

Seeing Circuits.

Nathan Hadley weighs in on climbing, bouldering circuits, and the art of setting from a lens groomed and shaped at the Bouldering Project.

Richelle Kimble and Nathan Hadley from the Bouldering Project sit down to talk circuits.

“Let’s get together and climb a circuit.”

Nathan remembers hearing this invitation frequently after he joined the setting team at Seattle Bouldering Project. Tonde Katyo, the Director of Setting at the time, wanted to session the color circuits that sprayed the walls of our flagship gym on Poplar with the people who designed the problems: the setters.

To Nathan, each circuit session was an opportunity to learn more about the setting program that kept him curious enough to continue route setting. He rounded out his work life with freelance photography and fieldwork that focused on ecological restoration, and he spent his free time weaving his rope through and up the mountain ranges that drew him to Seattle in the first place. Nathan grew up as a decorated competitor at the national and world level, and in his adulthood, continues to add to his climbing accomplishments as a sponsored athlete. Bouldering and route setting at Seattle Bouldering Project inspired him to put more effort and time into climbing, just as playing in the Cascade Range did.

“There was another level of engagement with the craft that I didn't know was possible until I came here. And then I realized that it was the work that I always looked forward to doing.”

Now, as a Head Route Setter at Seattle Bouldering Project, Nathan hopes to instill the same enthusiasm about circuits in setters as his own friend and mentor did in him when first learning to session circuits six years earlier.

Eleven years into our project, and we’re still wiggling our fingertips with excitement at the thought of expanding others’ movement and climbing training with our circuits. One of the ways we can do that is by sharing the perspectives of those who work on our project. Below, Nathan Hadley weighs in on climbing, bouldering circuits, and the art of setting from a lens groomed and shaped at the Bouldering Project.

