

Dear Members of the Youth Climbing Task Force; Ms. Felson Di Pietro, President, USA Climbing; and Mr. Norman, CEO, USA Climbing:

We are privileged to be part of the youth climbing movement at a time of unparalleled excitement and interest in competitive climbing. In the US, there is unprecedented growth in youth climbing, with the number of youth competitors nearly tripling from 2021 to 2024, expanding the pipeline for future elite athletes and building a love for the sport in a new generation. Last summer, the world witnessed three current youth-aged climbers ascend the Olympic podium and learned about the pivotal role youth climbing played in the launching the careers of many other Olympians.

**USA Climbing's changes** to the Youth Series and advocacy within IFSC to limit youth athletes' access to the global climbing community **make the successes seen in Paris impossible for today's youth competitors**, they discourage new young athletes from finding their passion in competitive climbing, and they diminish the pipeline for future Team USA elite athletes.

National Federations around the world have had to align to IFSC's updated youth age categories for U17, U19, and U21. The USA Climbing Youth Task Force **went beyond IFSC's requirements** and **rubber-stamped a reshaped Youth Series**. The Task Force has

- Denied scores of athletes the opportunity to compete in divisional and national events,
- Restricted >500 competitors from developing and competing in lead,
- Reduced access to competitions for U13s, as QE slots fill given size of cohort, and to pre-collegiate gap-year students who still want to compete
- Made setters' tasks nearly impossible by forcing 6- to 10-year-old climbers onto the same routes as those who are 11-12
- Discouraged younger climbers from getting involved in competitive climbing by adding older athletes to the youngest age group

**Youth athletes have fewer developmental and competitive opportunities** because of these changes, jeopardizing our pipeline of climbers. USA Climbing has implemented and expanded on IFSC's age group changes without meaningful input from USA-based youth climbers and their families.

Limitless Engagement for Athlete Development in Climbing (LEAD Climbing) is a diverse group of youth climbing parents, guardians, supporters, and allies **advocating to expand developmental and competitive opportunities for young climbers** while growing the sport.

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We are concerned that the voice advocating for the development needs of youth climbers is getting lost across USA Climbing's broad constituency. LEAD Climbing is that voice. **We call on USA Climbing to act on the following before the end of the 2024-2025 season:**

- **Immediately expand the Youth Task Force** to include more parents/guardians of active youth climbers, particularly those with climbers under 15 who are most effected by the recent changes
- **Develop a mechanism to engage the signatories of this letter** in shaping the Youth Series and related programming as required by the Youth Task Force Charter
- **Create a plan for multiple competitive tracks** aligned with the American Development Model, similar to Olympic development programs in more established sports
- **Stay true to the "U" designation**--devise a safe approach to allow athletes to compete in older age groups if they are able
- **Establish a U11 age group** to ensure early climbers are engaged and developed appropriately
- **Begin lead climbing in U15** instead of in U17 to improve skill development
- **Allow U17 competitors to compete in NACS** and allow athletes to “excel for high performance” in line with the American Development Model
- **Add back Divisionals and Nationals for U13** for the 2024/2025 season and beyond
- **Professionalize the youth series** with dedicated staff and resources commensurate with the impact and complexity of the operation
- **Articulate USA Climbing’s strategy** for a youth development program, including goals for the elements of the Youth Series (QEs, regionals, divisionals, and nationals)

We are grateful to the volunteers, gyms, coaches, and setters who have navigated the changes to the Youth Series to the 2024-2025 season. We also celebrate the efforts of those filling the gaps created in the Youth Series, through events like the Division 8 and 9 U13 Championship.

USA Climbing is collecting talent, not developing it. The next generation of Olympic champions are being developed by local gyms and coaches. They need a wider funnel and more support to cultivate future champions.

Securing climbing’s berth on the Olympic stage and ensuring USA Climbing’s preeminence there demands sponsorship of today’s elite athletes *and* a mature youth to develop tomorrow’s elites. We look forward to USA Climbing’s partnership in creating opportunities for our youth athletes to discover, develop, compete, and perform in climbing.

Respectfully,  
LEAD Climbing

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