



## AAC Publications

---

### **Ground Fall – Inadequate Protection**

Nevada, Rock Rock National Conservation Area, Calico Basin

**PAUL AND I had been climbing at Red Rock for about a week. On February 7, after a windy rest day, we decided to take it easy and stay close to the ground. We chose the Red Spring area of Calico Basin because we figured it would be somewhat sheltered if the wind decided to kick up again.**

I am very familiar with Red Rock Canyon, having climbed there for a few weeks a year since 2014, when I took the American Alpine Institute (AAI) courses "Intensive Intro to Rock Climbing" and "Learn To Lead." I had been trad leading since then, mostly 5.6 to 5.8. When following or top-roping outside, I climbed at the 5.10 level.

We started with a few routes on Cowlick Crag, then headed over to Dickies Cliff. The route we chose was Guys and Ghouls (100', 5.6), which I had top-roped during one of the AAI courses. I was confident it was well within my ability to lead it.

Because of my injuries, I don't recall the details of the climb and fall. Here is what I have put together based on discussions with witnesses.

I started leading up the route and put in a small cam (approximately 0.4 Camalot) about 15 feet off the deck. I pulled a small roof and continued up 10 to 12 feet above my cam. Paul (my belayer) figures the reason I didn't put in another piece was because there was no good place for a cam or nut—at least, I was apparently unable to find another protection opportunity. The route has a reputation of being somewhat sandbagged and awkward at the start, and I must have reached the awkward, hard-to-protect part. At this point, I fell. I don't know why, and neither do the people who saw the fall. No one saw a hold break.

Initially, Paul caught my fall. But then some bad things happened. First, the force of the catch (I dropped over 20 feet) and the sudden and forceful upward pull of the harness on my skin caused a bad subcutaneous degloving injury to my backside (specifically a Morel-Lavallée lesion of the posterior iliac region).

Second, the micro-cam at 15 feet, after initially holding a force powerful enough to seriously injure me, pulled out. I dropped the remaining five or six feet to the base of the climb, then bounced another 10 feet below that into a rocky gully. During the fall (possibly both before and after the initial injury), my head impacted the rock several times, causing skull fractures and a traumatic brain injury. Judging from my helmet and the fractures, I must have smacked my head at least three or four times.

A wilderness first responder named Jason, who was not part of our party, saw the fall and came running to help. He and Paul found me on my back where I had landed, about 10 feet below the base of the climb. Jason described me as "unconscious and unresponsive," with bleeding from the nose and ears. They called for a rescue and watched over me until a helicopter came and the EMTs took me to the hospital.

### **ANALYSIS**

I was on a route I had climbed three years earlier, and I am certain it was well within my ability. I will never understand how I could have fallen where I did, but sometimes climbers fall. (Maybe I stepped on a banana peel!) I would say the biggest takeaway is the adage, "Always have at least two pieces between you and the ground." I had one piece 15 feet up, and I was far enough above that pro that any fall had potential to be a ground fall. It's ironic that this fall bit me, because my main focus on that trip had been to increase my competence at protecting well on lead and to avoid running it out above a piece.

Some people have mentioned the possibility of the belayer employing a "soft catch" as something that might have prevented the cam from pulling. But my conclusion is that my belayer made the correct choice in this situation. Given the distance I had climbed above the cam, a ground fall was definitely a possible outcome, and the belayer's primary concern is to keep the climber from hitting the ground.

The cam was in good working order, the rock was sound, and although it had rained a tiny bit two or three days before the accident, I don't believe this had any impact on the rock quality. When a properly functioning cam in good rock pulls out, an inadequate placement is the only logical conclusion. I would point out, in my defense, that the piece did hold with enough force to give me a nasty injury, so it wasn't a completely useless placement. Still, I reckon it would have held if I had placed it better. Also, it was a fairly small Camalot, so maybe this was a case of over-reliance on a small cam.

In the final analysis, I can only emphasize that when starting up a pitch from the ground or a ledge, it's super important to get that second piece of protection in before climbing into ground-fall range. I am certain that I would not have climbed 10 feet above my last piece at that point on the route if I had anything less than 100 percent confidence that I could easily manage the terrain I was ascending. Sadly, that confidence was misplaced. Trust me on this: Always, always, always make it a priority to get at least two pieces in between you and the ground.

I'm sure that wearing a helmet is among the reasons I survived the fall. I recommend it. (Source: Greg Smith.)

An interview with Greg Smith was featured in the Sharp End podcast in April 2018. Click below to listen:

## Images



The helmet a climber was wearing when he survived a ground fall in Calico Basin, Nevada.



Rescuers prepare to airlift the injured climber from Calico Basin, Nevada.

## Article Details

Author	Greg Smith
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	71
Page	0
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	Accident reports