



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock - Failure to Test Hold

North Carolina, Linville Gorge, Shortoff Mountain

During the early afternoon of Monday, March 10, Jackson Depew (23) and Zach Patterson (24) were climbing Maginot Line (5.7) on Shortoff Mountain, at the south end of the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area. Jackson was leading the third pitch when he found himself slightly off-route. A hold broke, causing him to fall. Zach was able to control Jackson's fall, but not before he dropped about 35 feet onto a narrow ledge approximately 200 feet up on the route, sustaining multiple injuries that included a concussion, broken leg, fractured pelvis, tailbone, three broken ribs, and a collapsed lung. Because of his condition he was unable to self-rescue. At this time Zach called me (Wesley Calkins) and my climbing partner Dylan Johnston to request assistance.

Because I am intimately acquainted with Shortoff Mountain, I knew exactly where my friends were. When I arrived at the top of Maginot Line, there were three search and rescue personnel on scene. My first interaction with these gentlemen, unfortunately, conformed to every other interaction I have had with them. At their best, they are honorable, well-intentioned volunteers, but they do not spend much time in fifth-class terrain. I asked who was in charge. They didn't know and didn't offer me any plan or directive. Fearing for my friend and unsure what these three gentlemen could possibly do for him, I proceeded to set up a rappel to go down to Jackson. At no time did they direct me not to descend.

I attached my climbing rope to a tree and rappelled approximately 100 feet on a single line with a Grigri. At this point I built a midpoint anchor for the rappel line and continued another 60 feet to Jackson. Dylan also descended the line and positioned himself about 20 feet above.

Jackson was lying in a fetal position. I immediately could tell that he was in a lot of pain. Thanks to my training in technical rescue and wilderness first aid, I began to work. First, I made Jackson safe from falling any farther. I took some gear from his harness and built an anchor about 20 feet above him in a crack system. I secured Jackson to the anchor with his rope. I began assessing and monitoring his condition. I knew that I would not be able to extricate him from the cliff on my own. I knew from his condition that time was a factor and we needed to get him to advanced medical care as quickly as possible. And I knew that the terrain above would not allow for an efficient raising system.

I made cell phone contact with people on top of the cliff and incident command. I gave patient assessments and guided the rescuers where to place their ropes to reach the victim. I tried to be as precise and as helpful as possible.

Poor Zach had been down there belaying for hours. I swapped Jackson's rope out for my own, so that Jackson and I were secured by my rappel line. Then I directed Dylan to bring Zach up on the original climbing rope and get him off the cliff. Plus, I knew that I needed to get off the cliff eventually, so I also told Dylan to be ready to belay me up once the rescuers had taken over. I busied myself with Jackson, knowing that I had a belay no matter what the rescuers did or didn't do.

I made several phone calls to communicate Jackson's progress, so it is difficult to remember when I was first instructed to leave the scene by incident command. However, no one seemed to have a problem when I responded that I would leave the ledge as soon as someone from the rescue squad arrived to care for Jackson. It never occurred to me that they actually wanted me to abandon Jackson without handing him off to a rescuer. I deduced that the incident commander was not on scene,

because I could not fathom a directive that instructed me to leave an injured person.

When the first rescuer finally arrived, the rope was too short to reach the victim. It dangled 20 feet above our heads. The rescuer didn't know how to communicate his predicament to the people upstairs. He was doing the best he could, so I carefully directed him on how to use my climbing rope to rappel the remaining distance to reach Jackson. Once I had him on the ledge, he took out a massive first-aid kit, and once I saw him reach down and touch Jackson I didn't feel anything but gratitude, admiration, and relief. Thank God, I thought.

The first thing the rescuer told me was incident command wanted me to leave the scene. Jackson moaned some feeble protests, but I responded by saying that definitive care had arrived and that I needed to let the rescuers take over.

But the rescuer had transferred to my climbing rope during his descent, and Jackson was still tied to it as well, and both of them were anchored to the crack system 20 feet above their heads. I honestly didn't think the rescuer understood any of this very well. I was reluctant to leave and I wasn't sure how or when he expected me to vacate the ledge. It sounded like more rescuers were on their way, along with a helicopter. It never occurred to me to prusik the line, and the need for my immediate departure was never relayed to me. I told him that I was planning to climb out as soon as they could free up my climbing rope. But they never did. So I simply attached myself to the anchor that was 20 feet away. At the time, it felt like the safest thing for me to do was to wait there.

The helicopter eventually arrived, hovered near the cliff to assess the situation, and then lowered a rescuer with a basket to the ledge.

The two rescuers began packing the victim for extraction. Another paramedic was lowered out of the helicopter and attached the hook to the basket and lifted Jackson away. Then the helicopter lifted away the other two rescuers and I was all alone. I pulled up the now empty rope end, tied in, called up to confirm my belay from Dylan, cleaned all the gear, and climbed with Jackson's rack, my rack, Jackson's pack, and my pack.

When I arrived at the top, I wasn't greeted by rescue personnel, thanked, cared for, or supported. Instead, I was detained by a U.S. Forest Service ranger. He was visibly upset with me and my partner over the situation. I was emotional and more than slightly irritated. The ranger instructed me to hike down the mountain with him. During the two-mile hike, I managed to explain the entire situation that afternoon, and the ranger agreed that something did not sound right—he said that he had been called to the scene to detain a belligerent civilian who was interfering with a professional rescue.

The silent, indifferent eyes of all the rescuers at the trailhead helped me understand what had happened. I believe my actions, my critical thinking, and my decisiveness had embarrassed the search and rescue team members. I had inadvertently robbed them of some pride. The ranger pulled me aside and said, "Look, I admire what you did up there, but I have to do something here, because they are expecting me to arrest you. I'm going to write you a citation for disorderly conduct and you shouldn't worry about it. It's not a criminal citation, it's just a fine. If you pay it, it disappears." Believe it or not, I was grateful. If he had just believed everything the rescuers said, I would have been in jail. As it was, I was free to get in my car and leave, a gesture for which I am immensely grateful.

ANALYSIS

Many times in western North Carolina, you have to run out a pitch—or you may choose to run it out because of your comfort level with the climb. However, any number of things can happen while climbing—including breaking a hold, like in this incident—and protection should be placed conservatively to mitigate the risk of huge falls. (Source: Wesley Calkins.)

[Editor's note: This became a well-publicized and much-discussed incident. We contacted the local first responders for their side of the story but did not receive a response by publication date.]

Images

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