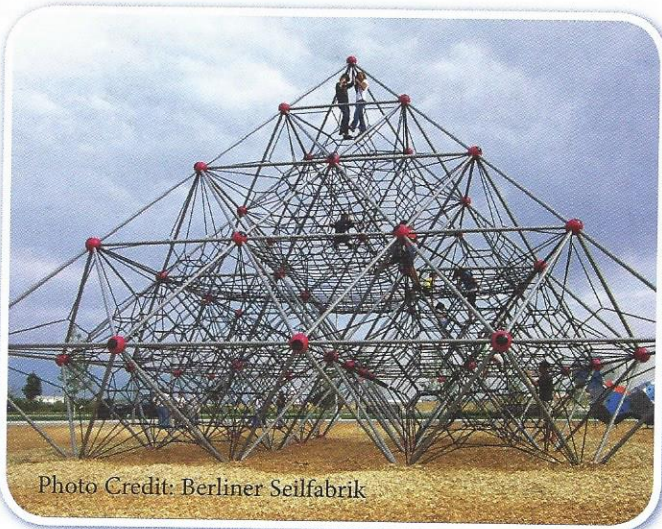
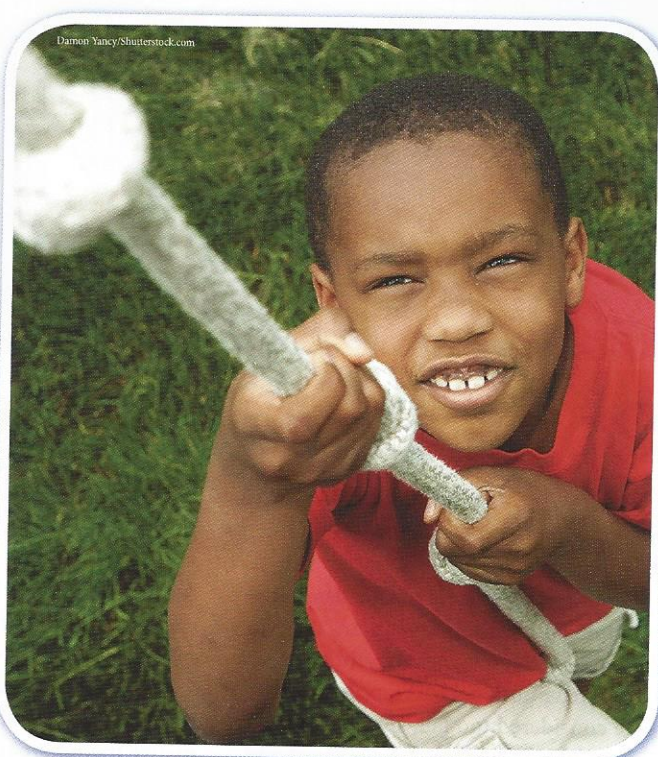


Photo Credit: Berliner Seilfabrik

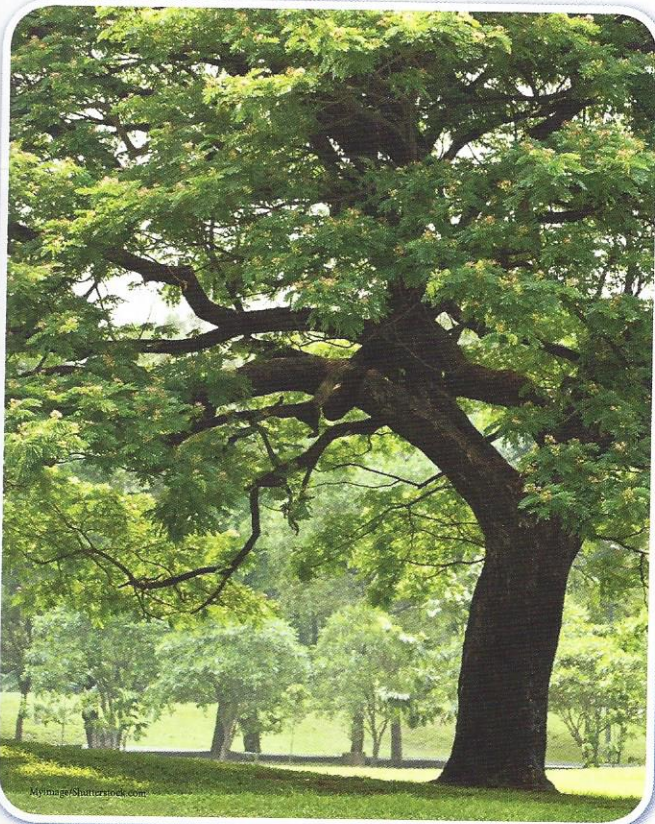
## Neptune Park in Saratoga Springs, UT

At 30'-2" the Berliner Seilfabrik Neptun XXL has a free fall height of only 6'-1" and a play capacity of 200+ users. Footprint/use zone required only 55'x55'. [www.berliner-playequipment.com](http://www.berliner-playequipment.com)



## Climbing Rope

We all remember gym class horror stories, but still, it's a great feeling to touch the ceiling of the gym and make it back to the floor alive. Those that really liked it joined the Army where rope climbing is an art and social symbol!



## Trees

Trees may well have been man's first great climbing event. Tree climbing is a centuries-old activity that is still practiced by millions of kids annually. Get some water and a seed and plant a tree!

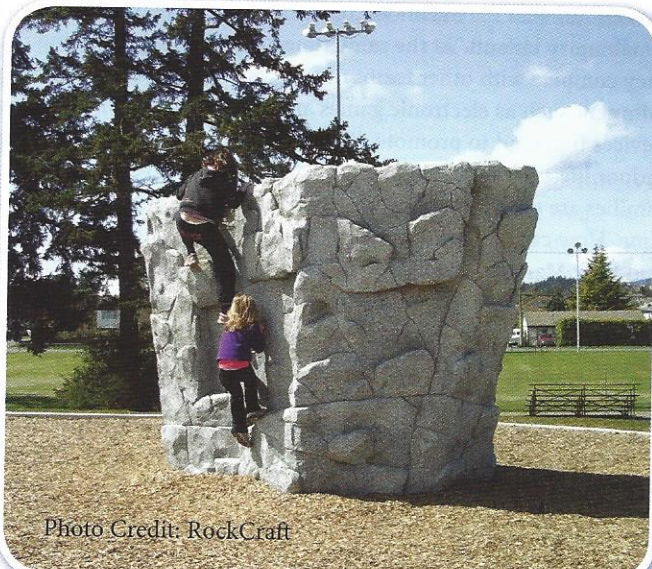


Photo Credit: RockCraft

## Chief-C-232

The Chief is RockCraft's largest climbing boulder. It is a massive piece at 10' high, 13' long, 8' wide, and weighs 7,000 lbs. This boulder has a load capacity in excess of 12,600 lbs., and can accommodate 22+ climbers. [www.rockcraft.net](http://www.rockcraft.net)