Fall on Rock - Inadequate Protection, No Belay Anchor, Off Route, Exceeding Abilities

California, Yosemite National Park, Half Dome (not quite) Snake Dike

Early in the morning of August 27, 2012, Sam (24) and I (Paige, 27) hiked from the Little Yosemite Valley campground to the southwest face of Half Dome, intent on climbing Snake Dike (5.7 R). We had chosen the route because of the easy grade; it appeared to be a multi-pitch climb that fit our skill levels and aspirations. (We had each trad climbed for a year or two and were fairly new leaders.) We had a topo of the climb but did not bring the approach directions, so we followed a social trail marked by small cairns. Sam felt he'd be able to recognize the route from photos he'd seen earlier, but when we reached the general area it was a lot harder to identify than expected.

We spotted features resembling those on the topo, with what looked like a bolt anchor above a shallow roof, and decided this was probably our climb. Because of some notable differences, we formed a retreat plan if Sam led up and decided it was the wrong route. It looked harder than what we were expecting, but we weren't familiar with Yosemite ratings so we started anyway. (Later we decided the "bolts" must have been sparkling crystals. We were way off route.)

We scrambled up an easy fourth- or fifth-class crack to a ledge where there was plenty of room for me to stand and flake out the rope. From the edge of the ledge, three feet behind me, the cliff dropped almost vertically for 20 to 30 feet to the ground.

The face above was steep and smooth, but a flake on the right offered an easy crack that ran 15 to 25 feet up to a shallow roof. The crack provided opportunities for an anchor. The week before, a friend had pointed out to me for the first time the importance of anchoring the belayer in exposed locations, so it crossed my mind now, but neither Sam nor I brought it up. My rationalizations included, "We have a minimal rack (intended for Snake Dike) and he's going to need all that gear to build the next anchor. This is a pretty big ledge, and the climb is supposed to be easy."

Sam breezed up the crack with no problem and placed a small cam under the roof. I should have asked him to place a piece or two in the crack below to protect both of us, but I did not. I did suggest he place a second piece at the roof, but he said, "There's no room," and I didn't push it.

Sam fell twice when he couldn't find a hold above the roof. The cam held each time, and I stopped him easily. I did not suggest he reset the protection after those falls. (Now I know that's what you should do.) I said, "I think you should come down so we can see if we're off route," and he said, "No, let me give it one more shot." After a minute of contemplation he said, "I just have to go for it."

On the third try he made a dynamic move over the roof, but fell again. He had gone higher than before, so he fell harder and the cam pulled. He tumbled onto the belay ledge and then rolled over the edge. Because there had been no protection, I had quite a bit of slack, but it ran out and the rope came tight before he hit the ground below. I instinctively tried to catch him and didn't react in time to let go, so I was pulled off the belay ledge headfirst.

I didn't think about anything except for the ground I could see coming at me (or vice versa), and I put my hands out and rolled. Luckily the landing was all fine grit with no big boulders to hit. I opened my eyes and got up on all fours. I saw some blood on the ground from my bloody nose and thought, "I'm

not dead!"

Sam was sitting against the cliff 15 feet away with a bloody forehead and no helmet. He said, "My arm is broken. We need to get out of here now!" His helmet was cracked and had come off in the fall, so I put it back on his head. He kept repeating, "We have to go," and I worried he might have a concussion or worse.

I said, "Hold on a second, our water's up on the ledge." I started to climb up to where I'd belayed, and at that moment I realized that my left leg was not working properly. I heard a popping sound whenever I attempted to move it. "My leg is broken. I can't get the water," I said.

I had no pain at that point, but very soon moving became a lot harder and my left leg wouldn't support my weight. I helped Sam get up and said, "I may not be able to walk," and he replied, "No, we gotta get out of here." He started walking fast and saying, "Come on, we gotta go." He was basically able-bodied except for his left arm. So I followed, hobbling and trying to pace myself. We had landed near a little social trail that headed down toward the main trail, about two miles away, where we were sure to find hikers. We had no cell phone.

