



AAC Publications

An Untimely Slip

New River Gorge, Meadow River

On June 29, Chad Watkins (age 49) was attempting the crux of the route Big Top, a 5.12a trad climb in the Greatest Show area of the Meadow River Gorge. The nature of the crack requires foot placements near and just above gear. As Chad attempted to move upward, his left foot popped from the crack and came into contact with the lower carabiner of the quickdraw attached to his uppermost nut placement. The nose of the carabiner penetrated the back of his foot, just forward of the Achilles tendon, and caught on the Achilles and calcaneus (heel), thus arresting his fall. (Afterward, his belayer, Amanda Smith, said she felt no weight come onto the rope.) Chad managed to pull himself up off the carabiner and was lowered to the ground.

Nearby climbers, including a paramedic, assessed his injury, dressed the wound, and assisted in evacuation to the parking area using a two-man rope litter. Amazingly, Chad suffered no permanent damage—he received three stitches in the ER and was walking the next day and climbing within the week. (Sources: Chad Watkins, Amanda Smith, Jeremy Fox, and Chad Heddleston.)

ANALYSIS

The nature of the holds on this route required Chad to position his foot near his previous gear placements, and very likely running behind his rope. In this instance, there were no real options other than to continue to move up the route.

While not the case in this incident, there have been reports of penetrating injuries from climbers deliberately grabbing gear, usually quickdraws, in a misguided attempt to arrest a fall. This practice should be avoided as it may result in puncture wounds or degloving injuries (the traumatic removal of large areas of skin on the fingers or hand). Seeking better stances or holds, attempting to downclimb, or falling with hands outstretched usually is preferred over grabbing gear. (Source: R. Bryan Simon.)

Images



The carabiner that impaled Chat Watkins behind his Achilles tendon during a fall in the Meadow River Gorge.



Chat Watkins' heel after snagging a carabiner during a fall at the Meadow River Gorge.



Snagged Achilles

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