



AAC Publications

Lowering Errors – Ropes Too Short, Helmet/No Helmet

California, Yosemite Valley, Swan Slab and Church Bowl

On July 3 there were two climbing accidents almost identical in nature in the Valley. Both were ground falls, and both resulted from a belayer lowering the climber with a rope that was too short for the pitch.

At approximately 7 p.m., Yosemite dispatch received a report that a climber had fallen from the Swan Slab Gully (5.6). YOSAR and the Valley ambulance quickly arrived on scene. The first responders found a mid-20s male lying on the groundface up, being held by his climbing partner. While the climber was conscious, he was disoriented and struggling to stay awake. Furthermore, he was complaining of back and hip pain, and witnesses stated he may have hit his head. He did not have on a helmet. After the climber was assessed and packaged for transport, the rescue team carried him the short distance to the road, and he was evacuated from the Ahwahnee meadow by medical helicopter at approximately 8:10 p.m.

Other climbers in the area stated the climber, a beginner, was being lowered on top-rope when the end of the rope slipped through the belayer's device. It was determined in these interviews that the fall was around 25 feet. The climber's rope, measured by NPS employees, was only about 98 feet long. The route is about 60 feet high and would require at least 120 feet of rope to lower a climber from the bottom.

Immediately following the Swan Slab accident, Yosemite dispatch received a report of a ground fall at Church Bowl. The reporting party stated that the climber was on Black is Brown (5.9) and had fallen about 20 feet. YOSAR found a male climber in his mid-20s at the base of the climb. He complained of hip and back pain, but had suffered no loss of consciousness. The patient had a helmet, which had impacted the rock and cracked during the fall. The climber was assessed in the hospital and released that evening with no major injuries.

In interviews after the accident, it was determined that the climber was being lowered from a tree anchor after leading the climb. At approximately 20 feet off the ground, the end of the climber's rope passed through his partner's belay device. While one guidebook states that the climb is 80 feet tall, the anchor that the climber used was over 100 feet off the ground, requiring a 70-meter rope to lower or rappel all the way to the ground. The patient believed his rope to be 70 meters, but the SAR noted that the rope was visibly cut at both ends, and upon measuring they determined the rope to be about 62 meters. This was the first time the two climbers had met and was the patient's first climb in Yosemite.

ANALYSIS

Both of these accidents could have been avoided with some basic safety measures.

Close the belay system. A stopper knot at the belayer's end of the rope or tying the belayer into his or her end would have prevented both of these ground falls.

Know your rope, know your route. Both parties were climbing on ropes that had been intentionally cut to a shorter length. If you choose to modify your rope, know exactly how long it is and tell your

climbing partners. And never blindly trust guidebooks. In the Church Bowl accident, the climber used an anchor that was roughly 30 feet higher than the guidebook's listed distance.

Both climbers impacted their heads during their falls. At Church Bowl, the climber's helmet was heavily damaged by the fall but he escaped serious injury. Without the helmet, the outcome could have been tragic. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images



Climbers on Swan Slab in Yosemite Valley.

Article Details

Author	Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	71
Page	39
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	Accident reports