

CWA Auto Belay Position

Introduction

Auto belay devices allow participants to climb without a belayer by retracting a lanyard while the climber ascends. Auto belays do not prevent falls, but rather control the rate of descent so that anytime a climber lets go or slips while climbing they are lowered to the ground in a controlled manner. The latest generation of auto belay devices are reliable when installed and maintained properly.

Many indoor climbers use auto belays regularly to exercise, hone their technical climbing skills, and improve their sport-specific strength. With auto belay use growing even more rapidly because of the pandemic, the CWA is taking this opportunity to expand on guidelines for auto belay use at indoor climbing facilities. These guidelines were developed by the CWA Industry Practices Committee with additional support by auto belay manufacturers and the CWA's insurance partners.

All indoor climbing involves inherent risks and relies on an individual participant's knowledge, skill, and attentiveness to manage those risks. While auto belays may offer one entry point for new climbers, they are a form of personal protective equipment (PPE) and participants should be informed of both how to use the device and the unique risks that are present when climbing with an auto belay specifically. Like other PPE systems, auto belay risks affect both experienced and new climbers alike.

Climbing facilities should treat auto belays like any other form of PPE by reading the device manuals thoroughly; implementing regular inspections and servicing; and providing training to participants on their proper use. Indoor climbing facilities should also implement risk mitigation equipment, procedures, and training when deploying auto belays.

Communication

As the ClimbSmart posters say, *Climbing is Dangerous!* That element of danger, and the ability to accept and manage risk, is intrinsic to climbing as an activity. This message applies to all types of climbing, including the use of auto belays. We can guard against complacency through effective and consistent communication.

Climbing facilities should communicate auto belay use as a serious climbing activity with inherent risks and dangers to all auto belay users. Highlighting the severity of accidents and reviewing risks like complacency with auto belay users will not deter participants who are willing to accept the risks of climbing from enjoying the sport.

This knowledge will empower auto belay users to stay vigilant while building good habits and practices.

Auto belay users should also be reminded about the additional risks and responsibilities that they assume by climbing with an auto belay, e.g., that if they are climbing alone, they will be solely responsible for ensuring proper use of the auto belay. Both experienced and new participants need to be reminded that they ultimately rely on themselves to avoid the risks of inattentiveness and complacency when climbing without a partner or supervision.

Climbing facilities can begin by using the CWA's ClimbSmart posters (or other signage) to provide visible reminders and a common language about auto belay use.

Orientation

Indoor climbing facility operators should orient participants to auto belay use just as they would for top rope or lead climbing. Operators should also assess participants and document the orientation like they document and store records of other orientations, e.g., top rope and lead belay. You can find guidance on auto belay orientations in the current CWA Industry Practices publication and a sample orientation from the third edition attached at the end of this paper.

Auto belay assessments should be in person and scrutinize each participant's understanding of the auto belay system and the climbing facility's policies in person by having them demonstrate their knowledge and skill with an actual auto belay.

Orientation Content

While individual auto belay devices may have different recommendations, and the characteristics of different facilities may necessitate different areas to emphasize, below is a general, non-exhaustive list of the topics an auto belay orientation should cover.

1. The limitations and hazards of auto belay use.
 - a. Forgetting to connect to the auto belay is the leading cause of fatalities in indoor climbing.
2. The basic function of an auto belay.
3. The climbing facility's auto belay policies.
4. The responsibilities of the participant.
 - a. The participant understands and is willing to accept the risks of using an auto belay and climbing alone.
 - b. To double check all connections prior to climbing - emphasizing the risks of climbing alone and complacency.
5. What to do in the case of emergencies.

Belay Gates and Barriers

The principal function of belay gates and similar barriers is to remind participants to clip into the auto belay. Belay gates or similar barriers also create a convenient clip-in point for auto belay lanyards when not in use by a participant, alert people to auto-belay routes, and passersby to the participant above. Some may display warnings or other instructions. Most major auto belay manufacturers sell auto belay gates, and some climbing facilities choose to make their own.

Climbing facilities should use belay gates or similar barriers and inform participants about their intended purpose and the protocol for clipping and unclipping from them. Climbing facilities are encouraged to set routes in a manner that allows the belay gate or barrier to obscure some or all of a route's starting holds as a further deterrent to climbing without first clipping into the lanyard.

