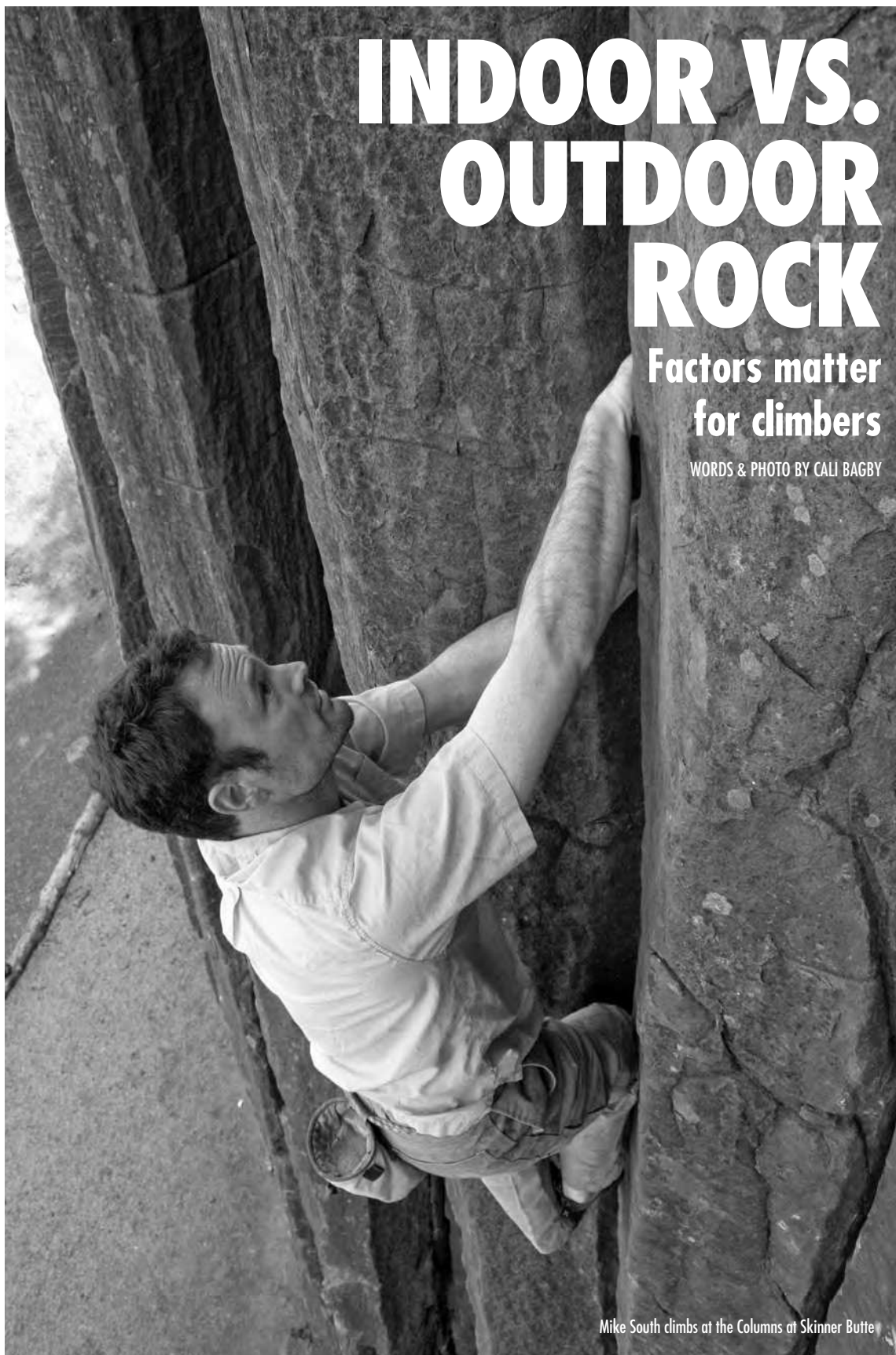


INDOOR VS. OUTDOOR ROCK

Factors matter for climbers

WORDS & PHOTO BY CALI BAGBY



Mike South climbs at the Columns at Skinner Butte

There are two types of climbers in Eugene: Those who wait for the sun to come out by spending their days training on gray rock wall decorated with neon plastic holds, and those who avoid the fluorescent lights and crowded spaces in favor of real rock.

Mike South, a rock climbing instructor at the UO and general manager of Backcountry Gear Ltd., falls into the latter category. "When I climb outside, there is a certain sense of rejuvenation," says South. He loves to get out and "experience nature from a climber's perspective, which is different from hiking and climbing indoors."

Climbing appeals to many Eugeneans because of the element of excitement and the ability to stretch new horizons, but it's hard to get that thrill in the rain and in the cold. So for eight months out of the year most climbers gather at indoor gyms to work out their muscles in anticipation of drier times. Well-cushioned mats, wide areas to fall onto, flat surfaces and gym walls that can only extend so high make indoor climbing spills easier to swallow. Yet indoor climbing comes with its own pitfalls.

The apparent safety of gyms may drive some climbers to put more stress on their bodies from overuse of their fingers, hands and arms. "I have mild tendonitis in my left hand," says Andrew Leary, who has been an avid outdoor climber for the last five years. "I probably tweaked it on some small crimpers at the UO rock wall." Crimpers force the fingertips to grip the small ledge of a handhold.

Indoor climbing also fosters an interesting dynamic between climbers.

"Gym climbing is a little more of a meat market," says Vanessa Georgiades, an indoor and outdoor climber. "There is usually a higher ratio for men to women. Sometimes I am the only woman at the gym, and I feel like I'm under a spotlight." Georgiades finds outdoor climbing more appealing because no one sits and watches her moves.

South, who focuses on fissures in the rock (making him a "crack climber"), also seeks quieter climbing areas. "I prefer more solace," says South. "To find that peace I tend to not like to wait in lines."

Yet, in order to stay fit, South compromises by climbing at local spots like the Columns at Skinner Butte Park near downtown. Other local climbers prefer, and even enjoy, having a close spot to get in a nice workout.

"It's not worth the money to go to the gym," says Matt Frick, who stays in shape in the winter by participating in snow sports and climbing at the Columns whenever there are a couple of dry hours in the day. "It's a great place to feel real rock and get an introduction to the elements."

For many, outdoor climbing remains the only place that can provide peace and a rush of adrenaline.

"Nothing else exists but the person I'm climbing with and my own abilities to push to the top," says South. "It happens whether it's some climb that's 1,000 feet or 60; often I get to the point where I have to dig deep and going for it is the spice of climbing."

If you want to experience the joys of rock climbing, visit the Outdoor Pursuits Program at the UO, www.uoregon.edu/~opp or contact the River House Outdoor Program, www.eugene-or.gov/recoutdoor or call 682-5329.

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