



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock, Belayer Error

Kentucky, Muir Valley, Tectonic Wall

During the early evening on Saturday, October 4, a female climber (20) was leading the sport route Plate Tectonics (5.9). When she was between the second and third bolt, about 26 feet off the ground, she fell. Neither the climber nor the belayer was wearing a helmet. The climber impacted the ground, hitting first on her feet then falling back onto her butt. Observers reported that she freefell with no significant arresting from her rope.

The belayer, a 20-year-old female, was observed to be inattentive to her climber and using poor belay technique with an ATC. Several climbers close to the scene reported that, at the time of the fall, the belayer was holding the rope with both hands up above the belay device in a such a way that no bight of rope was formed over the lip of the ATC. When the falling climber pulled the slack out of the rope, it simply continued to pay out through the belay device until she hit the ground. The climber sustained non-life-threatening injuries to her back, pelvis, and feet.

Bystanders ran to the nearest Muir Valley Emergency Radio Station and called for help. Within four minutes, Muir Valley Rescue (MVR) personnel were on scene. MVR volunteers assisted in treating, packaging, and transporting the victim in a litter to a waiting ambulance on Muir's Emergency Road. From there, she was transported by ambulance to a nearby medical facility for further treatment.

ANALYSIS

This is a classic mistake made by inexperienced belayers that can be simply summed up: no bight, no brake. Oddly, this two-hands-above-the-ATC technique is sometimes taught in climbing gyms. Because many beginning gym climbers are on a top-rope, they don't generate the force in a fall that a lead climber does, and the belayer can usually arrest the fall even without forming the bight with the brake hand. When the belayer needs to catch a much bigger load with a falling leader, the sloppy technique can fail. (Source: Rick Weber, Muir Valley.)

[Editor's note: According to Rick Weber, more than 40,000 climbers visited Muir Valley during 2014. In addition to the incident reported here, there were six other emergency calls that required first aid and trips to the ER, but were relatively minor in nature. One other climber experienced a severe but non-life-threatening injury when he fumbled a clip and fell with the rope coiled around his thumb and index finger, causing an avulsion of the finger and part of his thumb. The digit fragments were found right below the climb, kept cool with a cold pack—and then on ice in the ambulance—and brought to the hospital with the climber. The digits were successfully reimplanted, allowing the climber, a surgeon, to return to work and climbing at full strength.]

Images

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