



## AAC Publications

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### **Anchor Failure – Poor Rock, No Backup**

Utah, Canyonlands National Park, Maze District

**On May 25, Brent Blakenburg (30), Jason Bernard (36), Sean Finnegan (27), and Daniel Coldfelter (36) were camped near the Hans Flat Ranger Station in the Maze District of Canyonlands National Park. The Maze is well known for its remote location (about 40 miles from the nearest paved road). In the morning, Bernard began checking out a bouldering route at the base of a 50-foot sandstone outcropping. A summary based on Bernard's notes follows.**

We had been looking at possible routes up several faces on the rock, and eventually Dan and I decided to see if we could anchor a top-rope and attempt a possible first ascent on this bulging mound. Right above the most viable route was an amazing horn. I wrapped 10 feet of webbing, tied with a water knot, around a three-foot hunk of the rock; there was a perfect crease to lock the webbing into position. I attached a quick-link and prepared the rope. As I dropped the top-rope to the ground, Dan and I spoke briefly about setting up a backup anchor but decided there were not any reliable gear placements. And the horn appeared bomber.

I weighted the rope to test it while standing on the ground, then Dan tied in and began climbing. He had some trouble with the beginning moves, resulting in a few swinging falls, and asked me to tie in. I also took a swinging fall on the sandy, traversing route. I weighted the rope again on a fall as I moved toward the anchor, cleaning off about eight grapefruit-size holds as I went. After completing the route, I was lowered off the climb.

Brent now tied in. When he was about 30 feet above the ground, a handhold broke and Brent fell off. Sean, who was belaying, caught the fall. However, the horn that had been slung as an anchor, plus a three-foot-wide section of the surrounding rock, sheared off the wall. Brent fell to the ground, narrowly missing being crushed by the blocks falling around him.

Brent remained conscious and moved under his own power away from the base of the climb. An initial scan found blood on his head, a bloody nose, and a thigh laceration. He pointed out that his left ankle was disfigured, so Sean removed the climbing shoe from that foot. As the shoe was removed, the pad of Brent's heel fell into my hand, exposing muscle and bone. We used clothing and a towel to bind up Brent's ankle and heel, and quickly prepared to evacuate. During the 40-mile drive out of the backcountry, I was able to connect with emergency services via my cell phone. An ambulance met us en route and determined that an airlift to the hospital in Grand Junction was warranted, given the extent of Brent's injuries. He reached the hospital only two hours after the accident and recovered well.

### **ANALYSIS**

“Looking at the scene of the accident later that day, it was easy to see there were mistakes made in choosing the horn as a top-rope anchor, and we probably should not have even tried climbing [in this area] at all due to the loose rock.” A backup might have prevented Blakenburg's ground fall, but he also might have been hit by a large piece of rock if he hadn't fallen out of its way; a boulder impacted right where he'd been climbing. The bottom line: Some rock just isn't meant to be climbed.

These climbers correctly completed an assessment of Blakenburg's injuries prior to evacuation. A full

patient assessment is important to avoid overlooking injuries. Disfigured limbs or bloody wounds often distract from other potentially serious issues, such as neck and spinal injuries, especially in ground falls. (Sources: Jason Bernard and the Editors.)

**REMOTE 911 CALLS** Even if your cell phone is showing no bars, it's always worth attempting a 911 emergency call in remote areas.

- All carriers are required to provide free 911 service, and another carrier might be able to connect your call even if your carrier has no service in the area.
- An attempted 911 call may leave digital "breadcrumbs" of time, date, and location information that searchers can access and use, even if your call never connects.
- If you're connected, immediately tell the emergency operator your location and phone number, in case you are disconnected. If you're disconnected and no one calls back, try again.

## Images

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