

Guidelines for the Supervision of School/Social Climbing Clubs

(Updated from an original 1997 publication of the Mountain Club of SA)

1. Introduction

As a result of a tragic accident which caused the death of a young scholar, and the subsequent inquest which found prima facie evidence of culpability for her death, the *Mountain Club of South Africa (MCSA)* took the initiative at the request of the Attorney General to draw up a set of guidelines in an attempt to prevent the recurrence of this sort of accident.

In a short set of guidelines such as this it is impossible to cover all aspects relevant to the safe instruction of climbing and abseiling. It cannot be over stressed that there is no substitute for proper training and experience gained by participation in this sport.

2. Legal Implications

In the event of injury or fatality during climbing or abseiling the question of criminal or civil liability or both will arise. In this regard it is important to bear in mind that:

- a. Such liability will probably depend on the proof of casual negligence on the part of the person or persons being held liable;
- b. The undertaking of an activity requiring particular skills without having such skills is itself negligence.
- c. A duty of care is required and if not undertaken is regarded as negligence.

3. Qualifications

Due to the inherent risk involved in the sport it is essential that at least one adult, who is responsible for the activities, be properly qualified to supervise the members under their control.

In view of the developments in formalising proper qualification of mountaineering based instruction and guiding in South Africa, the minimum qualification recommended is a Top-Rope Supervisors certificate (TPS). This can be obtained from several approved rock climbing and guiding schools throughout the country. This is the lowest rock climbing supervisory qualification awarded under the *South African Mountaineering Development & Training Trust (MDT)* training scheme. (www.mdt.za.org or <http://mdt.za.org>) As such it provides certification at the most basic level of supervision. Such activities would include climbing on artificial climbing walls, and top-rope protected climbing on single-pitch climbs. If the club undertakes Abseiling as part of its activities, then the persons in charge should hold an Abseil Supervisors certificate (ASA) in addition to the TRS.

If the activities of the club include forms of climbing other than that covered by the two qualifications mentioned above then the qualification that would be required is as follows:

- **Single Pitch Supervisor**
Climbing activities that require the use of self placed traditional anchor systems on natural rock, or, where there is no easy access to the top of the climb.
- **Rock Climbing Leader**
To take participants on leader placed protection and/or multi pitch routes.
- **Rock Climbing Instructor**
To teach participants to lead using either leader placed protection, or fixed protection.

At present, only qualifications obtained under the MDT enjoy international recognition through the *Union Internationale des Associations d'Alpinisme (UIAA)*. (*World Mountaineering Federation*)

Definitions used in these guidelines:-

"Qualified person"

A person who holds a valid single pitch supervisors certificate issued by an accredited MDT instructor, and has overall responsibility for the activities of the club. This person would normally be a teacher or parent of a pupil at the school.

"Competent person"

A senior member of the school climbing club who has been designated as such by the qualified person. Ideally the competent person should also have attended a training course, although they cannot receive accreditation for it until they reach the age of 18 years.

4. Equipment

It is the responsibility of the qualified person to ensure that all equipment used for climbing and abseiling is properly used, stored and individually inspected at regular intervals, dependent on usage. For an active club a monthly inspection would be adequate. In addition the climbers should be taught to look out for anomalies such as abrasion, kinks, burn marks etc.

It is essential that all equipment is uniquely marked for identification, and that the date of purchase, date put into service, date retired from service and any significant events in the life of each piece of equipment be recorded. This is required in terms of the Occupational Safety Act.

Equipment must only be used for the purpose it is designed for. Retired equipment must be destroyed to prevent unintentional use.

When purchasing equipment it should be born in mind that children under 12 should climb in a full body harness because of their high centre of gravity and not yet developed hips.

In the event of a climbing or abseiling accident it is essential to keep all equipment involved in the accident separate in order to enable investigators to determine whether or not equipment failure was the cause of the accident. All equipment must be left in situ wherever possible, until it has been checked by an independent witness, and then kept separate.

5. Basic knowledge for climbers

On induction into the club all climbers must be taught and tested to do the following without assistance. Records of these tests should be kept

- Put on and fasten the climbing harness properly including doubling back straps if the design requires this.
- Tie the climbing rope directly into the proper point of connection of the harness, using a figure-of-eight knot.
- Connect and use all types of belay and abseil devices owned by the club both to the rope and into the proper connection point of the harness.

- Belay another climber using these devices. *(If the person will be belaying others)*
- Abseil using these devices. *(If the person will be abseiling)*

6. Artificial Climbing Walls

Construction

Where clubs construct their own artificial climbing walls for training it is essential that they are built to an acceptable standard to withstand the forces that can be developed in the event of a climber falling. There are written codes of practice for the construction of such walls.

Rules for usage of these walls:

- When climbing is in progress on the wall at least one competent person should be appointed as a safety officer for the climbing session.
- It is the responsibility of the safety officer to be vigilant to ensure that the equipment is properly used, and that no unsafe acts are allowed to be carried out during climbing.
- The safety officer must have the authority to force anyone who refuses to comply with safety rules to leave the wall, and report such behaviour to the qualified person.
- The safety officer must not have any other responsibilities during his/her duty which can distract him/her from it.
- All climbers should tie directly into the harness. The use of a karabiner between the rope and harness should only be allowed if double opposed gate locking karabiners are used.
- No climber should be permitted to climb to any potential dangerous height while un-roped. Climbing at a level close to the ground is known as "Bouldering" and can be done safely with the correct procedure and equipment. When climbers are engaged in this activity they should climb in pairs with one person 'spotting' the climber to break a fall. Suitable 'crash' mats under Bouldering walls must be used to reduce the risk of injury. The maximum height to which Bouldering is allowed should be set by the qualified person, taking account of the age of climbers and the nature of the wall. This should be marked on the wall.

7. Climbing at Natural Rock Cliffs

In addition to the rules for artificial walls the following must be adhered to:

- The qualified person must check, and take responsibility for any anchors placed to enable the climbing or abseiling to take place. There must be at least two independent anchors for each rope used.
- Climbers must be made aware of the dangers of approaching the top of cliffs un-roped.
- On natural rock there is always the danger of stone fall, which can be fatal. In any climbing fall the head is particularly vulnerable to injury. For these reasons climbing helmets should be worn at all times whether climbing, abseiling or waiting to do either.

8. Abseiling

All minors or inexperienced adults must be independently belayed with a separate rope while abseiling. This belay line must be tied directly into the attachment point of the harness, independent of the point of attachment used for the abseil device.

The abseil site must be chosen so that the abseiler and belayer can stand comfortably and safely (i.e. without placing load on the ropes) to check that all knots, harnesses and attachment of the belay and abseil devices to the harness karabiners and harnesses are correct.

9. Accidents

In the event of an accident involving serious injury, the following procedure must be adopted:-

- Secure the injured person to prevent further injury, only moving them if there is risk of further injury in them remaining where they are.
- Administer first aid as required, (it is strongly recommended that the qualified person hold a valid first aid certificate - ideally the Primary Emergency Care Practitioner certificate or equivalent as a minimum).
- Send for help if required to evacuate the injured person safely. Mountain rescue teams can be tasked by phoning 10177 and asking to have your call patched through to Metro Control. Mountain rescue is a specialised task, do not try to improvise.
- Unless people are in danger, do not disturb the scene of the accident in any way, especially if the injuries are serious, and an enquiry could be necessary.
- Keep the equipment directly involved in the accident separate from all other equipment. As indicated earlier, leave it in-situ whenever possible until it has been inspected by an independent person
- In the event of a fatality call the SAPS immediately.

Further information, Courses & Assessment:

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