



AAC Publications

Fall On Rock, Lowering Error – Rope Too Short

Kentucky, Red River Gorge, Motherlode

On September 26 I fell about 55 feet while lowering from a session on the Madness (5.13c), which I was hoping might be my 1,500th route in the Red River Gorge. Once I realized I was falling, I cursed, straightened up, got my feet underneath me, and had just enough time to think “feet shoulder width apart, knees bent, back straight, head up” before my feet hit the ground. This was essential to my “successful” landing.

My knees struck my chest and knocked my breath away. I crumpled into a ball on the ground. When I opened my eyes I saw that my right arm was facing the wrong way, and that there were two rocks on either side of my head that I had somehow narrowly missed. Since the arm wasn't painful yet, I grabbed the flopping hand, paired up the bones, and set it into place. I tried to hold it there while attempting to roll onto my side. Neither operation was successful. The arm sprang back into its previously backward position, and I was still lying on my chest. Now I was in a lot of pain. I was pretty sure something in my back was broken. Luckily, someone at the crag that day had a satellite phone and the local rescue squad was called right away. They arrived surprisingly soon afterward.

As it turns out, my back was indeed fractured, my arm was broken, and my elbow was chipped. I was non-ambulatory, so the local rescue squad, along with my friends, carried me out in a Stokes basket, just as I had carried out many before during my rescue career. It was a humbling and embarrassing experience.

Analysis

Sometimes it is a big dumb mistake that causes an accident and sometimes, as in this case, it can happen after several small safety procedures are missed. I had chosen a fat older rope as I began to work the moves on the Madness, without taking into account that I had cut worn-out sections from this rope a couple of times. I had even used this this very rope on the Madness, but I'd never gotten all the way to the anchors with it. When I transferred this rope from one tarp to another, I overlooked tying both ends of the rope to the tarp.

A 70-meter rope is required for this route, and I estimate I'd previously cut five or six meters from each end. During the descent, I was talking to my belayer, discussing how optimistic I was regarding the route. At about 40 feet from the ground, I reached for the top of a small tree to turn myself in the air and face the cliff. My belayer was listening to me and watching me reach for the tree when the end of the rope shot through his belay device. Although my partner and I had over 52 years of combined climbing experience, experience isn't always enough. The importance of following safety procedures cannot be overemphasized:

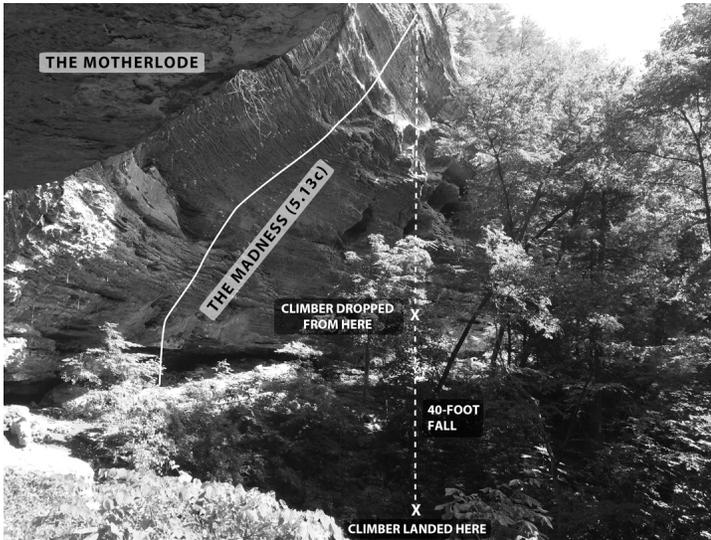
- 1) Use appropriate equipment. Make sure the rope is long enough to ascend and descend the route you are climbing.
- 2) Close the system. Tie a stopper knot, tie into a rope bag, or tie into your belayer.
- 3) Pay attention while belaying. The climber's safety is your responsibility from the second his feet leave the ground until he is safely back on terra firma.

4) Hold your brake hand on the rope well away from an assisted-braking belay device. If the rope were to slip through your hand, there still might be a chance the device would lock on the leftover rope.

5) Be prepared. Get medical training, know your surroundings, and carry a cell/sat phone that works where you are, if possible. (Source: Blake Bowling.)

Blake Bowling was interviewed about this incident in Episode 2 of the Sharp End podcast.

Images



Solid white line marks the Madness (5.13c) at the Motherlode. Dotted line marks the lowering path and the X marks the approximate spot where the climber began falling because his rope was too short.

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