



## AAC Publications

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### **Fall on Rock, Inadequate Protection - Misperception**

California, Yosemite National Park, Leaning Tower, West Face

On June 24, Australian climber Shane Houbart (29) was on his second day of attempting to solo the West Face of Leaning Tower (Grade V 5.7 C2). After lunch at Ahwahnee Ledge, he began aiding up and right on pitch five. Shane had consciously decided to “run it out,” judging that the steepness of the route would protect him from injuries if he fell. He left four pieces as fall protection and back-cleaned several others along the way. Then he placed a cam and bounce- tested it, but as he stepped higher in his aider the cam pulled and he fell about 50 feet. He pulled at least one more piece during the fall and struck a small ledge before a small nut held and he was caught by his Grigri. During the impact he felt a carabiner on his rack wedge deep into one side of his lower back.

After considerable effort and some problem-solving, he was able to transfer his weight onto his haul line, which was secured to the anchor at Ahwahnee Ledge—now above him—and ascend that rope to the anchor. By this time it was late in the afternoon. His injuries seemed limited to the lumbar-spine area and hip, but the pain was getting worse, so he decided to wait overnight before making a plan.

By morning the pain had increased, severely limiting his mobility. Shane could barely stand up, and he realized that he couldn’t safely descend the route on his own, so he called 911. NPS rangers were short-hauled with the park helicopter to the top of Leaning Tower while other rescuers climbed up to him from the bottom. Using ropes rigged from the summit, the team lowered Shane to the ground.

Fortunately, Shane had not broken his back but was diagnosed with deep lumbar bruising. He has fully recovered and has since returned to successfully solo the route.

### **Analysis**

Although this was his first attempt to solo a wall, Shane was an experienced wall climber, having done several Grade V and VI ascents in the Valley. He is not the first person to be injured on this pitch. In 2011 a climber took a long fall, breaking his patella and significantly injuring ligaments and tendons in his knee. In both cases the leader had back-cleaned several placements. Shane said he weighed the consequences of running it out, and as he led the pitch he looked at fall potential several times. He thought the pitch was so steep he couldn’t possibly hit anything. Indeed, you might not hit during the free-fall phase, but as the rope arrests the fall, you may swing with considerable speed, usually toward the wall. Broken ankles or heels on overhanging sport climbs are surprisingly frequent for this reason. As a solo climber, the consequences of accidents are exacerbated since you have no one to help you retreat. (Sources: Shane Houbart and Jesse McGahey, NPS Ranger.)

**Images**

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