



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock, Belayer Error, Inexperience

Colorado, Boulder Canyon

In July, Scott Jones (22) was dropped from the top of Iron Maiden (5.9) in Boulder Canyon by a belayer he had met through a climbing community web site. Scott describes the incident:

"I should establish that this was not a typical rapping/lowering miscommunication. I was the first to lead the route, and we established that he was going to lead it after I hung the draws." Before climbing, Scott also verified that the belayer had loaded his device, a Grigri, correctly. "When I reached the chains I yelled down, 'Take.' I didn't feel any pressure from the rope, so took both hands and grasped the line and began lowering myself. As I neared a bulge 10 feet below the chains, I felt (possibly mistakenly) the rope come tight." At this point, though he still could not see or hear the belayer, Scott assumed he was being lowered and let go of the rope. He fell about 60 feet to the ground.

"Luckily the initial bleeding wasn't too bad and I was able to self-rescue across the creek to the highway. A generous climber replaced my blood-drenched shirt with his own and offered to drive me to the hospital. Unfortunately, the traffic was bumper to bumper, but as luck would have it a man on a Harley was passing by, so I hopped on. I quickly made my way through traffic until I reached the cause of the backup and the hospital."

Analysis

"The next day I spoke to the belayer (if you can call him that) and was able to piece together what happened: He paid out slack at the top of the route by pulling on the Grigri's lever while letting go with his brake hand." The belayer must have held the Grigri too far open and lost control of the lower.

"I'm guessing the only thing that kept me from the morgue was the fact that the rope was hopelessly kinked, creating a good deal of friction. It may have also tangled itself below the Grigri just before I slammed into the ground. I guess the only advice I could give is not to be afraid to decline a belay from someone who gives you a bad feeling. I see now that a perceived insult is a much better outcome than a trip to the hospital." (Source: Scott Jones on Mountainproject.com.)

(Editor's note: "Blind date" partners are always a cause for extra caution. Make sure you and your partner fully understand each other's experience level, and visually verify the other climber's belay and lowering methods before starting to climb. A belayer must never let go of the rope with his brake hand even when using "assisted braking" devices such as the Grigri. See page 68 for more about belaying with a Grigri.)

Images

Article Details

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| Author | |
| Publication | ANAM |
| Volume | 10 |
| Issue | 67 |
| Page | 58 |
| Copyright Date | 2014 |
| Article Type | Accident reports |