When I realized our escape was going to take hours, I started yelling, but then I discovered there was something wrong with my lungs. While I could talk normally, there was no force to my yells. We only walked for a few minutes, maybe 200 yards. I didn't try to keep up, and when the terrain was rough I butt-scooted along. That's when I realized my right wrist was broken. Sam was about 100 yards ahead of me, out of sight and going about twice my pace, when he ran into two climbers headed for the real Snake Dike, which turned out to be a few hundred yards west of our route. I heard Sam using their cell phone to report to the rangers, so I just sat down, figuring that now I wouldn't have to crawl out of there. Soon, however, I realized that the rangers were coming to meet us on foot, because they had gotten the impression that the incident had been minor and we were going to walk out, which I doubted.

The two climbers came up and helped me continue to where Sam was. About an hour after Sam's call we called SAR back so I could give them my status. At their direction, I palpated my neck, which was sore. We had trouble figuring out my pain level because I didn't really have much unless I palpated an area, even when I weighted my leg. But after they got a clearer picture of what had happened, and more details about my condition, they told me that we could have neck and back injuries and that they were sending a helicopter. The two other climbers put out a bright yellow shirt to guide the aircraft while I tried to relax.

Two rangers were short-hauled to us. They decided that I needed to be immobilized in a litter and short-hauled out. Sam was short-hauled on the flight after mine, but he didn't require a litter. In the Valley I was transferred to an air ambulance and taken to a hospital in Modesto.

Sam had dislocated his elbow. Here is my diagnosis: left hip socket (pelvis) fractured though not displaced, symphisis pubis (pelvis) fractured and minimally displaced, right wrist fractured, six to eight ribs fractured, and the spinous processes on two neck vertebrae (C6 and C7) fractured. I also had a 20 percent right-side pneumothorax and a lacerated/bleeding liver, in addition to some lesser injuries. After lots of physical therapy, everything seems to have healed OK. I'm gym climbing again and recently ran a half-marathon. And I think Sam and I are a little wiser.

Analysis

Finding the route: In Yosemite there's a "corner with a crack that leads to a roof" everywhere you look. Unless you want to explore, and you have the skills and experience to do so, bring all the navigation tools you can, including photos, topos, and maps. If you load files onto your smartphone or camera, be sure you can see sufficient detail—that's been a problem in some cases. A paper copy for each

member of your party never hurts, and everyone should know the descent/ escape route in case your team's leader is the one injured.

Under-protecting: Judge the hazard and the protection requirements based on what you see, even though you think you're on route and "the climb is supposed to be easy," and take a conservative approach to risk. This applies to everyone but is especially important for inexperienced parties who may not know enough to make informed decisions.

Communicating the hazard: Paige had concerns as soon as they reached the belay ledge, but she did not insist on an anchor, or at least on anchor-quality protection on the pitch. She also held back on saying something when Sam kept falling on that single cam. These can be uncomfortable social situations, and Sam was responsible for his own decisions, but being tied to him, Paige's life was also in his hands. A hesitation to communicate is often a factor in climbing accidents, as it is in many other fields.

Helmets: They're quite hard to crack. Sam's helmet may have prevented a debilitating or fatal injury.

After the fall: In a case like this the best action may be to stay put, given the risk of worsening a serious injury. But with no way to call for help, at least one of them had to move. (A whistle can be useful for raising the alarm.) When Sam finally contacted the NPS, his report was so mild (though unintentionally so) that it raised no concern and we directed nearby staff to meet them on foot. Yet Paige's internal injuries were quite close to being life-threatening and time-critical. Once we got a clearer picture of what had happened, we immediately shifted into high gear. Sam may not have understood the potential danger or how to give a clear report. One can learn about both of these topics in a Wilderness First Responder class. (Sources: Paige and John Dill, NPS Ranger.)

(Editor's note: This narrative from 2012 did not appear in the last edition because of its length and a few missing details. The lessons illustrated are important enough to warrant inclusion this year.)

Images

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