



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Inadequate Protection

Tennessee, Tennessee Wall, Ain't So Eazy

My friends and I had decided to end a day of climbing in late February with a 5.9 arête called Ain't So Eazy. No one in our group had tried it before. Before starting the climb I expressed some concerns to my belayer: The bottom holds were wet, the climb looked like it wandered a lot, and it didn't appear to protect well. Regardless, I pulled on and started climbing.

I have little recollection of climbing the route but remember expressing concern about the lack of quality pro. My last vague memory is pausing to place a 0.1 Camalot X4 (the smallest size in the X4 range) in a shallow, horizontal slot. I couldn't get the piece to set properly was starting to feel fatigued, so I left it and moved on. Shortly afterward I hit a crux on the climb and fell. The tiny cam popped out. It was approximately 10 to 15 feet above a nut.

I was about 40 to 50 feet above the 12-foot-high boulder at the start of the route. The less-than-vertical nature of the climb, combined with the 0.1 cam before it popped out, probably slowed my fall. After tumbling down the rock, I hit the pointed boulder at the base and started to slide down its side. I regained consciousness as my friends guided me down to the ground. I was in shock and my adrenaline kicked in. I relentlessly tried to convince my friends to "pick me up and go." I wanted to flee the scene. My friends resisted my pleas and held me down for nearly three hours while we waited for rescuers to arrive.

Other climbers stopped to help, and several of these people, along with two of my friends, were medical workers or certified Wilderness First Responders. I'm grateful that these knowledgeable people were there to help. It was imperative that I was kept still. Later, the neurosurgeon said I nearly had been paralyzed due to shattered vertebrae pushing up against my spinal cord. My friends keeping me still may have prevented my spinal cord from being severed.

The Chattanooga–Hamilton County Cave/ Cliff Rescue team arrived around 9 p.m. and wheeled me down the mountain in a litter, creating belay systems using the trees. An ambulance drove me a short distance to a helicopter pad, and then I was airlifted to Erlanger Hospital. The diagnosis was a fractured skull, four shattered or fractured vertebrae (T11, T12, L1, L2), several broken ribs, a brain bleed, and mild hypothermia.

Analysis

I think my main mistake was choosing a climb with inadequate protection. However, there are other factors to be taken into consideration.

First and foremost, I forgot to put on my helmet. I almost always wear my helmet while trad climbing. The severity of my head injury may have been drastically reduced if I had been wearing a helmet.

Second, I didn't use very good judgment. I'd gotten a little too comfortable climbing at Tennessee Wall after frequenting the crag for several years. This climb followed an arête, and I knew that many arêtes at T-Wall don't protect well. In addition, I had expressed a variety of concerns about the climb to my belayer before pulling onto the climb. My gut was telling me something wasn't right. From this point

on, I will always trust my intuition. I will also be more educated about my chosen routes and fully assess whether the risks are appropriate before starting.

This incident has inspired me to get certified as a Wilderness First Responder. It also demonstrates how important it is to have partners who know what to do in these types of situations. I want to thank my friends and fellow climbers who stopped to help me during this incident. I also want to thank the rescue crews for coming to get me. (Source: Brittany Decker.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Brittany Decker
Publication	ANAM
Volume	10
Issue	68
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Accident reports