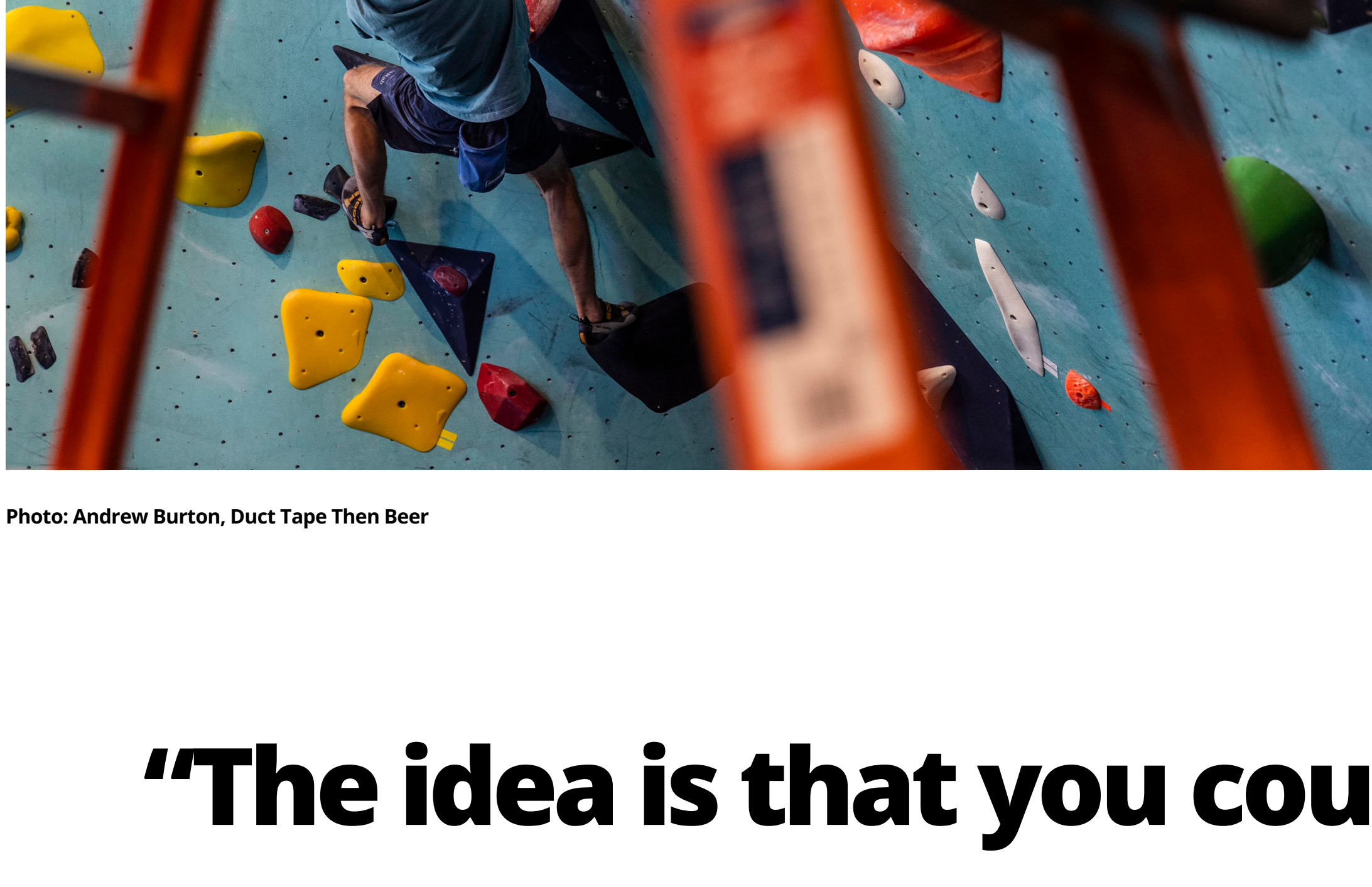


Photo: Andrew Burton, Duct Tape Then Beer

“The idea is that you could train for climbing on a rope effectively, or arguably more effectively, at a Bouldering Project or any gym where you could climb bouldering circuits.”

Prior to climbing and setting the Bouldering Project, the closest Nathan had come to completing a circuit was in a self-guided version of the [5x4](#). He would move his body through boulder problems outside or inside to get a workout, but didn't realize that he was creating a circuit.

Unlocking the practice of creating sets of boulders inspired a new training vision for Nathan. The more he climbed circuits, the more he understood how they impacted his performance. The more he understood how to tailor his circuits, the quicker bouldering became a building block for his climbing. Circuits became his go-to method of training for everything from projecting in the Buttermilks, to long days on Aguja Mermoz, to establishing the most difficult route on Mt. Baring.



Photo: Andy Wickstrom

“It’s at the point right now where all of the training that I do for outdoor climbing is at the bouldering gym,” Nathan said. “No matter what kind of rock climber you are, old-fashioned trying hard on boulders is going to be the base.

Already having a base built by bouldering indoors and route setting, Nathan can prepare for a season of rope climbing simply by adding more power-endurance circuits to his circuit training regimen. “Power endurance is something that your body doesn’t hold on to, so I just train it when I need it, leaving myself a month to plan ahead.”

