



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Inadequate Protection

Colorado, Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, Astro Dog

I (32 at the time, with 20 years of experience) broke my ankle in a lead fall in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison as the moon rose on September 25. I had been a bit cavalier when Jack Cody (age 30) and I rappelled off the south rim at sunrise to climb Astro Dog (V 5.11d) in a day. Jack and I had climbed enough routes in the Black that we felt very comfortable on its committing walls, where the only way home is to climb out. Astro Dog was supposed to be the warm-up route on a four-day trip.

It was dark by the time I started pitch ten—the crux. We knew we would be finishing by headlamp, but I'd hoped to have daylight for onsighting the glass-smooth stem corner. In spite of the darkness, I was certain I could hike the slippery moves, even with a backpack and tagline.

The crux boulder problem starts off a small ledge. I placed a bomber yellow Alien at waist-height from the ledge. However, I couldn't find solid gear that would keep me off the ledge if I fell. I placed a marginal brass nut in a shallow, flaring pin scar and pulled into a desperate layback. I was two inches from a fingerlock, with the brass nut at my waist, when I slipped. The nut popped, I fell about six feet, and I clipped the ledge with my right foot as the rope came tight. I sat on the ledge and rubbed my ankle. I'd shattered my talus bone and ripped some cartilage, but I didn't know that yet. I convinced myself it was a sprain. While catching my breath, I noticed some handholds behind me that I hadn't seen before and decided to try again.

This time I did what I should have done the first time: I stood in a sling from the yellow Alien at my waist and placed a micro-cam (number 00 C3 Camalot) that would keep me off the ledge. With good preclipped gear, I stepped back down to the ledge and fired the crux 30 feet to the top of the dihedral, where my ankle gave out for good. I was cross-stepping onto a slab when my foot turned into a noodle. No matter how much I willed my right foot to take weight, it just flopped to the side. I was 10 feet above my last gear and realized how foolish it would be to continue on one leg. I downclimbed and dropped onto the rope. Jack took over the lead. I finished the climb (several more pitches) by using my knee and grabbing gear whenever possible. Prusiking would have been more difficult and time-consuming because of the zigzag character of the pitches. When Jack finished the last pitch at 1 a.m., he tied off the rope and went to the truck parked nearby. He got jumars and aiders and lowered them down to me to spare me the effort of thrashing up a loose 5.9 chimney.

ANALYSIS

In retrospect, my overconfidence and hastiness were the main factors leading to the accident. I wish I'd taken a few extra minutes to evaluate the crux before launching into it. There is a tendency to feel rushed when darkness falls. However, it was already dark and the weather was stable—there was no real reason to rush. If I'd taken the extra time, I probably would have seen the proper sequence and maybe not have fallen at all. Also, my pride clouded my judgment. If I had stood in a sling and preplaced the micro-cam before the first try, I probably would not have hit the ledge.

We also made some good decisions that kept me safe overall: I picked an extremely reliable partner (Jack is an AMGA certified rock guide and solid 5.12 climber); we had headlamps and plenty of clothing, food and water; and the forecast was ideal. After the accident, we moved slowly and carefully, wary of our fatigue and the fact that we were in a bad position if Jack got hurt. Thankfully, because of all these good decisions, getting out with a broken ankle was more of a mini-adventure

than a rescue. (Source: Derek Franz.)

Images

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