



AAC Publications

Fall on Ice – Anchor Failure

Washington, Snoqualmie Pass, Kiddie Cliff

On December 3 I left the Alpentel parking lot around 10 a.m. with a good friend to find some ice to top-rope. This trip was training for bigger alpine ice objectives to follow in 2015. After about two hours of hiking and hunting, we found a gully with a frozen creek and decided to rope up and ascend it. We simul-climbed through easy 20°–30° ice with occasional steps about eight feet high, placing ice screws along the way.

After a couple of hundred feet we encountered an ice flow that was about 40 feet high with a towering cedar directly above it, and decided it was the perfect location for a top-rope. My partner ascended the gully to the right of the ice and traversed through low-angle terrain covered in shrubs. For an anchor, he tied a 30-foot length of retired climbing rope around the tree with a bowline and attached a locking carabiner to the end of the rope using a figure 8 on a bight. He then rappelled to the base of the ice.

We climbed the ice for the next three hours, each taking at least four laps on different parts of the formation. After my last lap, my partner suggested I climb back up to the anchor to clean it. I agreed and enjoyed a final lap.

At the top, the ice ended at a ledge with three feet of vertical dirt terminating in a 30° slope at about my hip level. The copious shrubbery and thin, powdery snow covering the ground left no purchase for hands or tools to mantel onto the slope. I decided instead to clip my tools to my harness, grasp the end of the rope going down to my partner, and haul myself up the short distance to the anchor. I took a couple steps to my left to get directly in line of pull with the anchor and hauled in about a foot of rope. My belayer took the slack, and I pulled a second time. As I slid my hand up the rope a third time, I felt slack, noticed the bushes above me shaking, and immediately began falling through the air.

I do not remember hitting the ground. I slid down the gully 35 feet until the rope came tight against my belayer, who arrested my fall. I was unconscious for about a minute and came to in a panic, repeatedly asking my belayer, “Did I fall? Where are we?” As I began to grasp the situation, I told him I could not feel my legs.

I was wearing softshell pants, a base layer, thin puffy coat, and hard shell. My partner pulled the bivy pad out of his pack and placed it under me, along with the pack. He carried two puffy coats and placed both around me. Then he said, “I am going for help,” and he was gone. It was 4:30 in the afternoon, and the sun was starting to set.

As I lay on the ice I fought to bring my breathing under control. Under my head there was a depression in the ice so I could not rest my head without tilting it back. Considering that I had a badly broken back, this was very uncomfortable. I pulled down the length of rope attached to me and stuffed it behind my head. This improved things somewhat, but I was unable to shift my body and I had to hold my head up with my neck and abdominal muscles. A short while later, I noticed that one of the jackets had blown off me, and I began to feel cold. I knew I had a spinal cord injury and should not move, but I decided that I was more afraid of the cold, and I pushed myself upright until I could grab the jacket and wrap myself in it again.

I watched the colors of the sky change and the stars come out. I began to shake with the cold. Every few minutes, I would call for help. About three hours after my fall, I heard a helicopter in the distance and hoped that it was here for me. I continued to yell for help. Another hour passed, and I began to hear voices far away. A group from the Seattle Mountain Rescue Team soon arrived, climbed up above me, and began to rig some ropes. Soon one of them rappelled down and put me in a cervical collar. I was able to rest my head for the first time in four hours.

The helicopter returned and lowered a paramedic. The team moved me onto a back board, and I was hauled away from the scene and flown straight to the hospital. My injuries included a mild concussion, six broken ribs, and five broken vertebrae, including the displacement of my lower spine, resulting in a severed spinal cord.

ANALYSIS

After hours of discussion with my climbing partner, I believe there are two possibilities to explain the anchor failure. The first was that the screw gate on the single locking carabiner attaching the climbing ropes to the anchor somehow opened as we moved the ropes back and forth, and then my rope popped out of the carabiner as I tried to pull onto the slope below the anchor. The other possibility is that the section of climbing rope used for the anchor either broke or the knot (a bowline) tying this rope around the tree came undone. The anchor was not examined during the night of the accident, and when friends returned several days later the anchor rope was gone, either picked up as trash by the SAR team or by other climbers.

Whichever theory explains the failure of this anchor, there are two primary takeaways: 1) top-rope anchors should have redundancy throughout the system; and 2) anchors should be checked regularly when they are weighted and unweighted during a day of climbing.

I suffered a potentially fatal fall due to an unusual anchor failure. I will likely never walk again, but otherwise I am in good health. I'm lucky that my back broke near the bottom of my spine and not in my neck, so I can still move my fingers and do my job. I'm lucky that I did not suffer a traumatic brain injury, and that I can still recognize my mother and tell her how much I love her. My helmet is missing a chunk of hard plastic, and the inner shock-absorbing material was broken at every intersection. It saved my life. (Source: Josh Hancock.)

Images

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