



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Inadequate Protection, Top-Roping Error

Utah, Zion National Park, Kolob Canyon

On April 6 a female climber (approximately 20 years old) broke her leg after taking a large, swinging top-rope fall from a sport climb in Kolob Canyon. The climber was part of a group of seven that visited the very overhanging crag that day. The group had one lead climber, who hung draws and left top-ropes on the two easiest routes at the crag: a 5.10+ and 5.11-. None of the other climbers in the group was able to complete these routes on top-rope, and each climber cleaned the quickdraws to his or her respective high point, leaving fewer directionals for each subsequent climber. At some point each climber swung away from the wall and was unable to regain it.

The lead climber cleaned these two routes, then led a wildly overhanging 5.12a, resting at each bolt. On his way down, he cleaned all of the quickdraws, leaving the rope hanging directly from the anchors to the ground, about 40 to 50 feet from the base of the wall. The victim then began climbing the 12a on top-rope with no quickdraws in place as directionals. She climbed to the first bolt, asked for her belayer to take, and fell. She swung about 40 feet out from the wall and impacted a rock, breaking her left leg. Another party at the crag made sure the group had adequate insulation, water and headlamps, and hiked out to notify park officials. Rescuers responded and the victim was evacuated from the canyon that night.

ANALYSIS

The victim's uncontrolled swing could have been prevented by leaving some quickdraws in as directional anchors. The draws were removed because the lead climber doubted that any of his friends would be able to complete the route. The injured climber later told the others that she knew it was a bad idea to climb the route without directionals, but had deferred to her more experienced friend.

Other contributing factors include a large group of inexperienced climbers at a remote, backcountry crag, top-roping through worn fixed anchors in soft sandstone, and lack of first-aid training. [Source: Ben Iseman, witnessing party.]

Images



The severely overhanging climbs of Kolob Canyon require directionals for safe top-roping.

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