



AAC Publications

Avalanche – Climbing Unroped, Weather

California, Laurel Mountain, East Face, Mendenhall Couloir

On April 6 my partner (age 44) and I (age 29) set out to climb Laurel Mountain (11,812') via the Mendenhall Couloir (3,000', III, Class 4, Steep Snow). We started hiking around 8 a.m. and reached the base of the couloir by 8:45 a.m. The weather was clear and the air temperature around 40°F. The couloir contained enough snow for a winter-style ascent, but there was not enough snow to descend on skis, with exposed rocks and bare spots. We dug a snow pit right at the base to check the snow conditions, and there was no indication of a weak layer. Everything seemed consolidated. But it was warm, especially as we went up.

We carried winter gear, crampons, ice tools, avalanche beacons, helmets, a rope, and some rock protection. This was our first time in the couloir, and we wanted to be prepared in case we needed to set belays. We were climbing unroped as we felt the conditions were quite within our moderate level of experience (the snow was 45° or less). We initially climbed with crampons until reaching a 30-foot rock slab. The remaining ascent was without crampons.

By 10 a.m. we'd gained 1,500 feet and were halfway up the mountain. At this point there is a band of red-colored rock and the gully splits. I heard a low rumble and looked up to see a snow cloud coming down the right-side gully. We immediately took a few steps to the left. Just to the right of my partner, a step away from clearing the slide, I was caught and carried downward. I tried to self-arrest, but there was too much snow sliding beneath me. I lost grip of my ice axe and struggled to stay atop. Throughout my slide, I fought to grab onto rocks and reorient myself. I fell over a few large drops, including the 30-foot rock slab. Near the bottom, after sliding and falling around 1,000 feet, I was able to hold onto a ledge and stop.

Luckily I was not buried and was able to extricate myself from the snow. I found a small ledge where I could drop my backpack, patted myself down for injuries, and yelled, "I'm okay!". Within seconds I heard my partner calling for me. After making visual and audible contact, I asked that he move away from the gully and onto the rock. It took him 15 minutes or so to downclimb to me.

My right thumb was bleeding; I also felt pain in my left hip, tailbone, and right knee. While waiting for my partner, my hands and fingers started to tingle and shake. I felt exhausted and just wanted to sleep. After my partner reached me, I took 600mg of ibuprofen and we were able to walk out to Convict Lake without further incident.

A doctor's visit revealed abrasions to my hands and hip and increased curvature in my tailbone, possibly due to a high-impact fall. I also continued to have tingling and shaking for 10-plus hours.

Analysis

This was a wet-snow avalanche with small to medium-size snowballs; it contained no fresh snow and was very heavy and clumpy. The Eastern Sierra Avalanche Center advisory for the day had mentioned low to moderate risk for east-facing slopes, like the one we were on.

The warm weather was likely the main factor in this slide. It's also likely that our position on the open,

upper slope was too centered; we should have climbed along the side of the couloir. However, lower sections of the couloir are so chute-like it would be impossible to climb out of the avalanche path. [Source: anonymous climber.]

[Editor's note: With an earlier start these climbers likely could have climbed the couloir before the snow heated up dangerously. Ascents of east-facing snow climbs in the spring and summer are best started before dawn.]

Images

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