

finding your plumb line

Whether you climb, mountain bike, or snowboard, the secret is all in the balancing act.

BY JESSICA RIDENOUR

We've all had embarrassing wipeout moments, whether being gracelessly ejected from a mountain bike or face-planting into the roiling surf. It's not clumsiness, necessarily; it's just falling victim to our body's insatiable love affair with gravity. Sometimes it seems like that snowboard is as ornery as a wild bronco trying to buck us off its back, when really we're just forgetting the most important rules of balance: stay aligned and be attentive. Laws of physics aside, you can be as poised as a ballerina with a little practice and patience.

Balance is possibly the most intangible yet elemental aspect of any athletic venture. Although it can't be measured in concrete terms like speed or endurance can, when your balance is off, you certainly know it.

Our physical sense of balance comprises the visual, somatosensory, and vestibular systems. Vision, obviously, is necessary to keep you from tripping over things and running

into walls. The somatosensory system detects environmental conditions through skin and muscle receptors. But the magic really happens in the body's vestibular system, also known as your inner ear. These organs keep the brain informed of changes in head and body position. Without those tiny semicircular canals and vestibules, our poor brains literally wouldn't know which way was up, and we'd be as graceless as an elephant on roller skates.

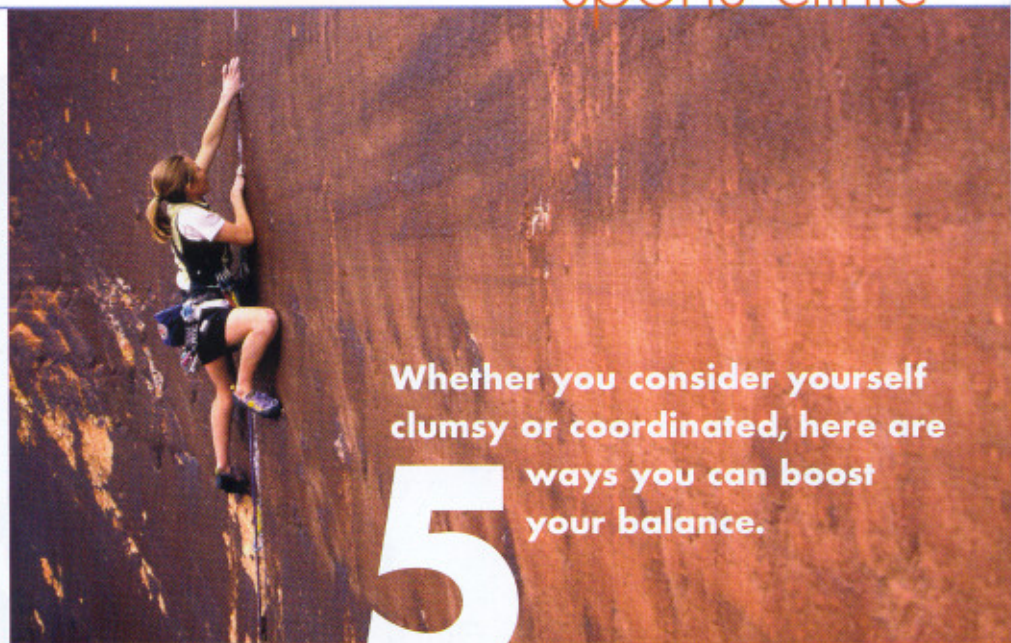
The truth is that even when our senses are fully functional, being in equilibrium requires constant attention and continual adjustments of our bodies. "The key to maintaining physical balance is concentration and focus, really being able to commit, to connect, to stay absolutely in the present moment," says yoga guru Seane

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Corn of Santa Monica's Yoga Works studio. "Notice shifts of weight. Does your body move to the left? To the right?"

To be in balance, your center of gravity (usually described as being in your belly) must be aligned over your feet; but given unstable ground, shaky muscles, or precarious heights, that's not as easy as it sounds. Climbers are well aware of the importance of being centered because every move done out of alignment will likely cause unnecessary fatigue and frustration.

"To be in balance is also the most relaxed position to be in," says Shelley Presson Dunbar, climbing instructor and author of *Climbing: A Woman's Guide*. On the rock face, think efficiency by keeping your mass over your feet and your hips underneath you. ✱



Whether you consider yourself clumsy or coordinated, here are 5 ways you can boost your balance.

1 **Harness your inner yogini.**

Practice balancing asanas such as the Tree, Mountain, Triangle, and Warrior I and II poses. Remember to concentrate on proper form. "If your foundation is insecure or unstable in any way, it throws off the whole of your skeleton," says Seane. "So when you're in a pose, first concentrate on your feet—all four points of your feet must be absolutely rooted to the earth. Once you have that, you know that the rest of the body is going to align accordingly."

2 **Climb like a girl.**

Not so coincidentally, this is also the name of Shelley's climbing clinic. She suggests practicing each climbing move in a number of different ways until you can feel that place of balance. "If you do one move over and over again—trying it in different ways—the most in-balance way will also be the easiest way," says the climber.

3 **Ride loose.**

Mountain bikers have a special relationship with good balance. The common mountain biker mantra "ride loose" reminds riders not to white-knuckle it because being tense only exaggerates sharp bumps. For hairy terrain, rise up off the seat and use your knees and shoulders to absorb the shock. When climbing up a hill, lift your rear off the saddle and lean forward. Stay back on the bike while descending—sometimes even behind the seat for really steep descents. In general, look well ahead for potential obstacles and avoid mud and sand if possible.

4 **Have a ball.**

Hone your snowboarding, surfing, or skateboarding skills with a balance ball or wobble board. The unstable surface builds core muscles and improves coordination, and it can actually be really fun. Check out www.indoboard.com for fun surf- and skate-style balance-training equipment.

5 **Experiment with different balancing exercises.**

Offset your center of gravity by wearing a loaded backpack, which challenges stability and builds core muscles. Or try doing some exercises, such as yoga poses, with your eyes closed. This basically shuts off the body's visual balance system and makes the other systems work harder to compensate.