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Mel Champer competing in a bouldering competition on May 4 in Madison. “Here everyone supported one another and we were just having fun.”

For the past nine years, Mel Champer has participated in U.S. regional competitions and Pacific Northwest collegiate competitions. On May 4, at Boulders Gym in downtown, she hit a milestone, reaching the finals for the first time.

The achievement terrified her. “I have pretty severe performance anxiety so usually I just get panic attacks,” Champer says before the finals. “So when I heard I was in the finals I was like, ‘Oh shit! I did too well.’”

Boulders’ 8,000-square-foot rock climbing gym opened six months ago. The gym is structured like a multi-colored cave, billowing with chalk smoke. It’s a bouldering-style gym, meaning the climbers don’t wear harnesses attached to ropes. But the routes are closer to the ground and the floors are cushioned to prevent injuries.

For today’s Downtown Throwdown competition, 200 Wisconsin climbers from all age groups are here to try their hands at 60 different courses.

“It’s honestly more of a mental game than it is physical,” explains Evan Stone, a Madison competitor who started climbing when Boulders opened downtown.

“It’s like trying to figure out a giant puzzle with all four of your limbs,” adds Eric Solari, another beginner.

When Champer takes her turn, just as she feared, hundreds of people are watching. But as she bends and twists her way up the 12-foot wall, there’s nothing but cheers.

“Normally in competitions you have these really serious kids with frowns on their faces and headphones on their ears,” Champer says later. “But here everyone supported one another and we were just having fun.”

Many of them are returning a favor. Champer is known for her enthusiasm on and off the walls, encouraging friends and congratulating perfect strangers during the six-hour event, sometimes even breaking into dance moves. “I always have so much fun trying to pump people up,” she says.

Few would guess that Champer has clinical depression.

“I had a rough go of it when I was 16 and climbing is what gave me something to look forward to everyday and forced me to put myself out there with competitions,” she says. “I can truthfully say it’s what kept me around.”

Originally from Eugene, Oregon, Champer moved to Madison two years ago to pursue her doctorate in biomedical engineering. The first thing she did was find a climbing gym and Boulders quickly became her home away from home; there she met “strong and powerful” women climbers like Jasmine Barthel.

Like Champer, Barthel has also used climbing to overcome hardship and connect with a community. “I have horrible cardio because of my asthma so I’ve never liked running or doing a lot of the typical workouts other people do,” says Barthel. “But with bouldering, I love being able to use muscles I’ve never used before, or even knew I had.”

Barthel used to play softball but had to stop after damaging her shoulder. Rock climbing has helped to rebuild those shoulder muscles. She got more bad news last year after being diagnosed with type one diabetes. So along with her climbing shoes and chalk bag, Barthel’s Dexcom Receiver — which attaches to her arm and keeps her blood sugar in check — is part of her essential climbing attire during the competition.

“I just have so much stuff going on with my body,” says Barthel, laughing. “I’m actually getting shoulder surgery in June for my torn rotator cuff, so this competition was like my last hurrah before I’m out of commission for six months.”

Barthel places second in the finals for the women’s division while Champer takes fourth.

Boulders has yet to schedule more competitions for the summer, but Champer would jump at the chance to take part again.

“Hell yeah,” says Champer. “As long as I have my peeps, I’ll be there.”

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