



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock, Weather, Poor Communication, Exhaustion

Kentucky, Red River Gorge, Playground

A group of six spent the day of March 21 climbing at the Gallery before heading over to the Playground. Once at the Playground, the climbers set up on two climbs, a 5.10b and a 5.10a. The climber on Jungle Gym (5.10b) was unable to move past the crux and lowered, letting another climber try. The climber was able to make the next clip after the crux (the fourth bolt on the climb, about 25 feet up), but was unable to climb further before the party heard thunder. The climber did not know how to set up a mid-climb bail system, and was lowered. On the 5.10a, I (GW, 24) instructed the climber who was top-roping the route to finish and clean the climb while I got onto the 10b, set up a bail system, and cleaned our gear. I proceeded to climb to the last bolt and clipped it with a sling and wire-gate carabiner. Then I attempted to construct a bail system I had discussed with an instructor earlier that day, instead of my standard approach. After lowering on the alternative system, it failed to let me pull the rope—the rope got jammed in the bolt hanger. The rope was now in the bolt about 25 feet in the air. The belay side of the rope still had about 40 meters of rope, while the climber's side had about 20 meters. Assessing the situation, I decided that I could use the belayer side of the rope to lead the climb back to the bolt and fix the jam. I took the tail end of the rope from the belay side, providing me plenty of rope for the climb, and proceeded to climb back up. I made the first bolt and began to work past it, but due to exhaustion I only managed to make it a few feet higher before I began to weaken. The first bolt is approximately ten feet off the deck, and the second bolt is another eight. I was about two feet from the first bolt; it was near my knees. Fearing a ground-fall if I failed to make the second bolt, I planned to rest and then finish the climb. I asked my belayer to “take,” intending to have the slack removed and the belayer close against the wall so that I would take a small fall of about four feet. The belayer moved into the wall and took slack, as I intended. However, moments before I let go, the belayer asked if I was falling. I responded “Yes!” as I finally slipped and let go. Unfortunately, the belayer proceeded to add a large amount of slack just as I let go. I proceeded to deck and pulled the belayer about three feet off the ground. I landed on my side, but was unhurt, as her dynamic catch softened my landing. My belayer also was unhurt. Following the fall, I completed the climb, cleaned the route, and retreated before the arrival of the storm.

Analysis

The accident resulted from the belayer adding slack, as well as the weight difference between the climber and the lighter belayer. The botched bail system did not contribute to the fall directly, though my exhaustion and the strain of retreat caused my inability to complete the climb. The belayer feared spiking me, and added the slack to soften my catch, a habit brought over from the gym. From this experience, I learned two lessons: Establish a clear standard of communication between belayer and climber, and always wear a helmet. While I had clearly explained what I desired from my belayer, she misunderstood how I wanted her to respond to those commands. And while I had worn my helmet on every other climb of that trip, I had failed to put it on in my rush to clean the system and retreat. Thankfully, it did not make a difference, but the result could have been very different! (Source: Gavin W.)

Images

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