



AAC Publications

Falling Rock

Kentucky, Red River Gorge, Global Village

On May 13, I (Matt Queen, 32) was gearing up at the base of Father and Son (5.7) when a member of my party, climbing above me, dislodged a block weighing approximately 10 pounds while traversing between the anchors of Father and Son and the adjacent route Kentucky Pinstripe. Both routes start on a very large ledge. I had my back turned to the cliff when I was struck on the top of my helmeted head and knocked unconscious. Members of my party noted that the climber above yelled, "Rock!" but I don't remember hearing the warning.

After the impact, another member in my party grabbed me and kept me from falling off the ledge. I regained consciousness after about one minute. After I had gathered myself and was checked for further injuries, I was evacuated by the three members of my group.

I sustained a concussion from the impact, and my memory from the following couple of days is pretty fragmented. But I believe my helmet probably saved my life. Like most climbers now, I started climbing in the gym, and after my transition to outdoor climbing I still kept my gym attire—i.e., no helmet. It wasn't until I started trad climbing that I started wearing a helmet, and even then I would only wear it during gear-protected climbs. It took me longer than it should have to realize that my logic was flawed. Thankfully, I'd already made the decision to always wear a helmet before this particular incident. In hindsight, I'm glad that I got blasted by rockfall that day. Now I have a great story to tell people that may save someone's life.

Analysis

My helmet probably saved my life. Always wear a helmet while climbing, especially where rockfall is possible. Be aware of what's happening around you. If I had paying more attention to the others climbing, I might have been able to avoid the falling rock. Assess potential hazards while climbing, Although both routes were well traveled, the traverse between the two anchors was not, therefore greatly increasing the possibility of encountering loose rock. Assess the hazards of the surrounding environment at the base of the cliff. Because the ledge at the base was so large, the thought of being knocked off it had not occurred to anyone. Take a Wilderness First Responder or Wilderness First Aid course to be prepared when situations such as this arise. (Source: Matt Queen.)

Images



A dazed Matt Queen before evacuating to the road.



The helmet Matt Queen was wearing in the Red River Gorge, and a piece of rock "about one-third the size" of the one that hit him in the head.

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