



AAC Publications

Fall On Rock – Off-Route, Inadequate Protection

Colorado, Boulder, Third Flatiron

I was injured in a rock climbing accident on December 13. We were climbing Friday's Folly (5.7) on the back of the Third Flatiron. I've climbed the Third Flatiron probably over 100 times, but almost always soloing the East Face and either reversing the route or downclimbing the Southwest Chimney. I had never done Friday's or any adjacent routes. I was climbing with my friend Pat, and both of us have been climbing over 20 years. A route such as Friday's should be well within my comfort zone, and I led the first pitch with no problem. I established a belay at a fixed eyebolt at Friday's Folly Ledge, pulled up the remaining rope, and belayed Pat until he joined me.

Pat put me on belay and I went up and left from the bolt to start the second pitch. I saw what looked like a runout section above, didn't think it was a good idea for me that day, and downclimbed to the belay. I then went up and right into a dihedral with a wide crack. [Editor's note: Friday's Folly is usually done as a single pitch, ending at the eyebolt about 75 feet up. There are two variations to the rarely climbed second pitch, and the right-hand version goes farther right than the line attempted by the author.] The climbing started low angle, then steepened. I placed some gear, including a slung chockstone. I then placed a number 1 Camalot between a microwave-size block and the main wall—this was about a body length above the slung chockstone. I had poked and prodded the block and detected no motion. I yank-tested the cam, and it seemed stable, again with no motion.

The climbing overhead looked difficult: a steep, overhanging chimney or semicave, with some large, threatening boulders strewn within. It seemed significantly harder than 5.7, and not really like a "normal" route. I saw a potential line going to the left, with an overhanging section of rock forming a short offwidth section before the angle eased off. Again, it looked harder than 5.7, and I wasn't enthusiastic about falling on the cam beside the block. I could have downclimbed to the belay and explored other options or just rappelled to the ground. But I'm a bit of a stickler for climbing ethics or style: I thought it was a two-pitch climb, and I hadn't really "done" it until I did another pitch.

I thought that if I attached a sling to the cam and stood in it, maybe I could reach handholds that would allow me to climb left across the offwidth. I decided to "take" before attaching the sling. I yelled "take" to Pat, then "take tight." Here's where things really went wrong. I saw the cam pull out of the rock and the chockstone coming toward me. I remember thinking "oh shit" and that I should try to avoid the falling chockstone as I fell. According to Pat, I fell 15 to 20 feet, slamming into the slabby terrain below as the rope caught at the slung chockstone. The block I had pulled out drove into my back and then shattered on a ledge, sending fragments to the ground.

Fortunately, Pat was well to the left and wasn't hit. I was knocked out. My lack of motion suggested to Pat that I was dead or nearly so. He yelled for help. Perhaps surprisingly to him, I regained consciousness after some seconds, moaning and communicating in grunts and broken words. Pat was able to lower me to near his belay point, but I was too far to the side to be lowered directly to him. I was bleeding from a head wound. Not as obvious, but significant: My back was broken, and my left shoulder and upper arm were wrecked. And some minor issues: a small liver laceration, smashed thumb, and miscellaneous cuts and bruises. Luckily, the broken back was just a broken bone—no neurological damage. The head wound was mostly superficial.

I was able to swing close enough for Pat to grab me and secure me to the bolt. We're taught not to move people with possible spinal cord issues, and Pat could have waited with me for rescuers to

arrive, or he could have left me attached to the bolt while he rappelled to the ground. But Pat made the decision to get me to the ground as quickly as reasonably possible. My head injury looked very serious, and it appeared that I might have significant internal injuries. He thought my total condition required getting treatment ASAP.

Pat rigged a chest harness and got me into a tolerably comfortable position to be lowered. Once I was on the ground, he fixed the rope to the bolt, and rappelled. I recall increasing consciousness and pain. Some guy in the area gave me warm clothes and encouragement. The Rocky Mountain Rescue Group appeared in about 45 minutes, as dusk settled in.

I'm not the best person to give an account of the rescue—I got a lovely view of the sky as it turned from gray to black, and of the often sweat-drenched faces of the many hardworking rescuers who rotated turns carrying and lowering the litter. Eventually we made it to an ambulance and then to Boulder Community Hospital. It looks like I will make a good recovery.

Analysis

I was not wearing my helmet. The helmet-averse who read this can learn from my mistake. Consider that I lost consciousness from impact—always serious—and that it easily could have been worse. A helmet also may have allowed me to participate more actively in the rescue and help Pat evaluate whether immediate lowering was the right action. Risk-taking in partnered rope climbing affects both climbers. There is a saying: You don't have to wear a helmet, but I don't have to belay you either.

Every accident may suggest various preventive measures, from the overly general ("Don't rock climb") to the overly specific ("Don't climb the second pitch of Friday's Folly"). I'm still processing this one, but my main advice is to be super-careful with loose rock and ultra-careful when your protection interacts with loose rock.

Images

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