



AAC Publications

Leader Fall – Loose Rock, Chopped Rope

Utah, Indian Creek Canyon, Bridger Jack, Hummingbird Spire

On November 14, Kelsey Brasseur (29) and I (28) planned to climb all of Indian Creek's Bridger Jack towers in a day. By 3 p.m. we had dispatched four of the towers and arrived at the base of Hummingbird Spire, where we ran into an acquaintance, Andrew, and his partner. After swapping pleasantries, Kelsey and I started up Hoop Dancer (5.11). Kelsey led the first pitch and I met her at the large belay ledge. Without glancing at the topo or even looking up, I grabbed the rack and took off toward the summit.

I deemed the rock too loose for any useful protection, so I ran it out up moderate terrain for 15 to 20 feet above the belay. (I later found out I was off route.) Knocking on each loose block before I grabbed it—all of them rang with a hollow sound—I picked the best hold I could find and pulled down. A cooler-size rock dislodged and fell toward the ledge below, with me underneath. The block hit the ledge and exploded on top of me as I bounced off and continued downward, ripping out the anchor piece through which I'd been redirected.

Twenty feet below the ledge, I jerked to a stop, hanging upside down by the rope around my ankle. I glanced down and saw a six-foot tail of rope coming from my harness. The rope had been cut in the fall. One of the smaller chunks of rock that had rained down with the block had fallen directly into a wide crack on the belay ledge and wedged itself in as a chockstone, somehow catching a section of rope. My foot was caught inside this 10-foot loop, holding me only around the top of my instep. My right arm was clearly broken, as my radius had come through my skin.

Kelsey removed the Grigri from the lead side of the rope, unburied the rope from the debris on the ledge, and fixed the longest line of undamaged rope to the anchor. She then rappelled about 10 to 15 feet toward me. I asked her to secure the rope holding me, which was somewhat precariously seated around the chockstone and led to my ankle, and to throw down a line for me to secure myself.

She wrapped the loose section of the snagged rope, above the chockstone, around her right hand, taking as much weight as possible in case the chockstone dislodged. She used her left hand to gather up another length of undamaged rope and lower it with a locking carabiner on a bight. I snatched the rope and pulled it down toward my harness, but it was slightly too short.

I pulled myself up with my good arm, grabbed the carabiner with my broken arm, and flopped my lifeless arm toward my harness. After several unsuccessful attempts to land the carabiner on my belay loop, I landed it on my left leg loop. Worried I wouldn't be able to get to my belay loop before my good arm completely gave out, I clipped the leg loop.

Kelsey was still holding the rope around my ankle. In order for her to reach the anchor and fix the rope I was now clipped in to, I needed to get my weight off the rope. After talking with Kelsey, I reached over to the flared chimney on my right, rammed my broken pelvis in as far as I could, and chicken-winged my broken arm to establish myself. Kelsey released the rope around her hand and quickly fixed the rope that was attached to my leg loop. As soon as I weighted the leg loop and swung out, I enchainned some cams from the bight in the fixed rope to my belay loop (although I was still hanging off my leg loop).

Having heard the rockfall, Andrew ran around the corner to the base of Hummingbird. I told him our rope was too damaged to get us down on our own. He raced down the talus to his car and sped toward the Canyonlands National Park ranger station.

As I hung by my leg loop, Kelsey gathered more rope to lower herself further down and pull me over to a small ledge on my right, where we rigged up a series of slings to stabilize my legs.

An hour or two later, Andrew returned and let us know that rescue was on the way. It was now dark, but Andrew racked up, climbed the first pitch, and built an anchor above us, planning to lower me to the ground. We had a hard time getting me off the ledge, both because of pain and because we were trying to hold my body still, out of fear of spinal cord injury. After a discussion, I decided it was worth the risk to lower down without a backboard, reasoning that A) it could be a very long time before SAR would be able to rig up a safe lowering setup (if they were able to do this at all); B) further movement would pale in comparison to any movement/ trauma I'd already undergone; and C) although I was not bleeding too much, we were aware of the risk of hypovolemic shock. Andrew did a great job of lowering me slowly and communicating, allowing me

time to stabilize as I descended. About three hours after the fall, I was back on the ground. Perhaps half an hour after that, a paramedic showed up, then two flight nurses in another half an hour. The flight nurses injected me with a steady dose of ketamine for the long carry down the talus.

I sustained a broken pelvis (inferior ramus, superior ramus, and acetabulum), broken back (burst L1), a broken sacrum, broken arm (open radial fracture), dislocated wrist, and damage to my sacral nerves. (Source: Craig Gorder.)

ANALYSIS

Because the two climbers were moving fast to accomplish their linkup, Gorder neglected to check the route topo to see where the line went, and as a result he got off route on rotten rock, but he continued without protection because the terrain was easy for him.

Gorder was wearing a helmet, which he credits with saving his life, as the helmet had a sizable depression in it and he came away with no head trauma. He had also just taken a wilderness first responder (WFR) course, which allowed him to assess his own injuries, remain calm, and take the lead in decision-making. (Since he was fully conscious and aware, he explained, he didn't want his partner to be forced to make serious decisions affecting him.) Gorder also said that bringing a SPOT or similar communication device to this isolated cliff could have sped up the arrival of paramedics. All of these climbers can be commended for their handling of a shocking and extraordinary accident. (Source: The Editors.)

This incident was featured in Episode 21 of the Sharp End Podcast. Click below to listen to Craig Gorder tell his own story:

Images



Hummingbird Spire in Utah's Indian Creek Canyon. The accident occurred in the notch to the right of the tower.



Gorder's helmet, showing the dent incurred in the accident. Gorder credits the helmet with saving his life and preventing a serious head injury.



Epic on Hummingbird Spire

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