

The New Kid in Town

The Bay Area has always been on the cutting edge of anything cool about to stir up noise. From technology, to arts, food and politics this is a place that never stops amazing me. Such was climbing back in the early 90's in the city of Emeryville when one of the nation's first indoor climbing facilities opened up.

City Rock, the brainchild of world-class climber Peter Mayfield (FA-1981 Zenyatta Mondatta A-5/ El Capitan-Yosemite), was as sleek as anything could be for its time, and would become the epicenter of the after shocks for the future of the indoor climbing industry. City Rock, with its walls designed by RadWall and later, a bouldering area designed by Christian Griffith (Verve), gave accessibility to climbing in ways no one would have imagined. If you had never seen climbing not only did you have the opportunity to do so in a world-class place but you could try it for the first time in a somewhat controlled environment with world class instruction.

By 1995 another passionate lover of the vertical world took this concept to a new level - Mark Melvin opened up Mission Cliffs in San Francisco. Not only did Melvin have the grand vision of allowing climbing to enter the main stream but in a quantum leap, he created the blue print for the new indoor climbing revolution in the Bay Area...opening bigger facilities that would emphasize climbing as a form of exercise but also implementing a workout-like environment featuring free weights, cardio equipment, yoga, spinning classes etc., giving birth to the new entity - Touchstone Climbing Inc. MC was only the beginning, soon after branching out to the East Bay-Iron Works and GWPC, Diablo Rock Gym-Concord and Sacramento's Pipe Works also giving birth to a new breed of climbers "The Gym Rat".

Since indoor climbing came to be the sport has exposed an incredible array of people to climbing that otherwise would have never given it a chance. Due to its convenience and accessibility it also has been producing some gnarly and powerful contenders for the sport. A form of recreational activity and a sport in its own right climbing puts you on the edge, no matter what form you practice. Since the early 90's I've been one of those people who took on and stuck with it. I have made climbing my sport, my form of adventure and my community. I have worked in climbing from different angles, as a climbing instructor, as a course setter (City Rock and Touchstone about 8 yrs combined) which led me to my current job working for one the most cutting edge companies in the outdoor industry - Mountain Hard Wear.

My fascination with climbing leaned towards bouldering. All forms of climbing you can say has its own group of dedicated followers. Bouldering is one of those specialties that through the years have become a sport within the sport itself. From really hard, powerful and short to super technical and scary tall, bouldering gets your adrenaline up and going. Doing it outdoors definitely gets you pumped and embodies the freedom that climbing over all provides.

What about doing it indoors? What about a place in which you can hone your skills to tackle not only the hard but also the tall with a full top out experience just like if you were climbing as high as the classic Great White Rastafarian in Joshua Tree or Ghetto Blaster in Hueco tanks. I clearly remember daydreaming with all my climbing buddies and always skimming plans. "We should open up a pure and only bouldering gym some day guys, wouldn't that be awesome?" We all wanted that little Oasis where only chalk and shoes was all we needed.

Damian Cooksey, a transplant originally from De Moines, Iowa moved to California 12 yrs ago and must have heard those prayers when he decided to bail out from pursuing an acting career in LA to move to the Bay Area in 2001. He is the owner/founder and designer of our new local climbing paradise. The new kid in town, Bridges Rock Gym, is the newest addition to the climbing scene in the Bay Area. Perfectly located in the city of El Cerrito, Bridges, offers what every hard-core Bloquista is looking for – realistic terrain combined with high ball top outs and cush landings.

Damian has been a lover of climbing all his life. His passion first found expression while cliff jumping in Iowa with friends. As his buddies would swim out to do the small hike to the top he basically argued “why not just climb back up”, which I would call a form of deep water soloing. He also set two world records for Slackline walking at 405 ft progressing to an astounding 506 ft. He poured his brain out to come up with a flawless picture of the vision he set out to produce. While doing your thing at Bridges you are performing on 16 to 18 Ft. high walls on independent boulder-like features. Not only do you get high, but you also need to top out your line, which makes it not just fun but ultimately the most incredibly rewarding experience. A massive cave in which you can pull out 20 footer problems of steep and powerful terrain will leave you pumped out of your mind but begging for more. I was lucky to step in with my friend Chris Bloch, a world-class climber in his own right and four-time silver medallist at the X games for speed climbing, as we approached Damian about course setting for Bridges. It was a dream come true. We both have had quite a few years of experience in the sport and working in the industry and it just felt like the natural progression. Currently CB is the head course setter and I’m his sidekick. Since then he has recruited a small troop of local talent that is busy at work and eager to bring the ruckus.

Bridges compliments but also fills in a void to what we already have as far as indoor climbing places in the Bay Area. The fact that it is dedicated 90% strictly to bouldering, makes it very unique and a must visit destination. The moment you walk in the place you can feel the excellent vibe it emanates, its beautifully constructed walls and features are hard to ignore. You can tell that the attention to detail was not dismissed but rather harmoniously embraced. The gym is literally a family run business with Damian’s wife Jeffie Cooksey, a former kindergarten teacher running the front; her father, David Strain, the contractor responsible for the beautiful wood detail including the Golden Gate bridge-like railing that leads you to the second floor where you find a chill lounge area; and “Annie's Café”, run and managed by Jeffie’s sister, Annie Strain, spinning her California Culinary School skills to produce some wholesome vegetarian and vegan bocadillos, juices and more using as much organic ingredients as possible. Bridges also features a new twist for the urban enthusiast - a full slack line arena and day care service. A small section is dedicated to some cardio equipment and free weights, not the main focus but a nice extra. It will also feature a Yoga studio.

March 15th marked 6 months since I received a bilateral lung transplant and my recovery has been flawless. Climbing kept me in shape all those years and I have begun to feel the power back. A Bloquista at heart my latest journey has made me feel just like everything is new - My outlook on life, the way I see things and my new found appreciation for the now. New lungs, new gym, I too feel like a new kid in town.

Bridges Rock Gym-5635 San Diego St El Cerrito CA 94530. Its grand opening is March 28th and 29th for more information check out www.bridgesrockgym.com or call 510-525-5635.