



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock, Inadequate Protection

California, Joshua Tree National Park, Intersection Rock

In October I was leading the Left Ski Track (5.11a) on Intersection Rock and suffered a ground fall from about 20 feet up. I landed in a patch of dirt that is about two feet by three feet. All around the spot where I landed are sharp rocks that could have seriously injured me.

I climbed up past the “fin” area of the climb, which is about 18 feet off the ground, or so it appears. I placed a No. 4 C4 cam behind the flake/fin down low in the pod, clipped the piece, and continued up the climb. I messed up the sequence through the crux and decided to take what I thought would be a short fall to my last piece and start the sequence over again. I told my partner, “Falling,” let go, and fell to the ground. My No. 4 cam popped out of its placement, as did a crappy No. 2 below it. I knew the No. 2 was no good, and knew that once my No. 4 had popped, I was going to the ground. I landed on my butt, which broke my fall wonderfully. My arms also broke a bit of the fall, although I didn’t hit them hard on the rocks. I didn’t hit my spine or head on the rocks at all, which is probably why I ended up in reasonable condition.

After the fall I stayed on the ground for a minute and felt out my injuries. My chest and butt hurt, but other than that I didn’t feel horrible. I then stood up and immediately felt pain in my rib cage. As I stood up, I felt some movement in my chest, which was pretty freaky.

My partner took me to Hi-Desert Medical Center in Joshua Tree, where the staff put me through a CT scan. The doctor came in about two hours after the scan and told me that I didn’t have any broken ribs, my spine was intact, and I didn’t have any organ damage. He said I had soft-tissue damage and cartilage damage at my [costochondral junction], and that it would most likely take a few weeks to heal.

Analysis

Causes of the piece of protection failing: I went back to the site on Sunday and looked at the area where I had placed the cam. The crack is slightly flaring, but not horribly. I have to assume that as I moved past my No. 4 placement, the cam rotated or slid up the crack into a more flaring section. When I fell, the outward pull on the piece popped the cam outward and through the more flaring area of the pod. If I had slung the piece, the piece probably would have not rotated or moved, and it would have held my fall. A better No. 5 placement was available higher in the pod and deeper in the rock. This alternative placement would have been much safer, but I didn’t have a cam of this size with me. I have since bought one for such cases.

Slinging pieces that are critical on lead to protect the leader from a ground fall is always a good idea, especially if movement of that piece can jeopardize its integrity. A common complacency error among climbers is to assume that larger protection does not require as much care while placing the piece. I can now testify that larger protection needs just as much care as placing smaller protection pieces.

It was definitely psychological pro. I was not relying on it at all. I knew the next piece I was going to place, which hand I was going to use, and racked it in the appropriate place on my harness. I took an educated risk in relying on that protection and executed everything as planned. I just should have

slung the piece.

I also agree with the recommendation of downclimbing and "taking" on the pro if the option is available. I was so confident in the placement that I just took the fall instead. If I had downclimbed, I would have seen that the piece had walked and would have been able to correct it.

I am not proud of this ground fall. It is an embarrassing blemish on my otherwise excellent climbing record. I hope others can learn from my mistake. (Source: Nelson Day, edited from a post on Supertopo.com.)

Images

Article Details

Author	
Publication	ANAM
Volume	10
Issue	66
Page	44
Copyright Date	2013
Article Type	Accident reports