

UPRISING



Over summer, I climbed at Uprising, Christchurch's newest bouldering gym. While climbing gyms in Oz are getting more extensive, Uprising is next level. At 1300m, it's one of the largest in the Southern Hemisphere, open from 7am to 10pm weekdays, with memberships from \$19 a week. There are so many climbs you can drop in regularly and still find new routes to tackle at your grade. Uprising also has its own yoga studio, weights area, café with signature coffee and beer, gear shop and chill-out lounge. And it's super kid friendly. I spoke with co-owner Sefton Priestley about his vision for Uprising.

Uprising is a gym, but it's also a climbing holds manufacturer and a climbing wall construction business. If you were prone to puns (which I am), you could say that Sefton Priestley knows climbing walls inside out.

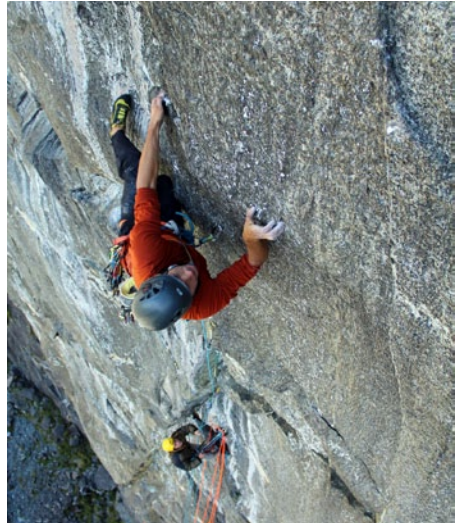
Priestley is a former New Zealand national lead climbing champion. (Fun fact: he's the only climber to have won the title over three consecutive decades, the third after a double hip replacement.) Priestley began manufacturing climbing holds 12 years ago, becoming the first in New Zealand to make them out of polyurethane. Today, Uprising Climbing Holds supplies many gyms in the Asia Pacific region, with Japan a huge part of their market. Owning a climbing holds company has allowed Uprising the gym to function a bit like a research lab: Priestley and his business partner Vaughan Jones 'can come up with crazy ideas and shapes, do 3D renders and create these hopefully quite unique holds', then see if they're popular.

Jones brings to the partnership a background in constructing climbing walls—he's built walls on almost every continent.

In 2015, Priestley and Jones opened the first Uprising gym, a 'tiny shoebox' in the Christchurch suburb of Woolston. 'Over three years, it got bigger and bigger to the point that we couldn't do any advertising or take on any new members,' said Priestley. The pair also started building climbing walls, including New Zealand's first lead, bouldering and speed integrated gym in Queenstown. They were bidding on international contracts and realised they needed a proper, world-class facility to showcase their skills.

More than anything, however, Priestley credits the Christchurch climbing community as the inspiration for the way the venue has been set up. 'Christchurch has a strong climbing and mountaineering community. We wanted to create a hub, not just a gym, somewhere our friends could come and hang out. We wanted to make sure we got it right. To have that chance has been a real privilege.'

Because Christchurch is a small city, Priestley and Jones didn't have to cram walls into every inch of the interior. And they've given a lot of thought to how you interact with the space when you're not climbing. There's a lounge with the latest climbing magazines to peruse, long tables for eating your lunch and plenty of beanbags dotted around—spaces where you can rest, relax, or strike up a conversation. They've also tried to incorporate natural features into the design where



Sefton on Te Hamo, an 11-pitch grade 31 put up in the Darrans last summer

possible, including bamboo flooring, pot-plants and large floor-to-ceiling windows.

The result is a truly vibrant space that local climbers have embraced, with thousands turning up for the opening weekend last August. While many members arrived via word-of-mouth, Priestley said the biggest group they underestimated was those who came out of the woodwork: people who used to climb but hadn't connected with any of the existing gyms. 'That was a big surprise.' There are also many travellers passing through, like myself.

I asked Priestley his recommendations for outdoor climbing around Christchurch. While there are 25 crags in the surrounding Port Hills—crags he's grateful to have so close—they're not really



*Flock Hill in Winter
All photos courtesy of Sefton Priestley*

'destinations'. If you're in town, Lyttelton Rock and Jane Fonda are worth a visit, especially if you're climbing in the early-to-mid twenties, while Britten is the most accessible with more consistent bolting. And if grade 27 is your idea of a warm-up, the Cave in Redcliffs has climbs up to grade 34, and projects beyond.

However, Priestley advocated spending as much time as possible at Castle Hill and Flock Hill (approximately 90 minutes drive away). 'They're legitimately world-class areas.' These days, Castle Hill gets a lot of traffic, including tour groups of non-climbers, so Priestley suggested exploring the outer areas of the reserve, crags such as Wuthering Heights where the limestone isn't as polished.

He also suggested heading to Flock Hill (a 40-minute walk-in). The rock is older with more features than Castle Hill, lending itself to more interesting climbing. 'Some people find it frustrating that there isn't a guidebook, but if your goal is to tick big numbers there are other places you can go. It's more about being in a spectacular environment, running around and finding stuff to climb on. That what makes it a great experience.'

When it comes to the outdoors, Priestley's personal goals have shifted to alpine rock, especially putting up long multi-pitch mixed routes in the Darrans, where there's plenty of steep, unclimbed terrain. In addition to running three businesses and being a dad, Priestley tries to get down there at least once a year. Then there's the challenge of training for those alpine routes back into a bouldering gym...

If you're visiting Christchurch, be sure to check out Uprising on Ferry Road. You can connect with local climbers there, or on facebook—see the 'New Zealand climbing' and 'Christchurch climbing' pages.

Useful guidebooks include *The Comprehensive Castle Hill Climbing Guide*, *Rock Deluxe* and *South Island Rock*. You can also hire bouldering mats from Uprising or Smylies in Springfield.

Leigh Hopkinson