



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Darkness, Inadequate Protection

West Virginia, New River Gorge National Park, Junkyard Wall

Four friends were climbing late at night on July 5 at the Junkyard Wall after bad weather earlier in the day delayed their start. Near 2 a.m., John (23) had just completed a solid lead of New Yosemite (5.9), using headlamps to light the way, but he was unhappy with his lead because he felt he had “stitched it up” with too much protection.

He then started up Four Sheets to the Wind (5.9+), placing multiple pieces of protection as he moved through the lower roof, including a solid piece at the lip. He headed up a corner to the upper roofs on the route, but rather than stop to place gear, as his belayer recommended, John continued into the upper roof crux and then fell. His tie-in was about nine feet above his last piece of gear, and he fell 22 feet before impacting the slab below the first roof. The climber immediately grabbed his right ankle and asked to be lowered.

John’s partner splinted the ankle using shoes and climbing tape and, with the help of friends, evacuated the climber to their parked vehicle. The climber had a fractured right calcaneus (heel) that required surgical intervention and implantation of 15 screws. (Source: Anonymous report from the climbers.)

ANALYSIS

This incident occurred due to multiple factors, the most important being the limited visibility of a nighttime climb illuminated only by headlamps. This prevented an adequate assessment of the climb, potential gear placements, and fall zones. Without being able to see the slab below him, John may have mistakenly believed a fall would be safe because he had climbed around a roof. At the upper crux, he believed he did not have any pieces of the right size and chose to continue without adequate protection. To a lesser extent, pressure to climb within a limited time frame and his self-perception that he had overprotected the previous route were contributing factors. (Sources: The climbers’ report and the Editors.)

Images

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