



## AAC Publications

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### Fall on Rock, Failure to Follow Route

North Carolina, Rumbling Bald

On February 25, I (Mike Best, no age given) arrived at Rumbling Bald around 7:50 a.m. to meet John, my partner for the day. We started with Comatose (5.8), followed by an unnamed sport climb (5.9). After completing both climbs we elected to do Bunky's Rest Day (5.8). Neither of us had done the route before, but based on the topo and rating, it seemed to be a route that I could easily climb. The topo shows twin cracks leading straight up to a slab, then moves out to a bolt (5.8). From this point the route moves up and right to a second bolt, then over a small roof and on to the anchors. The total climb to the anchors is 150 feet. I racked up, John put me on belay, and I headed up the twin cracks. The climbing to start isn't terribly difficult (5.6), with tricky but ample gear placements. After 50 feet I plugged a finger-size cam and moved out to the first bolt. I clipped the bolt at a ledge and took my first assessment of the upper part of the route, which wasn't visible from the ground. At this point I realized the route gets more serious. From here I could barely see the second bolt. Moving between the first and the second bolt definitely takes you through a no-fall area, because the farther right you climb, the more likely you become to fall directly into the gully, which has several ledges and trees that could definitely cause injury. The second bolt featured another nice rest area with a small ledge and good handhold. This was a good area for another risk assessment. From here, bailing was very easy; I could be lowered to a rappel station in the gully, or could elect to rappel off the single bolt (which clearly had been done before as there was a quick-link attached to it). I took a look up the next part of the climb, which involved moving up the slab, pulling the small roof, and then climbing an undetermined distance to the anchor. I could see the roof had several cracks underneath to provide good gear, and the distance to the roof was pretty short. On my way to the roof, John let me know that we'd reached the center mark on the rope. I was able to move through the roof with a solid undercling, allowing me to get my feet high and reach up for a crimp hold. Looking up after the roof, I noticed what appeared to be a thin crack no more than 10 feet above, but still no anchor in sight. From here I made the decision to climb the crack, place some gear, and then make another decision. The climbing was definitely a bit tougher, composed of slab moves with poor handholds. Once at the small crack, I realized just how thin it was and placed a Black Diamond C3 (size 0, green). From this point there was no anchor in sight, which meant I was now probably 120 feet up (or 30 feet from the anchor, per the topo). I took a quick look around to find my next point of protection and couldn't find anything. From what I could tell, the route flattened out about 15 feet from where I was, and I assumed a few more feet took you to an anchor. Given that I'd placed a solid piece of gear, I continued up, looking for the anchor.

Immediately after the green cam the climbing got tough—frankly much too tough for a 5.8 climb. I found myself using dime-thick crimps and smears for several moves. About 10 feet out from the green cam, I was still balanced precariously with no anchor in sight, and at this point had no ability to downclimb back to the green cam. I looked left and noticed that if I could move slightly up and left, there was a ledge and some reasonable handholds—in all likelihood the correct route. I moved higher and found myself in a funky position with my left hand and left foot matched on a foothold, right hand on a sidepull, and right foot effectively off the wall. I tried to move more weight onto my left foot, but got nowhere. I was 15 feet above my last piece, and I'd climbed myself right into a place where I couldn't go up and I couldn't downclimb. I attempted to shift my weight, my left foot smear couldn't take it, and off I went. Sliding feet-first down the slab. I quickly reached the 0 cam and continued over the roof. After I cleared the roof, the rope began to tighten, and eventually I came to a stop right atop the last bolt I'd clipped. I was effectively lying face-down on the slab, with no weight on my feet and thankful that the fall had stopped. I did a quick personal assessment and tried to get on my feet. That is when I realized I hadn't escaped this fall unscathed. The pain was immediate. On a 1-to-10 scale,

this was a 10, easily the most intense pain I'd ever felt, and I realized that standing was not an option. I yelled down to John that I was OK and just needed a minute to collect myself. I attempted to put a little more weight on my right foot, then tried my left foot. Neither was going to work. My back was also in pain, but I had full feeling in my legs, could move everything around, and realized the back injury was just a large bruise from where the harness had come tight. I told John that I couldn't put any weight on either of my feet, and that my back had some pain, but otherwise I was good. Given my situation, location, and gear, John and I decided that he would lower me to the rappel station. He began lowering, and when I arrived at that last bolt that I'd clipped I told John to hold up. I unclipped my alpine draw, figuring the more slings I had the better. The rest of the lower was relatively easy, although definitely not pain-free, as I was using my hands and my knees to keep myself off the wall. I arrived at the rappel station with 10 feet of rope to spare (whew!), sat myself upright on the slope next to the tree, rigged a tether (using my cordelette and a locking carabiner) to attach myself securely to the tree, and told John I was safe and to take me off belay. I quickly rigged a rappel with a backup, tossed the rope down, and away I went on a butt-sliding rappel down a gully thick with vegetation. After another 50 feet or so, I arrived 10 feet left of where I'd started the climb and safely on the ground. Estimated time since the fall was about 30 minutes. Getting down was the easy part—getting to the car was a whole different ball game. Three of John's friends, who had been climbing nearby, offered assistance. (If you think climbers aren't a supportive group, you've clearly not met the right climbers.) One of them, an EMT, immediately began taking off my climbing shoes and gave me some ibuprofen to help deal with the pain. The scramble down to the main trail wasn't without its pain and awkwardness. As I slid on my rear end, I think I managed to roll over every stump and pointy rock on the trail. After about an hour we arrived at base of the main trail, and three hours after leaving the rock we reached the parking lot of Rumbling Bald. At the hospital in Charlotte, I was diagnosed with a left calcaneus fractured in three places and a fractured right talus bone. The orthopedist thought that in four to five weeks my right foot should heal enough to allow weight to be placed on it, and that my left foot would take around 10 weeks to bear weight.

## **Analysis**

I got lost on a route that I'd never climbed, and that the guidebook didn't describe in detail. This is a risk I accepted then and accept now. Getting off-route happens, and falls happen. In this case, if I had gone left from the last piece of gear, I would have found easier climbing, likely would've made it to the anchors just fine, and would've climbed a few more routes that day. Having the ability to self-rescue was good. (Source: Mike Best.)

**Images**

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