

OUTDOORS...

By FELIX WONG
For Fort Collins Now

“What I love about rock climbing,” said a friend in California who had a habit of running off to Yosemite every weekend, “is that on the side of a big rock, I’m never thinking about work, bills or the problems of the world. It’s a great escape.”

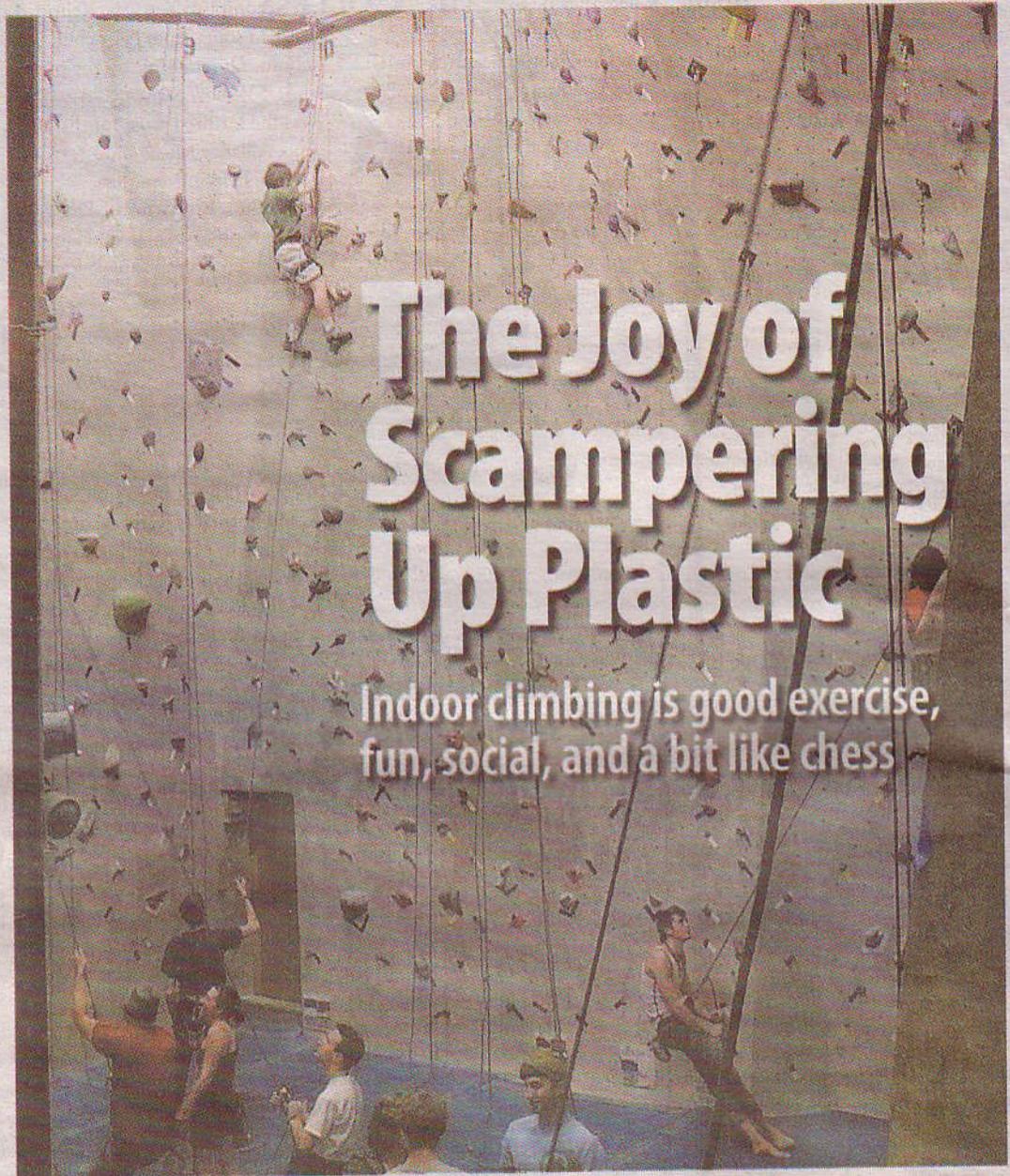
I understood what she meant during my first “warm-up” climb at Inner Strength Rock Gym in Fort Collins. Here I was two-thirds up a 40-foot wall, clinging onto a single clamshell-shaped “feature” with both hands while one foot dangled in the air, and thought about nothing but how the heck was I going to reach the next hold that was two feet above my skull.

