



AAC Publications

Rockfall

Utah, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Pfeifferhorn

During the afternoon of February 1, Susan DeBruin (30) and Derek DeBruin (27) hiked in to Maybird Gulch above Little Cottonwood Canyon and established camp with the intention of climbing the Pfeifferhorn (a.k.a. Little Matterhorn Peak) the following day. A small amount of snow fell overnight, accompanied by winds of perhaps 40 to 50 mph. The following morning the party waited for the warmth of sunrise and then left camp around 7:30 a.m. to attempt the north ridge, approaching via the snow couloir on the east side of the ridge.

Once on the ridge, Derek established a belay in anticipation of the terrain above, largely 4th-class to low 5th-class rock, blanketed with snow and occasionally coated with verglas. The pair donned crampons and Derek began leading a series of short pitches (50–75 feet) up ledges and corners. After leading the fourth pitch, Derek established a belay and Susan began climbing.

Moments after she stepped off the ledge, she was struck by a rock on the top of her helmet. While startled and injured, she was coherent and shouted to Derek. They agreed the simplest plan would be for her to climb the 50 feet to Derek, and he could then inspect her injuries.

Susan arrived at the belay a few minutes later. Her cervical spine was free of pain, she had no sensory or neuromotor deficits, and she was completely responsive. Two of her teeth were chipped, one was cracked, and her tongue was badly bitten. She reported general pain in her teeth and jaw, and her neck muscles were stiff and painful. Her helmet suspension was completely undone, and the helmet shell had a large gouge in it.

The party rappelled from their belay stance off the east side of the ridge into a couloir. Given the low snowpack in the Wasatch that year, this couloir was barely filled, with about 10 to 15cm of faceted snow atop rock slab. Another rappel placed them in downclimbable terrain. Given the relatively slow pace of the descent, Derek became quite chilled and developed minor frostbite in a few toes. Once at camp, the two took a break and warmed up. The pain prevented Susan from eating, but she was able to drink. They then struck camp, hiked back to the trailhead, and found a dentist.

ANALYSIS

The north ridge is the most popular technical climbing route on the Pfeifferhorn and is the cleanest option available, but is still fraught with detached granite blocks and unstable sections. Consequently, most parties attempt the route during the winter, when the rock is often frozen in. Given the low snowpack that winter, the route may have been looser than normal. It is possible that spontaneous rockfall occurred, but it seems most likely that Derek dislodged a rock when he tensioned the rope to belay Susan from above.

In this terrain, the team could have traveled without a rope or simul-climbed, but this would not eliminate the risk of rockfall or loose holds causing a serious fall. The best solution in such a scenario is likely traveling on a shortened rope for small distances (perhaps 10 or 15 feet at a time) and establishing quick but adequate belays for the follower, keeping in mind the danger of falling ice and rock when choosing a belay location. (Source: Derek DeBruin.)

Images

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