



Fall on Ice – Using Microspikes Instead of Crampons

New York, Adirondacks, Haystack Mountain

I organized a trip to the High Peaks region of the Adirondacks for March. The plan was to summit Mt. Haystack, Saddleback Mountain, and Basin Mountain in one day, under late-winter conditions, in order to simulate a long alpine climb. There were nine people in our party, mostly from the D.C. area, with varying degrees of experience. Although I had decades of backcountry travel under my belt, including eight years in the military, I was relatively new to mountaineering, but I had completed a winter ascent of Mt. Marcy, the highest peak in the Adirondacks, the previous year. As the trip leader (age 35), I had decided that we did not need ropes and harnesses, but I told each climber to bring the required winter gear, including snowshoes, crampons, and ice axe.

We planned to summit Mt. Haystack, eight miles from the trailhead, by way of Little Haystack, a subordinate peak just to the north. It was clear but cold (20°F) at the trailhead. We started off on snowshoes but switched to crampons where the trail to Little Haystack split off. Once we reached the summit of Little Haystack, we took a break to assess the route ahead: a steep and rocky descent into a col before a scramble up to Mt. Haystack's summit. Much of the rock was covered with ice, and three members of our party were uncomfortable with the conditions and turned back. Among the six of us who decided to press on was my younger brother, Chris, who was wearing Kahtoola Microspikes rather than crampons.

As we began the difficult descent of Little Haystack, we had not gone 50 feet when my brother, directly behind me, started sliding. I intentionally fell on top of him, hoping to stop his slide and arrest both of us with my ice axe and crampons. Instead, we both continued to slide. My brother was able to grab a rock to stop himself. Having lost my grip on my ice axe, I continued sliding until I forcefully planted my right crampon onto a rock outcropping. I stopped just a few feet short of a cliff.

When I rolled over, I saw that my right foot had flopped over, and trying to stand was very painful. We tried to call 911 but couldn't get a cell signal. Soon another hiker came along and pressed his SPOT emergency beacon. We waited in place for about two hours but gradually lost hope for a rescue and decided to start back toward the cars.

I spent the next two hours crawling back up Little Haystack and down to where we had stashed our snowshoes. I made a splint from one of my snowshoes, but it didn't help much. I soon tried my cell phone again and was able to get a signal. The 911 dispatcher knew who I was and advised that forest rangers and a state police helicopter were on their way. The rescue party reached me about 20 minutes later, packaged me in a litter, and lifted me to a hospital in Saranac Lake. My right fibula had fractured in two places, and my ankle was dislocated.

ANALYSIS

My brother's fall started the chain of events that ended with my injuries, and it probably could have been avoided if he been wearing crampons instead of Microspikes. I didn't know he was improperly equipped until we ditched our snowshoes. As trip leader, I should have done a gear check the night before, and I should have turned him around when it became apparent that Microspikes were inadequate for the conditions.

Furthermore, this was the first time some climbers in our party had ever held an ice axe, including my brother. I did not train anyone before the outing to self-arrest. Finally, if I had carried a SAM splint in my first-aid kit, I could have better splinted my leg, which would have made for a slightly more comfortable crawl up and down Little Haystack. (Source: Shaun So.)

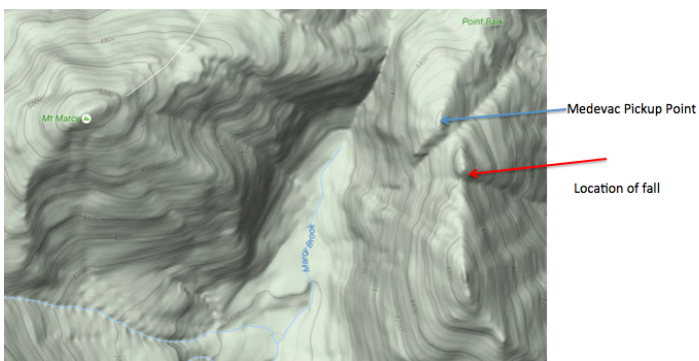
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View toward Haystack from Little Haystack. The accident occurred during the descent from Little Haystack.



The accident scene about 20 minutes after the fall.



Map of the Haystack area, showing approximate locations of the accident and the helicopter pickup.

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