Lowering Error – Inexperience, Communication Issues

Colorado, Pikes Peak

On August 22 a female climber (age 39) was injured while being lowered from the anchor after top-roping a trad climb. She was in a climbing party of five exploring a granite crag near the Crags Trailhead. Just below the anchor, it was necessary to lower over a large overlap to reach the slab below. As she pushed off the lip, the climber free-fell to the slab, approximately eight feet down, fracturing the calcaneus and talus bones in her heel and ankle. The climber and belayer (age 29) had met through an online post and had not climbed together before the day of the incident. (Source: Mountain Project.)

ANALYSIS

This incident was discussed at length on a Mountain Project forum. The parties involved disagreed about the causes and conclusions. The analysis below outlines general actions that can be taken by climbers and belayers to avoid this type of incident.

In this particular incident, the source of slack in the system cannot be determined definitively, and likely resulted from a combination of factors. Slabs and other rock features can create friction in the system that make it difficult to feel the weight of the lowering climber (or can disguise the fact that the climber has unweighted the system). Before lowering over the lip in this incident, the climber expressed that she hesitated, a pause that the belayer stated he did not feel and may have caused slack to be added. While lowering, the rope can shift over features, suddenly creating slack. When lowering from a slab (little weight on the rope) to vertical or overhanging rock, some rope stretch should be anticipated, and a pendulum swing may also result. For all of these reasons, a belayer should anticipate sudden additional force while lowering over a roof, overlap, or corner, or anytime the climber is out of view. If the climber unweights the rope by standing or grabbing the rock, the belayer should take out any slack in the system and sit in the harness until the climber communicates that he or she is ready to continue lowering. This minimizes rope stretch once lowering recommences.

The climber should clearly and loudly communicate with the belayer anytime he or she unweights the rope or needs to maneuver around an obstacle. Once the climber is ready to resume lowering, a hard “take” should be requested to eliminate any stretch or slack that could be introduced into the system. On lower-angle or vertical terrain, when the belayer is out of view, consider a rappel descent instead of lowering.

Prior to climbing, the belayer and climber should discuss the climb and the descent to understand the particular risks of the route and to communicate preferences. This is especially important when climbing with new partners or strangers. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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