



BY CLYDE SOLES

# HOLD

## tight



**T**HE ART OF MAKING ARTIFICIAL CLIMBING HOLDS has evolved greatly in the past two decades. What started out as a fringe business with just a couple companies producing product has since grown significantly with the rise of sport climbing and indoor climbing gyms. Now climbing holds are highly refined products offered by around three dozen companies.

In recent years, much of the market for holds has been indoor climbing walls at commercial gyms, schools and military bases. However, home gyms have long been a steady business that remains an opportunity for outdoor retailers.

### RETAILING HOLDS

When climbers build a wall in their basement or garage, they can use anywhere from 50 to 500 holds. More times than not, this purchase will be direct from a climbing holds company to get volume pricing. While this will get climbing customers off the ground, the newness can quickly wear off.

Inevitably, to spice up the wall, climbers will want to add new shapes and perhaps retire some holds from the bulk purchase they didn't like. Specialty shops can capitalize by selling add-on holds

are a few retailers who sell climbing holds, but that market seems to be pretty flat. Most of the shops that I've seen with holds have just enough sets to say they sell holds, but it really doesn't represent more than one percent of what's available. I think that Metolius has the lion's share of this

Once a fringe activity, the *climbing holds business* has grown into a viable, moneymaking category.

in sets and unique holds, as well as hang boards.

According to Clark Shelk, president of Revolution Climbing Holds, brick-and-mortar retailers have an advantage. "Selling climbing holds over the Internet is a little difficult because people want to see the size, shape and features of the holds before they buy them. Those things are not something that can be easily shown over the Internet."

But Malcolm Daly, president of Trango and e-Grips, noted, "There

market, mostly because of their packaging and POP. They've done a great job of this."

Despite the kudos, this retail dominance by Metolius didn't come overnight. Brooke Sandahl, vice president of Metolius, recalled, "Chris Grover and I started making holds and training boards after he returned from a trip to France over 20 years ago. We had to learn the hard way, and made some painful holds and

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holds that broke easily in the early days.”

Among Metolius’ early mistakes was selling training boards and sets of climbing holds in big white boxes where they couldn’t be easily seen or felt. To display them, retailers had to hang holds on peg hooks, which, subsequently, didn’t offer much eye appeal. Today’s holds come attached to a stiff, recyclable plastic board that hangs well, looks good and allows customers to touch the product. Hang boards slip out of a storage box and have pre-attached hangers that allow them to be easily displayed on grid or slat wall.

Merchandising improvements have been key to Metolius’ success at retail, but no less important has been the company’s constant innovation of specialty holds. Recent examples include the Wood Grips line, which has a great look and feel; the Screw-on Corners, which greatly expand the options on many home walls; and the new Inside Outs, which allow recessed holds to attach to the front of the wall.

Another brand with a unique line of holds is Petrogrips. Available for inserts or screw-in, its new Rockpods feature polyurethane bodies that have a synthetic rock grip area. The synthetic material offers a realistic feel to the handholds, while small footholds will not polish smooth.

### HOLD MATERIAL

In the early years of hold-making, polyester resin mixed with filler quickly became the material of choice because it was relatively inexpensive and easy to cast. A few companies tried making holds from natural rock by cutting and drilling or by firing clay in a kiln—all proved very unpopular with climbers.



While relatively cheap, polyester holds have had significant disadvantages. Finding the right blend of components has been a formidable task that few companies have successfully mastered. Oftentimes, the end results have been brittle holds that chipped or even broke off. (More of a problem on gym walls, which often have uneven textured surfaces, while home walls are usually just flat plywood.) Polyester resin vapors are also highly toxic, presenting a hazard for those who make the holds and the local environment. A CE standard for climbing holds is being developed in Europe that plans to ban holds made from toxic products.

Polyurethane is the alternative material that e-Grips developed and has been widely adopted in the industry. In addition to being durable, it’s relatively eco friendly. Plus, due to the slight flex of the material, the holds will conform to slight



irregularities in the wall surface when tightened down.

Kenny Matys, president of Atomik Climbing Holds, said that while the urethane is strong, it feels like plastic. His company puts an additive in the urethane to get the rock feel of polyester; “so Atomik offers an unbreakable hold that feels like clean sandstone,” he said.

A side benefit of polyurethane holds is they are about half the weight of holds made with polyester resin. This significantly reduces shipping costs, makes hold installation easier, and hold-heavy walls are under less stress.

Polyurethane does have its drawbacks. It’s too flexible for making extra large holds that are commonly used on steep overhangs. When used on outdoor walls, the colors will eventually fade. While polyester holds in a home gym feel good right from the start, many polyurethane holds, even with pronounced texture, have a slick feel that doesn’t go away until they’ve been chalked quite a bit.

### SHAPING UP

What separates one brand from another these days is mostly creativity and anatomical knowledge. During the early years of hold-making, companies were still learning how to make ergonomic, finger-friendly holds. They may have looked interesting, but were often painful and could cause injury.

“It’s all about the shapes. Whoever has the most fun shapes, wins. Once they are on the wall that is all that matters,” Lance Morgan, owner of Morganic Climbing Holds, said.

Trango’s Daly agreed: “The art of the shape...or is that the shape of the art? Our shapers—Ty Foose and Ian Powell—are the best in the industry and have been shaping since most shapers have been in diapers. Both are artistic sculptors as well as certified course-setters and bad-ass boulderers.”

Keeping lines fresh, while maintaining a visual style, is part of the challenge that each company faces. Most have signature holds that are a mainstay of their business—yet it’s the new styles that keep their customers coming back. Many of the more bizarre and cutesy holds wither on the vine, particularly for the home market; climbers want performance and quality, not silly faces or animals. A notable exception are holds made for kids, where bright colors and fun shapes rule.

### THE BUSINESS OF HOLDS

When asked who are the major players in the climbing holds business, the most

frequent names mentioned are Crater Holds, e-Grips, Entre Prises, Franklin, Metolius, Nicros, Revolution, Stone Age, So Ill and Voodoo. Other brands making inroads include Atomik, Morganic, Petrogrips and Teknik. Brands, like Entre Prises, Franklin and WallTopia, do the bulk of their business supplying holds for the commercial walls that they build.



As with other competitive markets, aggressive pricing has been employed as a sales tactic. At the retail level for small sets of holds, most agree that price is largely irrelevant since they are all in the same ballpark, and climbers will choose what they like. However, with larger starter sets and commercial walls, many admit that price becomes very important.

Still, Daniel Chancellor, president of So Ill Holds, said, “I don’t think price wars are going on, that would only screw everyone over. The new companies try to go really cheap, but then they go out of business because the mark-off for gyms is so big.” Surprisingly, So Ill launched in 2002 and quickly rose in the market, particularly with the younger urban climber crowd.

At present, labor and material costs have contained pricing. However, Casey Newman, brand director for e-Grips and Trango, said, “If somebody figures out how to go offshore, get the quality and beat the shipping (holds are very heavy), that would be the next pricing revolution.”

### WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Many agree that the bulk of the climbing holds business remains with commercial gyms, schools and recreation centers. Home walls, though, represent steady sales and an opportunity for stores in regions heavy with climbers.

Both e-Grips’ Newman and Metolius’ Sandahl point to playgrounds and city parks as an area of future growth. Around the nation, bouldering structures are cropping up in public areas since they combine both recreation and art.



But Trango’s Daly is cautious. “Some states are trying to regulate climbing gyms as amusements and make them suffer under the same stifling regulations as amusement parks. This could kill climbing gyms,” he said.

Certainly, this would be a backward step for the outdoor industry as a whole but, until then, the future of climbing holds seems secure.

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