



AAC Publications

Leader Fall on Ice – Ice Tool Puncture Wound

Utah, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Snowbird

I was on Rookie Party in Pipeline Bowl, above the Snowbird ski resort, on October 23. This is a WI4 single-pitch ice climb at about 10,500 feet. Ice conditions weren't great, but other than messing with my head, the conditions did not play a role in my fall. The total climb is around 220 feet, but it is mostly low-angle except for a 35- to 40-foot vertical section in the lower portion. I had placed several screws and rock pro prior to and through the vertical section. My last placement was a 13 cm screw in solid ice, about six feet from the top of the vertical section. Climbing on half ropes, I clipped one of the ropes through a quickdraw attached to that screw.

At the top of the vertical section, with my tools over the lip, I was moving my feet up to make the final moves when my right tool popped out. My weight was back, so this sent me backward. My left tool was still engaged in the ice. I assume I let go of it, but I can't really remember. I yelled "Falling!" and soon found myself up-side down, with my head about five feet above a lower-angle section of the climb. The top screw had held, but combining my height above the screw, the stretch in the skinny rope, slack in the rope, and the distance my belayer went up the mountain, it added up to about a 30-foot fall.

I righted myself and lowered off the route. After a few sighs of relief and a hug to my belayer, I untied from the ropes and took a few steps. Blood started to pour down the inside of my leg. In a few seconds there were two 12-inch pools of blood in the snow. The wound was a puncture high on the back of my leg—basically my butt, close to my crotch. We put pressure on it for about 20 minutes, but it was still bleeding. Two of our team went for help, and another (who was a nurse) stayed with me.

The Snowbird resort sent two patrollers, and four Salt Lake County Search and Rescue members responded as well. After an hour and a half of direct pressure the bleeding had stopped. Not wanting to risk walking for fear of starting the bleeding again, one of the rescuers belayed me while I slid down 200 feet of steep snow toward a boulder field. About six hours after the fall, I was picked up by a helicopter and flown off the mountain.

ANALYSIS

I believe that I let go of my left tool as I started to fall and this tool remained in the ice until it was overloaded through my umbilical. (Ice climbers sometimes attach stretchy "umbilicals" to leashless tools to tether them to their harness, so the tool is retrievable if dropped.) I believe either my crampon placement or one of the ropes caused me to flip upside down.

Somewhere during that transition, the loaded ice tool snapped out of the ice and the pick impacted my leg. The tool either hit me directly as it released from the ice or shot past me and then rebounded into my leg. The puncture was one inch wide by 1.5 inches deep. It was definitely not from a screw and could not have been a crampon point, since it was too high on my butt.

Other than during a couple of long alpine routes, I had never climbed with umbilicals until this. But I also had never fallen on ice before this. After this injury, I will no longer be using umbilicals on single-pitch routes. I feel like I was actually pretty lucky. The fall alone could have been much worse, and the tool could have easily impacted my head, neck, or abdomen. (Source: Brett Verhoef.)

EDITOR'S NOTE: As with many decisions in climbing, the choice of when to use umbilicals on ice tools (or leashes, for that matter) varies with the situation and the climber. Keep in mind that a dropped tool could have serious consequences for the leader even on a single-pitch climb, if he or she is unable to find protection or an anchor. Belayers and bystanders below also might be at risk.

As other reports in this edition will attest, there are potentially far more serious consequences than a puncture wound for the leader who falls off an ice climb. Outside of modern, bolt-protected dry-tooling routes, the generations-old safety rule for ice climbing is still valid: The leader must not fall. Expert climber and author Will Gadd wrote an excellent blog post about avoiding ice climbing falls in January 2017; search for "Note to self: How not to fall off ice climbing."

Images



Article Details

| | |
|----------------|------------------|
| Author | Brett Verhoef |
| Publication | ANAM |
| Volume | 11 |
| Issue | 70 |
| Page | 87 |
| Copyright Date | 2017 |
| Article Type | Accident reports |