



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Climbing Unroped, Failure to Place Protection

Colorado, Poudre Canyon, North of the Crystal Wall

On March 7, three climbers with one to five years of experience each—Patrick Keatly (19), Travis Grimes (22), and Robert Weddell (23)—scrambled four or five miles along a frozen creekbed to attempt an unnamed peak in Poudre Canyon, north of the Crystal Wall. In good weather, the group climbed several short rock walls, the last of which was 45 feet tall. Feeling confident, the climbers ascended this final wall without roping up or placing protection, with Weddell in the lead. According to Weddell, “On the very last move, what I thought was a solid right hand broke off.” (Weddell reports testing the hold prior to committing to the move.) He fell 20 feet, striking a ledge where Keatly stood, and then fell a further 20 feet to the base of the wall. Again, Weddell: “I came down pretty much on my left foot, leading to a compound fracture in my left ankle... Eighty percent of my talus bone was sticking out, my left elbow was broken, and the left wrist sprained.” He also suffered deep abrasions to his hands.

Grimes and Keatly were able to reach Weddell and provide first aid, improvising bandages by tearing a flannel shirt and dressing the open fracture of his left ankle. They attempted to carry Weddell back down the line of their approach, but found the terrain too difficult. They were able to contact emergency services with a cell phone but had difficulty identifying their position and waited a further two hours while a SAR helicopter searched for them. After locating the climbers, the helicopter was able to land a first responder, who brought a litter and explained that other SAR personnel were on their way. Poudre County firefighters were able to reach the climbers, and together they carried Weddell uphill to a landing site, from which he was transferred to a helicopter and evacuated. Keatly and Grimes then hiked out of the canyon with the SAR personnel after dark. (Sources: Robert Weddell and Patrick Keatly.)

Analysis

Overconfidence in their abilities led these climbers to decide against roping up and placing protection to mitigate the risk of a dangerous fall. That decision, combined with the failure to detect a loose hold, resulted in a ground fall and serious injury. Despite good weather and climbing conditions, and the ability to communicate via cell phone, the difficult terrain presented challenges to SAR personnel in locating and evacuating these climbers. This accident highlights how a backcountry setting often magnifies risk and commitment, even when the challenges of a climb are well within the climbers’ technical abilities. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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