



AAC Publications

Pendulum Fall During Rappel Retreat from Matthes Crest

California, Yosemite National Park, Matthes Crest

Will and James started climbing Matthes Crest in the late morning on September 11. Both have spent decades climbing in the Sierra. (Their names have been changed here.) The day had started out with clear blue skies, and both climbers felt that the weather report promised stable enough conditions to proceed with the climb.

After the initial steep pitches, the team began to simul-climb through easier terrain on the ridge traverse. As they were climbing, clouds started to form. Quickly, the weather worsened to hail and lightning, prompting them to rappel from the ridge.

The first three rappels went well. The team found in-place anchors from previous teams and backed up the rappels with extra gear when necessary. At the fourth rappel Will went first. He saw an anchor far to one side but felt the slick rock would make it a difficult and risky rappel. Instead he rappelled down an angled corner to reach a stance and build his own rappel anchor. Will called "off rappel" and James began to rappel. He started straight down and then tried to tension over to the belay when he was even with Will. Before he could reach the anchor, James lost control of his footing and pendulumed "approximately 30 feet." He sustained traumatic injuries to both legs while swinging horizontally across the low-angle terrain.

James threw the ends of his rappel ropes to Will, who then pulled him over to the anchor. With James in extreme pain and unable to function at full capacity, Will lowered James to the ground and then rappelled to the base himself.

The two were getting wet, and temperatures were dropping. With no phone reception to call for help, they decided to send Will out to the front country to seek a rescue. Will left most of their clothing, food, and water with James to keep him as comfortable

as possible; luckily, this included a rain jacket. James cut the bottom out of a backpack and slipped it over his legs to create an extra layer of protection from the elements. Will then jogged approximately five miles to the road and went directly to the Tuolumne SAR site, at about 8 p.m., to initiate a rescue.

Using GPS coordinates from his phone, Will was able to give the SAR team James' precise location. YOSAR sent a hasty team, including a registered nurse and a paramedic, to care for James until the helicopter could arrive with first light the next morning.

ANALYSIS

Being prepared for sudden changes in the weather is essential in the High Sierra. Although James' fractured heels were his only injuries, the potential for hypothermia was very real. Temperatures that night were in the low 30s (F). James wore only a long-sleeve fleece, but Will had carried a Gore-Tex jacket that may have prevented James from becoming hypothermic. Their clever improvisation of turning a backpack into a bivvy sack was also important for maintaining James' warmth.

One way to avoid James' swinging fall would have been for Will to fix the rappel lines to the lower anchor after anchoring himself. James then could have rappelled more directly to the belay. Fixing the ropes at the lower anchor also acts as a backup for the second person—a good practice even on straight-down rappels.

James and Will both were using hands-free backups while rappelling. If James had let go of the rope during his fall or hit his head and been knocked out, his prusik would have arrested a catastrophic fall. Backups are especially important in a forced retreat like this, when contending with the extra hazards of rain, chill, loose rock, and haste. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images



Matthes Crest in the Yosemite high country.

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