

A teenage rock climbing enthusiast promotes the activity for club and competitive sport status at Irondale High School

Rock climbing ought to be a competitive high school sport, says an enthusiast who's working from the bottom up

BY KYLE PENDERGAST

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Erik Flom is climbing unmarked territory.

The 15-year-old Irondale High School sophomore has made it his mission to make rock climbing a school-sanctioned activity, and, one day, a competitive high school sport.

"It's a very intellectual sport, in that routes (up a wall) are a lot like puzzles," the 15-year-old Flom said. "The way that you're thinking really affects how you climb."

And while there are supporters and detractors, one thing is clear - there definitely is interest. Flom organized an informational meeting about climbing at his school last month. More than 40 Irondale students showed up.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," said Kelly Kahle, an Irondale science teacher who teaches Flom in her honors physics class. "There's so much interest in it. It's a disciplined sport. It gets you really in shape."

Irondale has a number of student organizations, from a ping-pong club to a Dance Dance Revolution club. But a rock climbing club, said Principal Colleen Wambach, might warrant some research into issues such as safety if the school were to become formally involved.

"I'd have to find out more about it because I don't know what the liabilities are," Wambach said.

Flom has been climbing since he was 11. He went to Vertical Endeavors, an indoor rock climbing facility in St. Paul, and fell in love with the sport. He has encouraged his classmates to sign up for classes.

But Flom's mission extends beyond generating student interest. He wants the



Erik Flom, 15, climbs the wall Friday at Vertical Endeavors on St. Paul's East Side. He's promoting rock climbing as a school-sanctioned activity. The Irondale High School sophomore made his first climb at age 11. (JOHN DOMAN, Pioneer Press)

school to take a more active role.

"It's no more dangerous than football or baseball," said Glenn Burns, president of the Minnesota Climbers Association. "In fact, I'd say it's safer ... if you know what you're doing."

There are basic safety lessons, and climbers can rely on safety ropes and harnesses, backers of the sport note.

Burns believes rock climbing's popularity is booming among

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making rock climbing a competitive high school sport.

"There would need to be a groundswell at the state level to do that," said Doug Austin, the Irondale activities director. "He'd like to see the high school make it a sport. That's a long, long process."

Kyle Pendergast can be reached at kpendergast@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5460.

Generation Y members because it's available year-round, it's not limited to physically gifted people and it offers an element of rebellion.

A climbing program for high school-age kids will begin Tuesday at Vertical Endeavors, off of Phalen Boulevard on St. Paul's East Side.

"We're just trying to get high school students involved and interested," said Tyler Hoffart, a Vertical Endeavors climbing instructor who spoke at Irondale with Flom.

Flom said he hopes including a climbing program at Irondale will influence other schools to follow his lead.

According to David Stead, executive director of the Minnesota State High School League, Flom would need to gain the full-fledged support of Irondale along with at least four other Minnesota schools in order to just begin the process of