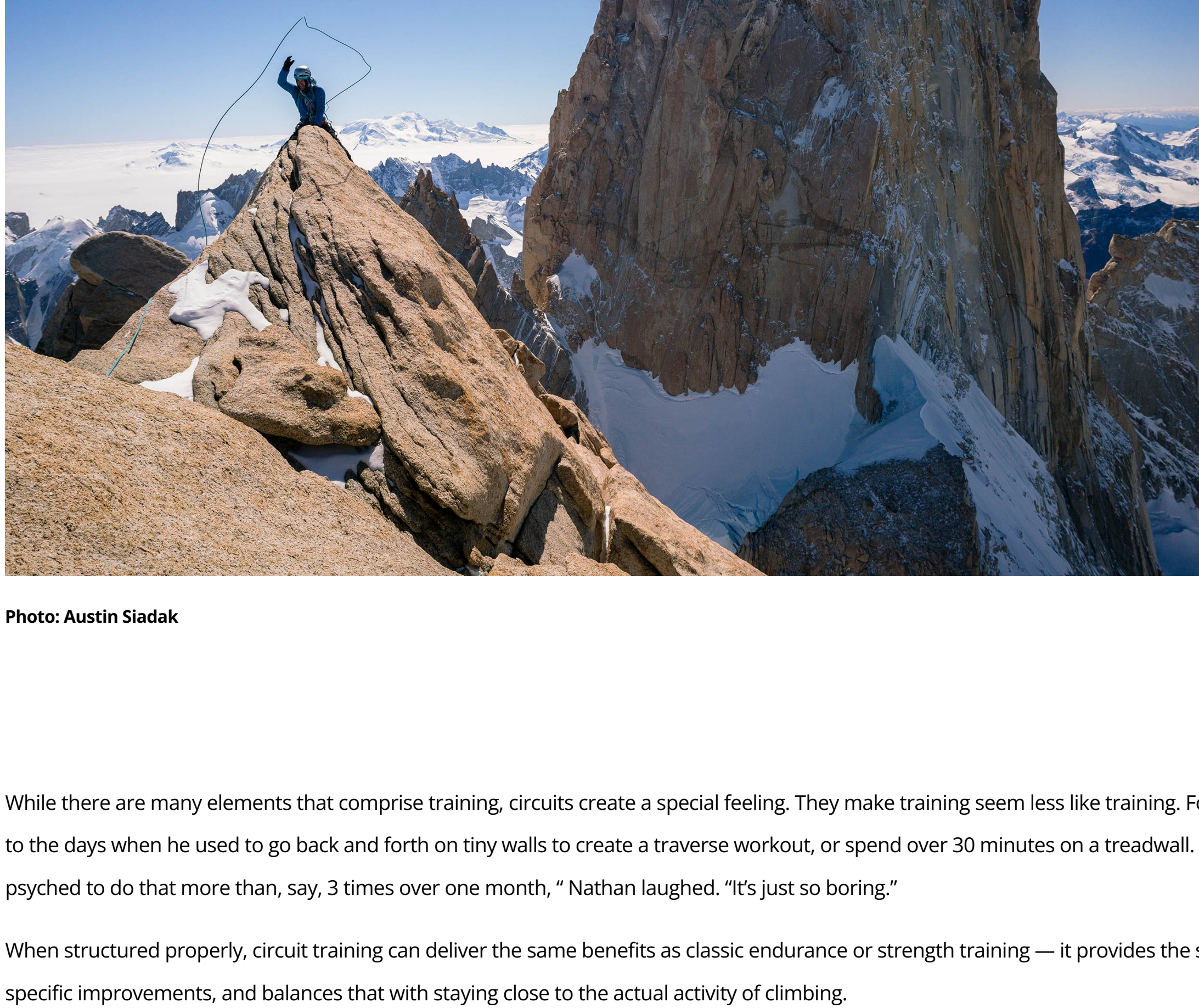


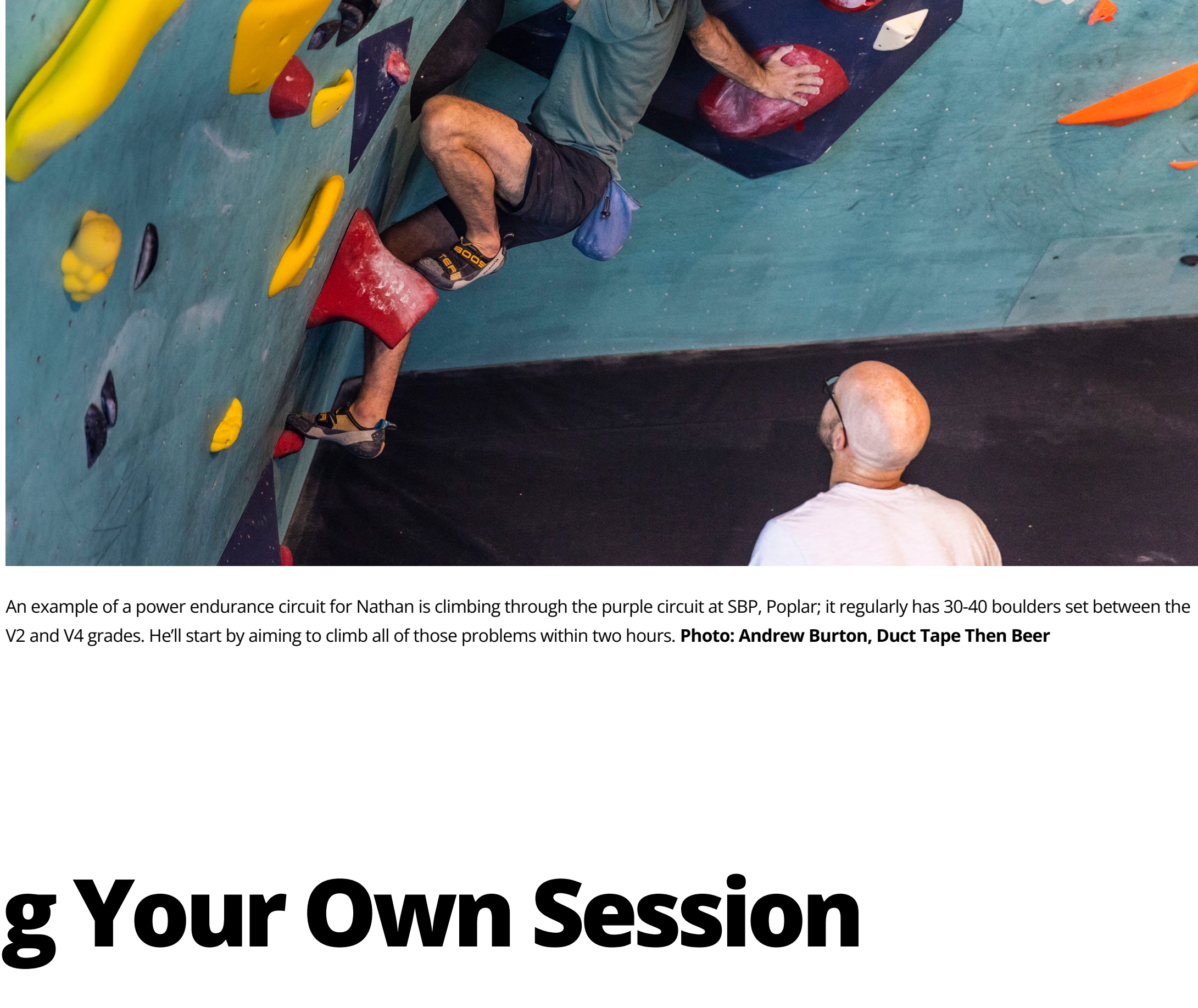
Photo: Austin Sladak

While there are many elements that comprise training, circuits create a special feeling. They make training seem less like training. For a moment, Nathan flashed back to the days when he used to go back and forth on tiny walls to create a traverse workout, or spend over 30 minutes on a treadwall. “I don’t know anyone who is psyched to do that more than, say, 3 times over one month,” Nathan laughed. “It’s just so boring.”

When structured properly, circuit training can deliver the same benefits as classic endurance or strength training — it provides the structure necessary to target specific improvements, and balances that with staying close to the actual activity of climbing.

“I think the vast majority of climbers who want to improve overemphasize other elements of training. And I'm not saying they're not important, but the most important thing is just to spend time climbing.”

“Circuits are a tool where you can do that. And you can adapt them to any kind of workout like strength, power, power-endurance, endurance...” And the best part? You can do it at a gym, in an environment where you can make it as social and fun or as concentrated and intentional as you like.



An example of a power endurance circuit for Nathan is climbing through the purple circuit at SBP. Poplar: It regularly has 30-40 boulders set between the V2 and V4 grades. He'll start by aiming to climb all of those problems within two hours. Photo: Andrew Burton, Duct Tape Then Beer

