



AAC Publications

Ground Fall – Loose Rock, Inadequate Belay

New York, Adirondacks, Starbuck Mountain

The following report is condensed from “Unbelayable: A Missed Catch,” published November 2016 in Climbing magazine, with permission of the author, Kevin Corrigan, and the climber, Annie Nelson.

I’m a 20-year-old from upstate New York. Last August I met a pair of climbers at Shelving Rock, and we made plans to check out a new wall called Starbuck Cliff.

One of the guys canceled last minute, so it was just me and his partner, who said he was an experienced climber. I’d just started leading trad in the spring, but was excited to try a crack climb that looked to be about 5.8, though we had no guidebook.

The bottom was casual. By the time I was 60 feet up, I had five solid pieces below me. My left hand was on a jug, and I was trying to decide what to place in the crack in front of me. Then the jug unexpectedly came out of the wall. Without thinking, I chucked it down in the direction of my belayer, yelling “Rock!”

My belayer, who was wearing a helmet, took a step backward and raised his hands in the air. The step back tugged at the rope against my harness. His instinct took over, and he let go of the rope to take another step back. I was trying to recover my balance, but the tug didn’t help. I fell about 60 feet and hit the ground. My belayer, in his surprise, never recovered the rope. I landed at on my back, on a small strip of soft dirt between two boulders.

The fall knocked me out, luckily erasing all memory of the event. When I woke, for a few seconds I couldn’t see or breathe. It felt like there was an enormous weight on my chest. Slowly everything returned. I was incredibly sore, but nothing felt broken so I packed up my stuff, walked to my car, and drove to the ER. (I know I shouldn’t have.) To the amazement of myself, my friends, and the doctors, all I suffered was some slightly cracked ribs and a mild head injury—not even a concussion. My helmet may have saved my life.

ANALYSIS

There are a few things we can all do to avoid such incidents:

- Assess the holds. **Knock on the rock, does it sound hollow? Does it shift at all when you grab it? These are warning signs.** (Editor’s note: If a hold comes off, be sure to throw it away from your belayer!)
- Assess new partners. **It’s important to know the experience level of your climbing partner and plan accordingly. However, even an experienced climber may not react appropriately to a surprise situation like rockfall.**
- Assess the belay area. **Before climbing, identify where it will be safest to belay (or flee to) should rockfall occur.**

- Consider an assisted-braking belay device. **These devices add an extra measure of security if your belayer is incapacitated by rockfall or other events.** (Sources: Annie Nelson and Kevin Corrigan.)

Images

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