



AAC Publications

Rockfall – Failure to Test Holds

Wyoming, Grand Teton, Upper Exum Ridge

On July 27, Joshua Smith and I (both 32) attempted the Grand Teton via the Upper Exum Ridge.

While climbing the route, I sustained severe injuries to my left foot when I pulled a loose boulder down. The incident occurred in a section of the climb known as the Wind Tunnel. While surmounting a short wall and pulling onto a ledge, I placed my hand on a large, flat boulder; as I pulled down, the boulder shifted and slid toward me. I quickly fell backward several feet onto a patch of snow, landing on my back with my legs in front of me, my feet pointing outward. The boulder continued to slide and impacted my left foot, mostly near the heel. Based on the size of the boulder I estimate it to have been 800 to 1,000 pounds.

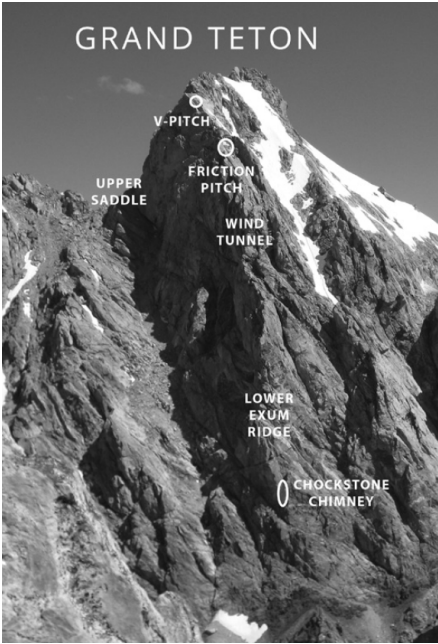
I spent about 30 minutes in shock and extreme pain. I had left my prescription-strength pain medication at camp, but Josh had naproxen, and I took a couple of tablets. After debating what to do, Josh and I chose to “retreat upward,” toward the summit, rather than down the route. I managed to support myself enough to stand on my right leg and ease weight onto my left foot. I found I could support about a quarter of my weight on the ball and toes of my foot. We slowly scrambled upward. Below the Friction Pitch, with the help of a doctor in another party, we wrapped my foot in an ACE bandage and tape to stabilize it. My sock was soaked in blood (from two puncture wounds, we later discovered). We continued up the Upper Exum without further incident, with Josh leading all the pitches.

At approximately 2 p.m. we began our descent from the summit via the Owen-Spalding Route, aided down the rappels by another party. By this time my foot and ankle had become extremely swollen and the bandage was soaked with blood. Slowly scrambling down the descent gully, we reached the Lower Saddle at 5:30 p.m., roughly nine hours after the rockfall. At the Lower Saddle, we informed Exum Mountain Guides about my situation and discussed with them whether to call for a rescue. Suspecting fractures, I eventually placed a call for rescue and a helicopter arrived 30 minutes later. This carried me down to the valley, and Josh hiked out with all of our gear. The injuries to my left foot included soft-tissue damage, two puncture wounds, and significant bone bruising to my heel, ankle, and toes. There were no fractures.

ANALYSIS

The cause of the accident was my failure to inspect and test holds. I became complacent during the climb, especially during the unroped portions. Although I am an experienced rock climber, I am fairly new to alpine climbing. The hazards in the alpine environment are more numerous and the consequences are more severe, even on a relatively well-traveled climb like the Upper Exum. (Source: Brett Verhoef.)

Images



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