



Rappel Anchor Failure – Trusting Old Gear

Utah, Zion National Park, Cerberus Wall

It was May 22, my fourth day living on the outskirts of Zion National Park. I had moved there for a summer job and was taking every opportunity to climb. That evening, my climbing partner and I took the park shuttle to Cerberus Wall. My partner jumped on the local classic Cherry Crack (5.10c), led it comfortably, and I followed to clean it.

I decided it was time to try another classic, Fails of Power (5.10+). I have been trad climbing for at least four years now, and prior to coming to Zion I could climb 5.10 without too much of an issue. I got pretty worked on this route, though. Toward the top, I was pumped and decided to run it out, hoping to get to a good rest and place a piece. It was getting dark (approximately 9:15 p.m.), so I wanted to hurry. My foot slipped, right at the end of the crux, and I took a good 25-foot whipper, ending up facing away from the rock and flipping over at the last minute.

After the fall, I was feeling really tired and I didn't think I could finish the route that day. I didn't have enough gear to aid to the anchors, either. Right at the base of the crux was a fixed cam, so I went back up the route to my last piece, just above the fixed cam. I clipped my belay loop to the fixed piece and bounce-tested it repeatedly while still clipped into the backup piece above it. I double-checked that the cam was truly fixed in the crack, and everything looked good.

Still clipped to my backup cam, I ran the rope through the old fixed cam, tested it once more, and then removed the backup and shifted all my weight to begin the rappel. About a foot into the rappel the cam popped out. The next thing I knew I was lying on the ground on top of the coiled rope, with rope burns all over. My partner had rope burns on his hands as well. He had been giving me a fireman's belay and tried to catch the rope as I fell.

My hip took most of the blow from the fall, along with my elbow and my heels. Miraculously I was okay, aside from severe bruising, whiplash, and rope burn. My partner ran down to ask the last park shuttle to wait for me. My head was spinning as I packed up my gear, but I did not seem to have a head injury, which was very fortunate. I did not have a helmet and somehow landed in the only flat spot—sharp rocks surrounded the area. We determined the fall was roughly 40 feet.

ANALYSIS

I trusted a single piece of fixed gear in desert sandstone. I didn't know how long it had been there, who had already worked on getting it out, or how strong it was. I believe that when my weight shifted from a somewhat outward pull to a straight downward pull the cam slipped. I understand that the sport we play is a risky one, but was it worth trying to save a little bit of money by not leaving a backup cam? Gear can be replaced, but life cannot. My partner also realized that he should have spoken up and asked me to leave my own gear.

I now have a whole new appreciation for making sure that gear is solid. And for wearing a helmet!
(Source: Benton Mitchell.)

Images



This vintage cam, found in a Zion crack, failed as a makeshift rappel anchor despite testing.

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