



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock - Fatigue, Inadequate Protection, Exceeding Abilities

Utah, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Beckey's Wall

My daughter Alex (27) had demonstrated very good climbing and protection skills the previous summer when she took me up a two-pitch, 5.7 trad route. Now it was May 11, and neither she nor I had climbed much since. Since she is young and strong (and I am neither at over 70), I thought she could lead Beckey's Wall, a 5.7 trad route on the granite in Little Cottonwood Canyon. However, she had not climbed the route before.

Leading the tricky and slippery first pitch, a ramp in a right-facing corner, I realized she was a bit off her game. But I said nothing, not wanting to interfere. As I watched from the belay anchor, she started up the near-vertical, left-facing corner of the second and final pitch. In my day, one would climb up the corner with a good crack for pro, and then, just before it becomes slightly overhanging, the climber would move left out onto the face where there is—or used to be—a good piton. She placed a good medium-size nut in the corner crack, just below the point where it starts becoming slightly overhanging. She climbed down some and moved out on the face, but could not find a piton. It had been removed. Apparently one is supposed to climb the crack directly now.

I remembered it was possible, but difficult, to place a small nut higher on the face, and suggested she do this. She could not find a good placement of any sort. She decided to go for it, and she climbed through the most difficult section. Now a good eight to ten feet above her last piece, the good nut, she began the traverse back into the corner crack, where it leans back above the steep section. She recalled, "If I fall here I'm in trouble." The traverse is tricky and she was now tired and fell.

I can't recall if I hauled in rope or not, but likely I managed to bring in some, as it is automatic. She rotated to face out, and the rope came tight just as she reached the sloping ramp, barely touching it, about 10 feet above me. She immediately pulled her left shoe off and said she had broken her foot, apparently having hit the wall on the way down. Had she hit the ramp it would have been much worse.

I lowered her to me and then down to the ledge at the start of the climb. She slid on her bum, keeping her left leg off the rock. There were a couple of other climbers at the ledge and they volunteered to retrieve the "saving" nut (now framed). Once at the trail, which is initially steep, it was a long "rumping" (arms and bum to move forward) trek to the parking lot, which is actually only a fairly short distance by hiking standards.

She was diagnosed with a shattered talus bone and fractured calcaneus in her left foot. She was non-weight-bearing for 12 weeks and was in a boot for four months. It was a long summer on crutches, and she is not pain-free, but she's still climbing. (Source: Peter Lev.)

Analysis

We thank this experienced climber for reporting. He thinks that one of the factors at work may have been that both parties were trying to please and/or defer to each other. Parents who are climbing with offspring need to consider this dynamic and try to agree when backing off might be the best solution. (Source: Jed Williamson.)

Images

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