



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock, Off Route

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan, West Face

On June 6, Rick Barus (26) was leading pitch 16 of the West Face, just above Thanksgiving Ledge, when he took the left of two possible cracks. It turned out to be the wrong crack and it petered out. His partner was out of sight below, and they could not communicate against the wind, so instead of lowering he set good protection, climbed a little higher, and tried to traverse to the correct crack about 30 feet to the right. The traverse turned out to be harder than it looked. He kept going, made a dynamic move, and got his fingers in the crack but fell. He took a 25- to 30-foot swinging fall on a fairly clean face; his protection held, but his foot struck something, severely dislocating his ankle. A nearby party called 911, and he was rescued by helicopter short-haul fairly quickly.

Barus' ankle required surgical reduction and hardware. Recovery took six months. His ankle has a slight decrease in range of motion, but he's climbing again.

Analysis

Although this trip to the park was their first time climbing together, Rick and his partner were a compatible team. They had no problems until the accident.

Getting off-route happens. A topo might have helped, but they had lost their only copy. If you find yourself in Rick's predicament, consider downclimbing before traversing, leaving protection above you to lessen the severity of a fall. In a worst-case scenario, downclimb or lower off the entire off-route section, pull the rope through your protection, and start over. In some cases the follower may be able to safely swing over to recover your abandoned gear.

As Jeff Jackson pointed out in a [Rock & Ice](#) report on the incident, "The West Face and East Buttress are infamous for difficult route finding.... Barus is a self-described 'newbie' with just two seasons of outdoor climbing under his belt. Route finding is a skill that develops over time.... Take some time to study guidebooks, talk to locals, and preview the route with binoculars." (Source: John Dill, Ranger, and [Rock and Ice](#), October 2012.)

Images

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