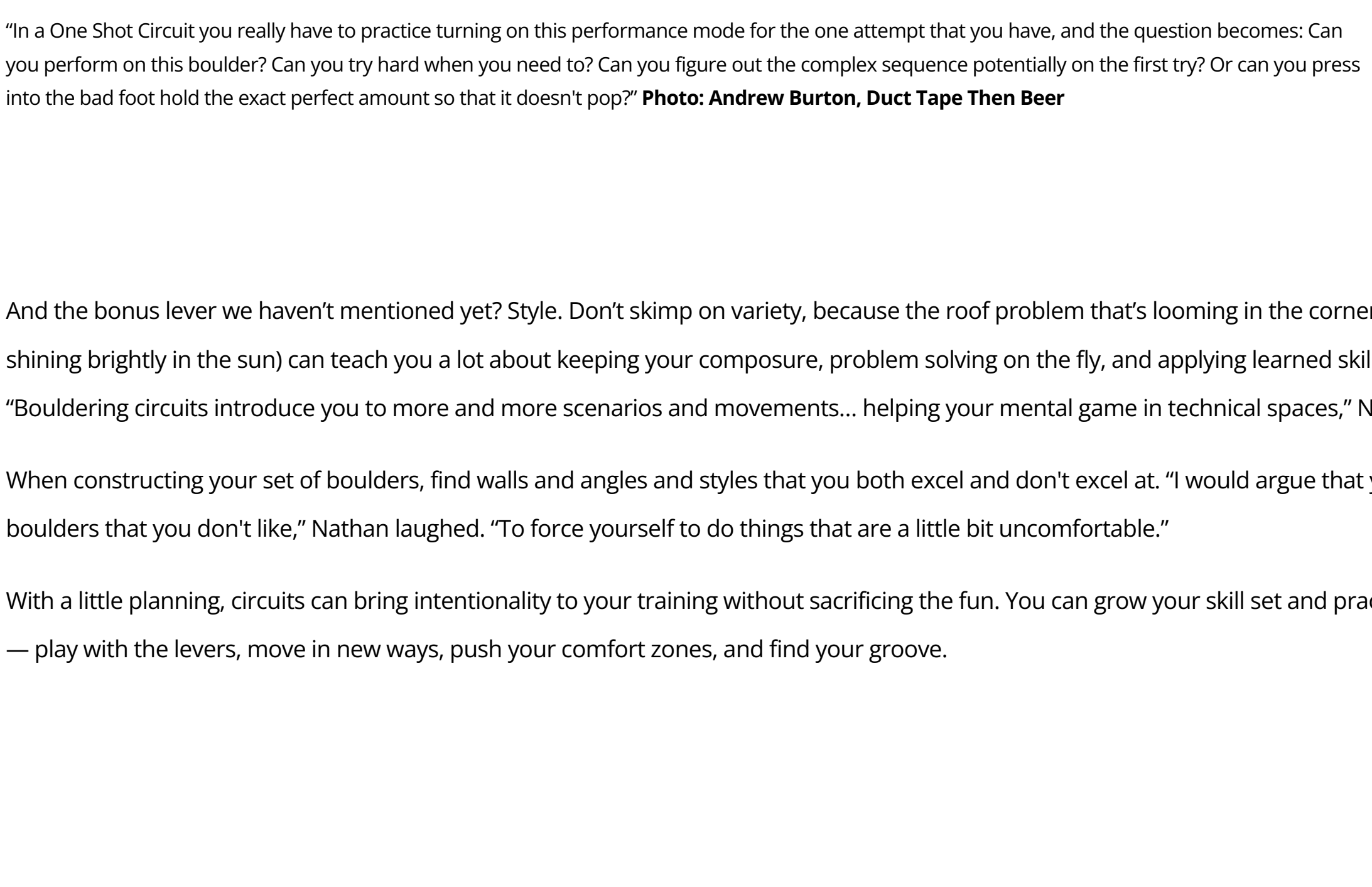
Building Your Own Session

“There are three main levers that you can pull: the difficulty of the boulders, how many boulders, and how long you’re resting in between boulders,” Nathan explained. “And just by adjusting those levers, you can come up with any kind of workout you need.”

For an endurance circuit (like [Color](#)), choose a large set of boulders in a grade easy enough so that resting between boulders isn’t necessary, and there’s very little to no pump felt in the forearms. Be aware that ever so slightly increasing the difficulty of the boulders that comprise your circuit could unintentionally change your endurance workout into a power-endurance workout.

Feeling pumped is an integral part of power-endurance circuits (like [Step Down](#), [4x4](#), or [Ladder](#)). If the power-endurance circuit is at the appropriate difficulty level for you, “you will get pumped and have to practice climbing hard boulders with the pump,” said Nathan. “It’s all about timing and limiting rest.”

Power circuits (like [Limik](#) and [One Shot](#)) require longer periods of rest for boulders with heightened difficulty. You shouldn’t be pumped, but it shouldn’t be easy. The goal is to push your grades and exert powerful, technical movements that require intention and focus.



“In a One Shot Circuit you really have to practice turning on this performance mode for the one attempt that you have, and the question becomes: Can you perform on this boulder? Can you try hard when you need to? Can you figure out the complex sequence potentially on the first try? Or can you press into the bad foot hold the exact perfect amount so that it doesn’t pop?” Photo: Andrew Burton, Duct Tape Then Beer

And the bonus lever we haven’t mentioned yet? Style. Don’t skimp on variety, because the roof problem that’s looming in the corner (or the crimpy, slabby toe-eater shining brightly in the sun) can teach you a lot about keeping your composure, problem solving on the fly, and applying learned skills in unfamiliar situations. “Bouldering circuits introduce you to more and more scenarios and movements... helping your mental game in technical spaces,” Nathan said.

When constructing your set of boulders, find walls and angles and styles that you both excel and don’t excel at. “I would argue that you probably should do the boulders that you don’t like,” Nathan laughed. “To force yourself to do things that are a little bit uncomfortable.”

With a little planning, circuits can bring intentionality to your training without sacrificing the fun. You can grow your skill set and practice in any direction you choose — play with the levers, move in new ways, push your comfort zones, and find your groove.