“This climb is NOT a 5.10!” I shouted to my climbing partner Nick, referring to the difficulty rating of the climb. After assessing my options, I hopped sideways on the wall like a shackled kangaroo, lunged toward and grabbed the hold over my head, and did a few more bunny hops before slapping a bar below the ceiling indicating I had reached the top of the climb. Then, Nick lowered me by allowing the rope that was attached to my harness to slip through a pulley at the top of the wall and the belay device hooked onto himself.

When I was back on the ground, I shook out my forearms, which were already burning with lactic acid, and muttered something about how I would be lucky to make it up three or four more climbs that night.

While I have participated in the sport off and on for 10 years, this was my first time rock climbing in several months. It was at Inner Strength that I reflected upon how indoor climbing is particularly attractive before spring fully kicks in because you can get some exercise without freezing your butt off.

It has some other benefits as



The Joy of Scampering Up Plastic

Indoor climbing is good exercise, fun, social, and a bit like chess

A climber almost reaches the top of a route as belayers watch from below.

Photo by Felix Wong

well.

First, it is social. To climb, you must have a partner—even if it is just someone you randomly met at the gym five minutes ago but who was willing to belay. Inside the gym, you are also usually no farther than a few feet away from other climbers or belayers you can talk to. (“Hey, how was that climb you just went up?”) You won’t see people wearing white headphones in their ears while mindlessly performing some repetitive exercise.

Second, unlike other indoor activities like spinning a stationary bicycle or running on a treadmill—you are actually going somewhere! Granted, it may be just up the side of a wall, but at least you feel more like Spider-man instead of a rat turning a wheel.

Third, it is a full-body workout. Despite the stereotype—no doubt perpetuated by Sylvester Stalone in *Cliffhanger*—of good rock climbers having bulging triceps and the ability to do one-

armed pullups, it is essential to use the legs (and for harder climbs, the abdominal and back muscles as well) to have any sort of endurance on the walls.

Lastly, rock climbing is a nice diversion from more traditional exercises like aerobics or jogging, as it uses a completely different set of synapses and psychology. Actually, it can be more like chess.

Chess? At first glance, rock climbing may seem like it has as much in common with Gary

Kasparov's favorite activity as a bicycle does with a tree. The gear is completely different. Rock climbers use special shoes with soft rubber soles to help them "stick" to the wall, along with harnesses, ropes, carabiners and belay devices for safety. Equipment-wise, the only thing in common is that climbing-wall holds and chess pieces are made of plastic, and that's assuming you purchased the \$4.99 chess set special at Wal-Mart.

But in both activities, one has to think ahead and ponder the consequences of the immediate move. For example, in rock climbing, if you grab a hold with the "wrong" hand, the next move could be much more difficult, if not impossible. Spending a few moments strategizing could mean the difference between coming down from a climb with muscles as fresh as just-squeezed orange juice or as scorching as Mad Dog Inferno Hot Sauce.

Rock climbing, like chess, has its own obscure rating system. Climbing routes are rated 5.1 to 5.14, with "five fourteen" being the hardest. Most climbing gyms have routes rated from 5.5 to 5.13, and the ratings are usually determined by the route setter or by consensus.

Why the number five in front of the decimal point? That originates from mountaineering, which classifies terrain by technical difficulty. Class 5 is considered "climbing on vertical or near-vertical rock where if you fell without a rope to catch you, you would probably die."

Speaking of ratings, it turned out that for the initial climb I complained to Nick about, I misread some numbers. It was actually a 5.11. No wonder the wall almost had me checkmated.

Felix Wong is an avid outdoors enthusiast in Fort Collins. His personal blog is at felixwong.com and he can be contacted at fcn@felixwong.com.