



AAC Publications

Lowering Error – Inexperience, Communication Problems

Colorado, Turkey Rocks, Turkey Perch

On February 7, a female climber with two years of climbing experience executed a slow but clean lead of Left Handed Jew, a 5.7 trad route. I was top-rope belaying a climber 20 feet to the left of their route. During the climb, several observers noted that verbal communication between the lead climber and her belayer (the climber's boyfriend, also with two years of experience) was mildly problematic, requiring repeated back and forth exchanges to clarify communication. When she reached the top of the climb, the leader set up a gear anchor.

At this point, the climber and belayer began discussing a descent/lowering plan for the first time. The leader and belayer were not in visual contact, due to the rounded, sloping terrain at the top of the route. The belayer suggested that he "just climb it," so that they could get down and eat lunch. I correctly inferred his intention to be that she pull up the rope and give him a belay from the top of the route, followed by a short walk-off. This, however, was not understood by the leader. The belayer took the leader off and called "off belay." A moment later, we heard a crashing sound and looked to see the climber rapidly tumbling down the wall. We shouted for the belayer to stop the fall, and he managed to grab the rope bare-handed, arresting the climber 15 feet from the ground.

The belayer was unable to lower the climber further due to a very high amount of rope drag. I lowered my climber to the ground, climbed up to the injured climber, and pulled her down by body-weighting her harness.

The response from the climbers at the crag was composed and effective, with approximately a dozen climbers organizing to aid the victim, several with wilderness first responder training. The climber was neurologically intact, denied impacting her head (she was not wearing a helmet), and was found to have a small, bleeding puncture wound on her buttocks. She reported pain in the arm, back and the sacrum. Though able to walk unassisted briefly, persistent lightheadedness resulted in the decision by local fire department personnel to evacuate by helicopter. The injured climber was later diagnosed with a fractured sacrum. (Source: Mark Williams, R.N.)

ANALYSIS

This incident could have been avoided easily by discussing the climb and descent options and agreeing on a plan before the climber left the ground. When communication is difficult, simple climbing commands and using each other's names will reduce confusion. Before lowering, ensure that you are on belay before removing your direct connection to the anchors. Have your belayer pull out any slack in the system so it is obvious he or she is holding your weight. Friction in the system might make it difficult to know that you are on belay, so you can control the descent by grabbing the rope that runs between the belayer and the anchors, and feeding it through the anchors until the belay is visually confirmed.

In this incident, the belayer was able to arrest the fall by bare-handing the rope without burning his hands even slightly. I later seconded the route on their rope in order to clean their gear. I cleaned a total of 17 cams on a 70-foot route with less than ideal use of extensions. The amount of rope drag was truly unusual for such a short climb, but likely prevented a ground fall. (Sources: Mark Williams and the Editors.)

Images



A climber leads the route Left Handed Jew at Turkey Perch. Dougald MacDonald

Article Details

Author	Mark Williams R.N.
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	69
Page	65
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Accident reports