Fall on Ice – Ascending Error, Darkness

Vermont, Mt. Pisgah (Lake Willoughby), The Tablets

On December 27, 2013, at the base of the center Tablet at Lake Willoughby, my friend John (37) and I (32) congratulated ourselves after a 60-meter rappel to the ground, shortly after sunset. We had just finished our third two-pitch ice route that day—one route on each of the Tablets. It was our seventh day of ice climbing for the season, only our second winter of ice climbing. I had three years of trad climbing experience and a good working knowledge of rope systems and self-rescue. John was one of my primary climbing partners over the past year; he had come to climbing only two years earlier. He lacked much of the climbing experience I had, though he took a course in crevasse rescue in preparation for a Mt. Rainier climb we had done together the previous spring. He was also an avid reader of climbing books.

I went to pull the rappel ropes and found they would not budge. I confirmed with John that I was pulling on the correct rope. We decided to pull together, hoping to overcome the unknown obstacle, but it was to no avail. I decided to pull on the other end of the rope and found that it slid with little effort for about a foot and then stopped. The ropes would not move any farther in either direction.

I thought back to how I had threaded our ropes at the top before rappelling. We had rappelled off a tree that had two or three loops of tubular webbing tied around the base and no rappel rings. Being thrifty and not wanting to leave a carabineer, I had taken one rope and threaded it from bottom to top between the tree and webbing. I then tied our ropes together with an overhand knot, leaving two-foot-long tails. On one of the tails I tied a backup knot so the primary overhand knot would not roll over itself. With this setup, we would be pulling the rope up and over the webbing around the tree. However, our pulling apparently had cinched the webbing tighter around the trunk and was pinching the rope with sufficient force to prevent it from being pulled through.

One of us had to ascend the rappel lines and fix the jam, and I began setting up for this. Knowing that John had voiced a desire to assume more responsibility with our rappels, I offered the job to him, which he reluctantly took. As I was tying the knots and preparing the system, I hastily explained what I was doing and how the system would work. In retrospect, I recall thinking it was odd that John was listening to me as if he had not ascended a rope before. He had taken a crevasse rescue class, after all.

John headed up the rope, reaching a large ledge about 15 to 20 feet up, and then walked across this before starting up the remaining 150 feet or so. I had occupied myself with some trail mix and hot water and was not paying much attention at this point. However, it was clear to me that he was becoming frustrated, as he began shouting down that it was going to take too long to climb the rope. He suggested we leave the rope overnight and deal with it in the morning.

About 20 to 25 feet above the large ledge, he came to a rocky overhang. He felt it would be easier to go around the overhang instead of passing over it. He held on to the rope and was reaching out with his crampon and beginning to pull himself over when he suddenly began to fall. I heard a scream and looked up to see a headlamp tumbling in the dark and landing on the ledge out of my sight. I grabbed my ice tools and began climbing up to the ledge, shouting to John, “Don’t move!” I was relieved to hear him shout back, “I am OK, I am OK.”

At the ledge, John was standing and reported that he was not experiencing any pain. He did not know

why he fell. However, he recalled that when he fell he was holding on to the rappel lines and that he held onto them all the way to the ledge.

ANALYSIS

A number of factors were at play. First the ropes were improperly set up for a clean pull after the rappel. This easily could have been prevented if we had checked to make sure they slid smoothly before rappelling to the bottom. [Editor's note: Attaching carabiners or rappel rings to the webbing and threading the rope through them is a better way to ensure a smooth pull and protect the webbing.]

Second, we were not completely aware of each other's skill levels. At John's crevasse rescue course, apparently they had only talked about ascending a rope and did not do any hands-on practice. Had I known this, I would not have suggested that he ascend the ropes and fix the rappel. Third, John was frustrated by the delay and was not mentally focused on the task at hand.

Fourth, when John began to fall he was grabbing the ropes above both prusiks. This pushed the prusiks down the rope with him as he fell and prevented them from being weighted and potentially stopping his fall.

Finally, John had not tied back up knots in the rope that would have prevented him from falling all the way to the ledge. (Source: Chris.)

[Editor's note: Backup knots could have caused problems when rappelling back down the ropes after they were freed, especially in the dark. A better safeguard when ascending icy rappel ropes is to use a metal/mechanical ascender, such as a Tibloc, in place of one prusik hitch. These also are less vulnerable to slipping if a climber inadvertently grabs the rope. This 2013 incident did not make it into Accidents 2014, and we've published it here for its instructional value. It is not included in our 2014 tables.]

Images

The two-pitch left and center Tablet routes at Lake Willoughby.

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