



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Lowering Error, Inadequate Belay

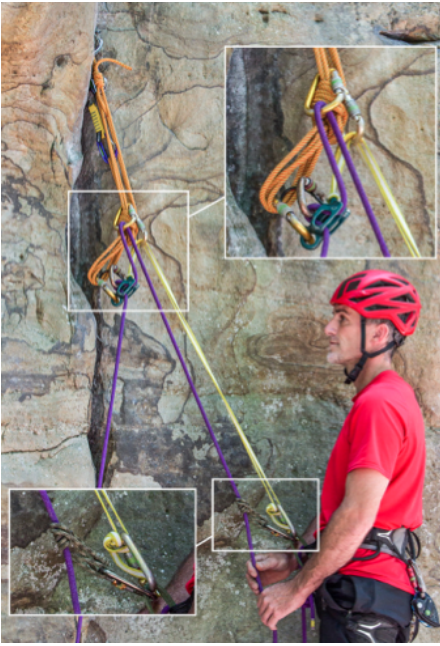
Colorado, Eldorado Canyon, The Naked Edge

Two experienced climbers, ages 31 and 28, were attempting the Naked Edge (5.11b) in August. The leader of the 5.11a first pitch belayed at a two-bolt anchor and set up to belay the second directly off the anchor with an ATC-Guide device in autoblock mode. After the second took tension to retrieve a stuck cam, he asked to be lowered a few feet before starting to climb again. The leader threaded a sling through the “release hole” of the device and redirected the sling through a carabiner clipped to one of the anchor bolts, so he could release the device and lower the second. In an email to Rock and Ice magazine, the climber said, “It took a lot of pull to get the ATC-Guide to release, but when it did, my partner [started falling]. I grabbed the brake side of the rope, but that didn’t help. I just got burns on my hand.... My partner stopped when he hit the ledge. I don’t think the belay system did much other than slow him down.” The second climber was lucky to escape with a minor concussion, abrasions, and bruised heels. (Source: Rock and Ice magazine.)

ANALYSIS

It is very difficult to control the speed when releasing an autoblocking belay device to lower in this fashion. As the manufacturer recommends, the belay must be backed up when the device is used in autoblock (guide) mode to lower a climber. This can be done either with a friction hitch connecting the belayer to the “up” rope (brake-hand side) running through the redirect (as shown in the illustration on the previous page) or by using a Munter hitch or a second belay device to belay the “up” rope off the belayer’s harness with one hand, while releasing the autoblock with the other hand and/or body weight. These techniques should not be learned on the fly. Practice them with real-world loads and full backup before relying on them to lower a climber. (Source: The Editors.)

Images



One method for backing up a lower from a direct belay with an autoblocking device. The weighted rope is redirected through the belay anchor and then backed up with a friction hitch clipped to the belayer's harness. Sterling Snyder

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