



AAC Publications

Falling Rock - Belayer Struck

California, Yosemite National Park, El Capitan, East Buttress

On June 2, British climbers Felix Kiernan (28) and Luke Jones (27) began an ascent of the East Buttress of El Capitan (5.10b). There was one rope team ahead of them, but because the British party was moving faster, the other team let them pass at the second belay. Jones describes what happened next: "Now, with the route free in front, Felix and I started moving at our own pace, and we were soon at the belay stance between pitches five and six. It was my turn to lead, so I took the rack, had a last look at the guidebook, and set off, all the while Felix bantering away in his poor attempt at a northern accent."

Based on later investigation, Jones was actually leading Supertopo pitch seven, not pitch six. In his words, "I had climbed up about 25 meters from the belay and was moving rightward along a small ledge. I then had to move around a bulge, and as I made the move the block I was standing on (about two feet by one foot) detached from the face, which caused me to fall about three feet onto the ledge. I shouted, 'BELOW!' as soon as I felt the block go, as is normal when the lead climber dislodges or drops anything. I looked down to check that Felix was okay, but saw that he was hanging upside-down from the belay. It was immediately apparent that the block had hit him and he was seemingly unconscious."

At 1:50 p.m., Yosemite's Emergency Communication Center received a 911 call from Robert Pressly and Parrish Berquist, the team that Kiernan and Jones had passed. Pressly and Berquist reported that a climber was hanging upside-down and unresponsive near pitch six of the East Buttress. Berquist climbed up to Kiernan while Jones built an anchor to rappel down to the belay. When Berquist arrived, at about 2:30 p.m., Kiernan appeared to be still breathing. She attempted but was unable to move him into an upright position, due to his awkward position and location. Eventually, Jones and Pressly also arrived at the anchor, but the group was still unable to help Kiernan. They initially thought he had a faint pulse, but ultimately they could not detect a pulse or breathing. They waited for rescuers to arrive. Shortly after 4 p.m., the climbing rescue team reached Kiernan and confirmed that he had no signs of life.

At around 6:30 p.m., Kiernan's body was extricated via helicopter long-line. The rescuers rappelled to the ground with Pressly, Jones, and Berquist.

Analysis

Despite Yosemite's reputation for solid rock, the risk of rockfall is ever-present. Here are some strategies for reducing that hazard:

1. **Wear your helmet.** Kiernan was wearing his, but we speculate that he leaned into the wall and ducked his head when he heard Jones yell. This is a logical action, and perhaps the only reasonable tactic at that time, but it put the unprotected part of his skull in perfect position for the fatal blow.
2. **Stay on route whenever possible.** The traveled route is often the most solid one, though rarely free of risk.
3. **Belayers:** Look at the pitch ahead, identify your escape options before the leader starts climbing,

and keep an eye on the leader as much as possible. If you hear the leader's warning or the sound of rockfall and think you have time, a quick glance upward at the path of the rock may tell you whether to move or stay put—or you may get that rock in your face. That's why the sooner the leader yells a warning, the better your chance of avoiding injury. Given the short pitch, Kiernan may have had no time to decide, so he simply took the quickest course of action.

4. **Leaders:** Know when you are on loose rock. It will often have a hollow or ringing sound when knocked on, and may look cracked or detached. If those clues are present and there's no way to avoid it, first warn your belayer, then be gentle, pull down (not out), avoid lever points, avoid placing protection near the block, and consider retreat. And if your tactics fail and rock falls, yell immediately. (Sources: Luke Jones and Ben Doyle, NPS Ranger.)

Images

Article Details

Author	
Publication	ANAM
Volume	10
Issue	74
Page	40
Copyright Date	2014
Article Type	Accident reports