



AAC Publications

Fall from Anchor – Communication Problems

Colorado, Durango Area, Lemon Reservoir

THAD FERRELL AND I ARRIVED at Lemon Reservoir in the upper Florida River Valley, near Durango, around 8 a.m. on September 9. It's a short hike in, about 15 minutes, followed by a 20-foot downclimb into the canyon. We climbed three warm-up routes, all sport climbs. I led each of the routes first, followed by Thad. At the top of each route, he would clip in and give me a thumbs-up and then set up a rappel and rap down. We used verbal commands, but couldn't hear each other because of the river running by us.

We next headed over to a 5.12- called Holy Grail. We decided to wear helmets because there was a slight chance of hitting a dangerous ledge about two-thirds of the way up the route.

I climbed the pitch first, putting up the draws. I fell at the crux and wanted to do the route again. However, just as Thad started climbing, two other climbers, George and Ian, told us they also wanted to do the route. We briefly discussed this as Thad started climbing, but didn't clearly decide what we were going to do. In other words, when Thad left the ground, we still hadn't determined if I was going to climb the route again. George and Ian also handed Thad a long draw to put on the bolt above the dangerous ledge, making it easier to clip. We discussed leaving my draws up so I could climb the route later, but we hadn't voiced out loud a clear decision on this. I remember clearly thinking that I should remind Thad to leave the quickdraws in place on his way down. Unfortunately, I said nothing. Saying something likely would have prevented the accident, because we both would have been on the same page about what was going to happen at the belay.

Thad sent the route. Shortly thereafter, he gave me the thumbs-up and I took him off belay, the same steps we had followed on the three previous routes. Soon after this he fell. I did not see the fall, but Ian and George told us both that he was windmilling his arms on the way down and then hit a slight slab at the bottom of the route. I dove out of the way because Ian and George were yelling "rock!" Thad landed with a terrible thud. It was the worst moment of my life.

Ian and George immediately ran to him. They told me to run and get help. I ran down the trail about 100 feet; a dozen or so climbers were across the river, and they shouted to me that they were going to run out and call for help. Someone else had a SPOT device and activated it immediately. Two other men, Chas and a second Ian, ran over to the scene as I continued to communicate with the people across the river. And then I collapsed and two women, Rosie and another, came across the river to sit with me.

George, the two Ians, and Chas all had Wilderness First Responder training, and at least two of them had recently recertified (George and Ian work with kids). Thad was unconscious for eight minutes. I thought he was dead. But Ian came over to tell me he was breathing and likely didn't have a spinal injury. They would not let me go near him, which was probably wise as I was freaking out. Thad started moving fairly quickly after he regained consciousness, but was clearly in terrible shape. He knew who he was, but he was extremely disoriented. Blood was everywhere, and his helmet was broken.

Rescuers showed up within the hour, followed shortly by Flight for Life. They organized a rescue to get him across the river and up to the helicopter. Another dozen or so people came from the nearby campground to help. I left with Rosie to call Thad's wife. She drove. It took at least half an hour or

maybe more to get to cell reception and call her.

Thad was flown to the local hospital before his wife or I arrived. After just four hours there, he was flown to St. Anthony's in Denver, where he has had a bunch of surgeries. He sustained numerous traumatic injuries, the most serious being a shattered jaw. The four first responders had saved his life by keeping his airway clear. He sustained a mild fracture in his neck, shattered his pelvis, and broke both his ankles to varying degrees. Because he sustained no serious brain or spine injuries, Thad will recover almost fully, though he will be partially bionic. He was already walking a couple of months after the accident.

ANALYSIS

Despite both of us having 20-plus years of climbing experience and being obsessed climbers, experienced in all realms (trad, sport, bouldering, ice, alpine), we didn't clearly communicate about what Thad was going to do at the belay while we were on the ground. We were sport climbing and nonchalant about it.

What went right:

1. WFR-trained people were there within seconds of the fall.
2. Someone across the river had a SPOT device and could call for help almost immediately.
3. We wore helmets.
4. Thad is a mutant.

I wish I had said something to Thad as he was climbing because it obviously wasn't clear in my head what he was going to do at the belay. I was on autopilot, and when he gave me the thumbs-up, I thought he was off belay and planned to rappel, just as he had earlier. He does not remember anything about the accident. I surmise that he was thinking he was going to leave the quickdraws up for George and Ian, and that I would lower him off the draws I had left at the anchor. He was still tied into his end of the rope, and the rope fell to the ground with him.

My WFR certification had expired 20 years earlier, so I wasn't equipped to help Thad after the fall, except to take notes on his vitals. Had the four first responders not been there, I am not sure he would have survived, as I am not sure I would have been equipped with the right knowledge to have saved him.

I feel extreme guilt for not being able to help and for taking him off belay. It doesn't matter how many people tell me it was an accident or that it wasn't my fault. I feel responsible, at least in part. I am seeing a trauma therapist. I don't know how people deal with stuff like this without seeing a trauma therapist. (Source: Lizzy Scully.)

Images



Crags in the Lemon Reservoir area, near Durango, Colorado.



Rescuers evacuate Thad Ferrell over complex terrain in the Lemon Reservoir area.



Rescuers near a helicopter landing site while evacuating Thad Ferrell after a fall at the Lemon

Reservoir climbing area.

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