



Inadequate Protection, Pulled Off Rock Block – Fall On Rock, Rock Severed Rope

California, Yosemite National Park, El Capitan, Muir Wall

On the morning of May 19, Mason Robison (38) was killed in a fall while leading pitch 27 of the Muir Wall (VI 5.9 A2) on El Capitan. This pitch, rated C1, heads up a left-facing dihedral for 20 feet, traverses left around a small roof, and then continues up the dihedral. After placing three cams for aid above the belay, Robison placed a fourth behind a large, hanging block directly below the roof. As soon as he weighted the cam the block fell out. His belayer, Marc Venery (48), saw Robison fall backward past the belay and out of sight below, with “a big piece of rock in his lap.” As the lead rope (10.5mm) began to tighten, it suddenly recoiled upward, completely slack. Venery knew immediately that it had been severed. In his words, “The haul line and tag line started whistling and whipping off the belay. I was in disbelief during those few seconds before they became tight.”

Robison continued falling to the end of his haul line (a static 70m x 9.5mm), a total of 250 feet, including the lead fall above the belay. The haul line was fixed to the leftmost bolt of the anchor, and the rest of the anchor did not share the impact. Venery stated, “When...I reached over to pull on the lines that were still attached to Mason after he fell...the haul line was tight and fully weighted.”

Venery shouted to Robison several times; when he heard no reply he began yelling for help. Yosemite Dispatch received reports of the incident immediately, and the NPS mobilized a response. From the Valley floor, rangers with a telescope could see Robison hanging in space, upright and motionless on the end of the haul line, a full rope length below Venery. Rescuers were lowered to Robison from the top of El Capitan and confirmed that he was dead.

Analysis

Recognizing and avoiding the risk: Robison was a very experienced climber, including previous El Cap routes. He and Venery were taking their time. They had added a rest day and had plenty of supplies, so haste was not an obvious factor. It appears that he simply thought the block was well attached. However, any hanging block or flake is risky, and you seldom know its strength or stability until it's too late. Furthermore, almost any protection becomes a lever when weighted, so it is a good idea to avoid potentially insecure features altogether.

Other climbers had skirted this block by traversing left below it to a vertical crack, but it is often difficult or impossible to navigate around hanging blocks or flakes. If it isn't possible to climb around the hazard, a pendulum may allow you to reach another climbable section of rock. Having enough specialized aid equipment and a bolt kit gives you other options, but in some situations retreat may be the best choice.

Rope damage from leader-induced rock fall: Robison's severed rope was not a fluke. A rope was cut in 2012 in Yosemite (the climber survived because he was leading on two ropes); another was cut in 2011 (fatal); and another was partially cut in 2010 (the leader was caught by the remaining core strands). Even if the rope survives, the falling rock may cause injury directly. When airborne with a rock in your lap, push it away if possible, but Fate may have other plans.

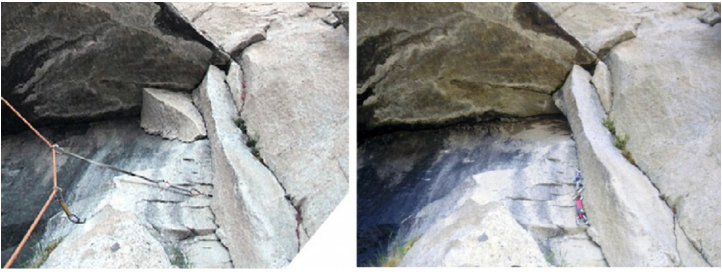
Surviving the fall: During the recovery and investigation, rangers noted that Robison's haul line was

attached to a gear loop on the front of his chest harness by a locking carabiner. The gate of the carabiner was open and was also hooked onto the structural webbing of the chest harness. The chest harness had been pulled tightly around his chest and up under his arms, apparently by the force of the fall. Venerly's photos of Robison leading previous pitches of the climb show the haul line attached to his seat harness. It is possible, but not likely, that the haul line became unclipped from the seat harness and reattached to the chest harness during the fall. A more plausible explanation is that he temporarily clipped the line to his chest loop during the belay changeover and then forgot to transfer it to the haul loop.

Robison died from severe trauma to his chest and fractures to the base of his skull. While impacts with the cliff may have contributed, the injuries are consistent with the chest harness constricting and crushing his chest. A 250-foot fall onto a static line is extremely risky in any event, but if the line had been attached to the full-strength haul loop on his seat harness—the recommended method and Robison's usual practice—the force might have been distributed more favorably.

After this incident some climbers recommended using a dynamic rope for a haul line, but this may not increase the overall safety of wall climbing. It is hard enough to free a hung-up haul bag with a static line, and harder still with a lead rope. Working harder to haul and descending more often to free bags could cause other problems, such as getting behind schedule, running out of water, becoming exhausted, and perhaps damaging a rope that has lower abrasion resistance. Hauling with a dynamic rope would result in a "softer" fall in the event that the lead line was severed, but this would require having a back-up rope. (Source: Jesse McGahey, NPS Ranger.)

Images



The roof on pitch 27 of the Muir Wall with the loose block (left) and the same spot after the block fell out.

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