



AAC Publications

Leader Fall Onto Ledge – Inexperience

West Virginia, New River Gorge, Bubba City, Tattoo Wall

On the morning of October 28, and with rain forecasted to begin by midday, my girlfriend, Liza Mindemann (age 33), and I (Sam Janis, age 39) decided to get an early start on our third day of a two-week climbing road trip. We were eager to get back out there before the rain and cold arrived, as the weather was expected to remain poor for at least two full days. Around 8 a.m., we started down the powerline approach trail toward the Tattoo Wall section of Bubba City.

A little background: We'd been together not even two months, and climbing is very much part of our relationship. In fact, we met at the Gunks, and since then I'd been teaching her to lead trad. Before this trip, we'd climbed together a total of six or seven days, and she'd led up to 5.7 at the Gunks and followed a few 5.10s. I was totally blown away by her ability to learn quickly, combined with a desire to push hard. I can see this so clearly because I have the exact same tendency, the only difference being I've been climbing for 14 years; thus, my energy has been just slightly tempered by time as well one or two "hard" lessons of my own on lead.

Walking down the approach trail, we discussed our plan for the morning. At first, she suggested I go first on Layback and Enjoy (5.10d), and in return I suggested she jump on Mrs. Field's Follies (5.8 sport) first thing, thinking this would be a better warm-up for both of us. The day before, she had led Geisha Girl (5.8), her first ever sport lead, with no problems. She also had tried Mrs. Fields, right next to it, also a four-star 5.8 and one of the longest moderates at the New. However, it was the end of the day, she was spent, and she couldn't get past the roof at the eighth bolt. Of course, she wanted to get back on it, but with lingering uncertainty and fear from the day before, she was definitely not expressing a desire to do it first thing.

We arrived below the 5.8 section of the wall and I announced (all too eagerly) that "we had an appointment with Mrs. Fields." At this point, Liza just smiled. With no actual discussion but only a kind of acquiescence to my more dominant energy, plus a certain rationality in both of us warming up on the 5.8, it was decided that Liza would try Mrs. Field's Follies right off the bat. In retrospect, I believe this was the single most important factor in the subsequent accident.

Liza led up the first few bolts with no outward issues. But at the first crux, on a slabby section with definite potential for smacking the ledge below, she grabbed the bolt with her finger and screamed in frustration, "I just cheated," as she made the move. I tried to encourage her, but instead I really just reflected those same feelings right back at her, saying something like, "Yup, it's OK.... We all suck sometimes." I could feel her tension and fear, except that I was on the ground egging her on.

She continued up the relatively easier sections above, still exhibiting the same nervousness and not breathing smoothly, until she reached the eighth bolt, where she had lowered off the day before. At this point she stepped up to the roof once to clip, then backed down, then on the second attempt she pulled the roof successfully. She was psyched. Incidentally, at this point we both had remarked the day before that most of the routes on the Tattoo Wall have plenty of gear placements, and that it's a little funny that they are bolted at all. In other words, she definitely could have brought some gear to protect the runouts and ledge-fall potential.

Liza takes over the story....

Finally standing atop the roof, with nerves slightly abated by the temporary satisfaction of moving through the supposed crux, I rested for a few minutes. My thoughts, however, returned to the same pattern as the day before, grinding into myself a bit for not having been able to do the moves the first time. Being relatively new to the sport, I find one of my biggest frustrations comes from the inconsistency in my climbing, knowing I can do something but not having fully integrated the movements into my physical vocabulary, or letting the mental game overthrow my ability to remain present in the climb. At this point, thinking I was only a few moves away from the top, I started up somewhat carelessly, looking for favorable hands, not finding them, but moving up anyways, thinking better handholds would be revealed and essentially forgetting my feet.

Eye to eye with the next bolt, I couldn't get my body into a stable spot to release one hand to clip. I kept feeling around, feet too high to back down and now somewhat paralyzed with the nervy blinders that come with desperation. I didn't really process the fall, or that falling wasn't an option, as I peeled off the rock and landed with a resounding slap of rubber directly on the ledge below me. Mad, more than anything, my inclination was to jump back on the wall and finish the damn climb, but when I tried weighting my right foot the pain was too much to stand and Sam was calling for me to come down.

Once on the ground, it was clear Liza could not stand on her right foot at all and it was most likely broken. After cleaning the route with Liza belaying in relative calm (amazingly), I set her up with a phone and jacket to sit on and ran to the car to ditch the pack and grab some duct tape. Upon returning, I found Liza had gotten bored of sitting and was crawling/hopping/skooching up the trail to try and meet me. We rigged up a textbook WFR splint, and then I proceeded to piggyback her most of the way back to the car.

We then headed over to the local Medical Express (urgent care facility), where the physician's assistant diagnosed her with a possible comminuted fracture to the calcaneus and talus, later confirmed by CT scans at the local hospital. Fortunately, the fractures were relatively clean and well contained, so surgery would not be required. (Sources: Sam Janis and Liza Mindemann.)

ANALYSIS

As with many lower grade climbs around the New River Gorge and elsewhere, ledge falls are often a hazard for the leader. The climber and belayer were familiar with the route, having climbed it the day before, and understood the potential for injury due to a fall of this type. While they do mention the possibility of placing traditional protection to supplement the bolts, the portion of the climb where the fall occurred is already relatively well protected. Mrs. Field's Follies is a tall route (100 feet), and given the amount of rope out at that point, rope stretch was a likely contributor.

The climber probably best identified the causes of the accident when she stated, "Being relatively new to the sport I find one of my biggest frustrations comes from the inconsistency in my climbing, knowing I can do something but not having fully integrated the movements into my physical vocabulary, or letting the mental game overthrow my ability to remain present in the climb. At this point, thinking I was only a few moves away from the top, I started up somewhat carelessly, looking for favorable hands, not finding them, but moving up anyways, thinking better handholds would be revealed and essentially forgetting my feet." Most new climbers face similar challenges. (Source: Sam Janis, Liza Mindemann, and the Editors.)

Images

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