Signage

Climbing facilities should use signage to provide warnings about all types of climbing and auto belays, specifically. Facilities can use posters that the CWA publishes through the ClimbSmart program, or they can use their own signage.

Supervision

Auto belays should only be used when an orientation and assessment of the participant has been made. Climbing facilities may allow participants to climb without assistance or direct supervision as they do with other types of climbing.

Climbing facilities may require more supervision for certain ages, participants, or activities.

Inspections

Refer to the operations manual or contact the manufacturer of your specific device for recommendations on which components of your auto belay device to inspect, how to inspect them, and the recommended inspection schedules. Climbing facilities may consider performing more frequent inspections than those recommended by manufacturers as there are good reasons for performing them beyond risk management, e.g., customer experience. For example, components and functions that climbing facilities might inspect daily are the lanyard, the retraction of the lanyard, and the smooth operation of the connector and its locking mechanism.

All inspections should be documented, and those records should be retained in accordance with the facility's record retention policies. Some manufacturers may

provide model inspection logs for their auto belays; or you can contact the CWA for advice about how to create your own inspection logs.

Conclusion

All indoor climbing involves risk. While auto belays mitigate some risks, the use of auto belays does not eliminate the risks inherent to climbing. Further, auto belays have unique risks as a PPE system; they are intended to be used alone, which puts greater responsibility on the participant.

At a minimum, a climbing facility should have an auto belay orientation; assess the participant; document their auto belay orientations and assessments; install belay gates or barriers; and display signage.

Auto belay users, like all indoor climbers, accept the risks and take personal responsibility for their own risk management when using an auto belay. Cultivating a culture where participants do so responsibly begins with an indoor climbing facility that provides the tools necessary for understanding and managing these risks. We believe that by following these guidelines, climbing facilities will better cultivate this culture and create more responsible use of auto belays.

About the Climbing Wall Association

The Climbing Wall Association is a trade association dedicated to protecting, connecting, and educating the indoor climbing industry. We provide relevant and actionable climbing business resources that keep the industry healthy and thriving. We do this through advocacy; developing industry standards; publishing industry news, data and analysis; sponsoring certification and professional development programs; and producing community-building and educational events.

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Annex C – Informative

Sample Auto Belay Device Orientation and Test Procedure

The following steps are suggested as an orientation procedure to an auto belay device for climbers using an auto belay device without assistance or direct supervision.

1. The climber is informed of the inherent risks of using an auto belay device.
2. The climber is instructed in the correct functioning and proper use of the auto belay device.
3. The climber is instructed in the limitations of use of the auto belay device, for example:
 - a. use by one person at a time,
 - b. weight or loading limitations,
 - c. climbing on route,
 - d. not climbing above the auto belay device,
 - e. not climbing in the path of another climber
 - f. avoiding a pendulum or swinging fall;
 - g. not releasing the line from the ground anchor or attachment point;
 - h. avoiding entanglement of the lanyard or rope with the wall or the climber;
 - i. not redirecting the lanyard or rope through protection points on the wall or interfering with the free running of the lanyard or rope;
 - j. keeping the landing area clear of obstructions and climbers;
 - k. etc.
4. The climber is instructed to properly fit and secure the climbing harness.
5. The climber is instructed to check for the proper operation of the auto belay device prior to clipping in.
6. The climber is instructed to properly attach the carabiner or snap hook to the climbing harness in accordance with the harness manufacturer's instructions.
7. The climber is instructed to double check the attachment of the carabiner or snap hook to the harness by depressing the gate to ensure it is closed and locked.
8. The climber is instructed how to ascend and descend using the auto belay device.
9. The climber is instructed to report any potentially unsafe condition or use of the auto belay device to the staff.

Sample Test Procedure

1. The climber properly fits and secures the climbing harness.
2. The climber checks for the proper operation of the auto belay device prior to clipping in.

3. The climber properly attaches the carabiner or snap hook to the climbing harness in accordance with the harness manufacturer's instructions.
4. The climber double checks the attachment of the carabiner or snap hook to the harness by depressing the gate to ensure it is closed and locked.
5. The climber ascends and descends using the auto belay device.
6. The climber is aware of the limitations of use of the auto belay device as stated above.