



Rappel Failure – Inadequate Knot

Washington, Methow Valley, Goat Wall, Prime Rib of Goat

About 3:30 p.m. on May 3, Ryan Kautz, 26, was rigging a rappel off Prime Rib of Goat, a multi-pitch 5.9 bolted route, with new 70-meter, 9.5mm ropes. He and his two partners had seen a storm coming in and decided to descend after climbing eight of the 11 pitches. One of the partners had managed the ropes on the previous rappels, and Kautz asked to take over at the second-to-last anchor. The two other climbers waited on a ledge 50 feet away (it's necessary to scramble down to the anchor from the previous stance).

Kautz slipped one end of the rope through a chain anchor and tied it to an identical rope. He tested the rappel by tugging on it and then lowered himself about 20 feet before something went wrong. His partners heard a loud snap and saw Kautz fall 100 feet and disappear into a gully. The other climbers were able to get help from a climbing guide above, who fixed a rope so one of Kautz' partners could rappel into the gully. Kautz was found dead roughly 90 minutes after his fall. He was still attached to the ropes, his rappel device was properly threaded, and there was no damage to either rope. (Source: Rock and Ice magazine.)

ANALYSIS

During the previous rappels the climbers had used a at figure-8 knot to join their two ropes, backed up with overhand knots on either side of the at figure-8. Although Kautz' partners did not see him tie the final knot, it's likely he too used a at figure-8; it's unknown if he backed up the knot. Testing has shown the at figure-8 is prone to rolling or "capsizing" under loads and is therefore not recommended for rappelling. (The new ropes in this incident reportedly had a very slick dry coating, possibly making it easier for the at figure-8 to fail.) A properly tied and dressed at overhand with long tails, a double sherman's, or a Flemish bend (retraced figure-8) are reliable ways to join rappel ropes.

The distance between the climbers before the fateful rappel also contributed to this accident. This reportedly was Kautz' first multi-pitch climb, and he would have benefitted from a more experienced partner checking his rappel setup. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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