



Fall On Rock, Bolt Failure – Rope Soloing

California, Owens River Gorge

Scott Sederstrom (44) fell to his death on March 13 when a bolt failed on Life in Electric Larvae Land (5.10b) at Silent Pillar Wall in Owens River Gorge.

When Sederstrom did not return that evening, his fiancée drove to the Lower Gorge parking lot, where she found his van and dog. Inyo Country Search and Rescue began an organized search in the morning. About an hour into the search, a family friend of Sederstrom's found his body at the base of the climb.

Sederstrom was on the ground, with a stick clip attached to his harness and an eight-foot loop of slack between the tie-in point on his harness and Grigri attached to his belay loop. A quickdraw was on the rope within the loop, with a bolt hanger (missing its bolt) clipped to the other end of the quickdraw. The evidence suggests that Sederstrom was using the stick clip to go bolt to bolt—unclipping the bolt below as he went and using the Grigri to ascend his short loop of rope to the bolt above him—when the third bolt on the climb failed. A Mini Traxion device was found in his pack, suggesting he was planning to set up a fixed line for top-rope soloing. Sederstrom fell 25 to 30 feet to the ground, suffering trauma to his head. He was not wearing a helmet. (Sources: Rock & Ice, Dan McDevitt, Marty Lewis, and Greg Barnes.)

Analysis

The bolt in question was not a standard 3/8-inch, five-piece expansion bolt; rather, it was a 5/16-inch buttonhead bolt (a pound-in compression bolt). The buttonhead bolt snapped approximately half an inch into its hole. Inspection of the bolt revealed corrosion below the surface and that the bolt may have been fractured prior to the accident.

While most modern five-piece and glue-in style bolts are strong and reliable (when placed correctly in good rock), climbers should be suspect of any older bolts, which are often not drilled deeply. Age greatly affects the integrity of most bolts; this one was likely placed on the first ascent, over 20 years ago.

The climber could have prevented this accident by implementing some form of redundancy (clipping into more than one bolt) or a true self-belay (utilizing an anchor near the ground) into his rope-solo system. Instead, he put his faith in single points of protection, well off the ground. It's impossible to say if a helmet would have saved Sederstrom after falling from such a height. (Source: The Editors.)

Images



The fractured third bolt from Life in Electric Larvae Land. Note the corrosion below the surface of the bolt head.



The third bolt hole on Life in Electric Larvae Land. The rear half of the bolt can still be seen embedded in the rock. The rock scarring below the hole is likely at least partially from the installation of the bolt, but may have been enlarged during the bolt failure.

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