

Make Or Break by Dave MacCleod

A review by Danny Brown

Dave MacCleod is well-known to climbers for being that climber that is just better than everyone else. A string of hard on-sites and technical ability puts him in the (admittedly small) class of best climber in the country.

However he is also known for his book 9 out of 10 Climbers (Make The Same Mistakes), a great read where he outlines his personal coaching and climbing philosophy on being good. It is a book that all climbers will and many have benefitted from. What sets Dave apart is his rigour. There are many better writers (although few better climbers), there are better researchers, better therapists, coaches and clinicians but Dave manages to understand all of them whilst acknowledging the expertise of others. As he says in his introduction notes Make or Break is “entirely his own opinion...and those opinions might be wrong”. A necessary caveat but an important nod to the many professionals working in this field.

However, the work necessary to assimilate, filter and regurgitate this amount of information is phenomenal and this level of fastidiousness is to be applauded – he should stick a mortar board on and give himself a baccalaureate.

This is a book that should be read by climbers, therapists and doctors alike because it is brilliant. A huge amount of work has gone into researching and determining not only the relative robustness of the evidence but in understanding how things work: How does massage work? How about ultrasound? What about trigger pointing?

Come to that what is ‘tendinosis’ or ‘tendovaginitis’ (to quote the inestimable Dr Volker Schoeffl)? He lifts the lid on many things, including surgical options and for those with a mind to peer into the contents of this book it is an interesting read.

Hard work but worth it

This leads me to the first minor low point of the book and that is its readability. It is heavy going. As it is a self-published book with low production costs it is just tracts and tracts of writing which makes reading it an exercise in perseverance for the avid self-helper. Also, dipping into it as I regularly do with my numerous other clinical books is not straight forward. There are gems of information in this book but Dave makes you work – in many ways this is a good thing as it ensures you come to the information when you need it and your comprehension is improved but it still means reading the book with a highlighter pen and those little post-its as bookmarks is a must.

There is a clear structure to this book which helps guide you to understanding so that when the exercise section is reached you know why you are doing what you are doing. However, skipping any element might leave you unsure as to the whys and the what-nots.

The section on pain is concise and only touches on this complicated subject but does get across the idea of why we (i.e. therapists) engage in manual therapy without making it sound like a trick.

Dave also devotes a goodly amount of words on understanding *why it happened*. This tends to be the Holy Grail for physios – if we can work that out we have a rehab plan. Without it we only have a treatment plan. There is an awful lot in this section from technique to lifestyle and nutrition and it is all good advice. There are some nice coaching tips but they are limited – this is an injury book after all – perhaps my only criticism of this section would be the shoe choice advice. Getting the right *performance shoe* can take time and while you’re building up your muscles, ligaments and tendons I wouldn’t stand on holds that were sufficiently small to require top end shoes. Keep with cheap shoes for a year or so on commencement of your climbing career until you know a bit more about what you want.

But this is only my opinion after all.

Don’t forget that climbers were climbing harder than you years before Boostics were invented.

The mechanism of pathology is also well explained and this leads nicely into a look at the main therapeutic modalities which can be summarised thus: not much evidence, opinion differs and some of them work for some people and some don’t.

My favourite section is Section 5: The Psychology of Injuries. Here Dave takes a fairly harsh look into what is the difference between getting better and not and reasons quite correctly it is not the bodies fault but tends to be about the approach to rehab. This is superbly brought to life with amusing anecdotes from his own experience and some insight into what has made him the climber he is today.

And this is the great strength of this book is that it makes things relevant. Let's be honest climbing is still a niche sport; many people have climbed but very few call themselves climbers. This is not about sponsorship or standards but about your relative interest in a sport. If you have become injured as a result of climbing you want the solution to be delivered in context. All sections show how climbing has caused or contributes to the problem and how climbing can be part of the solution. This is what 99% of my climbing patients want to hear and this book describes how you can maintain your climbing 'career' in the long term.

The young climbers section is a distillation of some fairly well-known information which is rapidly becoming part of every coach's knowledge base but does miss out the need for physiological screening – advocated by most professional sports and being slowly adopted by professional climbing coaches across the country.

The remaining sections are great resources based around a specific body part and I would suggest reading the relevant section when that part becomes an issue for yourself. With a few flick backs to the meat of the book this is where the book becomes a useful tool for climbers. Trying to remember all this stuff is hard (I know, I try to) so once you have filled your head with the principles this book is advocating then come back to it in times of need.

There is very little missed out and all the main injuries and problems are in there including how to test for them – often not seen outside of the physio clinic. I approve of this information sharing and have been doing much the same myself in my articles for The Professional Mountaineer.

P.O.L.I.C.E.

There are a few errors and omissions. Acupuncture is described as 'superficial needling' but I can tell you that my 7.5cm needles go *all the way* in which isn't particularly superficial. There are better stretches out there and Dave's description of health care is based on his personal experience. For example generally we do not advocate rest (except where clinically necessary); the oft repeated maxim of R.I.C.E. has been superseded by P.O.L.I.C.E. – Protection, Optimal Loading, Ice, Compression, Elevation. Dave discusses at length the need for optimal loading so it is not so much an error but an acknowledgment that as Dave himself says, "Make sure you go to a good physiotherapist".

Knowing the 'optimal load' is what makes us good Physiotherapists.

But these are minor blips in what is otherwise an excellent book.

There is a wealth of information inside and although some points are brought up ad-nauseum they do bear repeating. Dave paddles in the shallow end of the knowledge pool while successfully signposting to the deep end should you wish to go there. The reference and further reading section will be of limited interest to some although I enjoyed going through ticking off articles like I do routes in a new guide book.

I would like to see this book re-published but in a more user-friendly format and perhaps with extra sections contributed from the various other worlds that Dave describes from his theoretical standpoint – medicine, therapy, surgery.

I cannot recommend this book more highly but please do not quote it when you come to see me – *I know.*