



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Inadequate Protection, Inexperience

British Columbia, Squamish, Stawamus Chief

My climbing partner, Scott, and I were first responders to an accident high on the Chief on September 7. We had climbed Rock On and planned to continue up the Squamish Buttress (mostly 5.6 with one 5.10c pitch; about six more pitches). At the top of Rock On, we met two climbers (Franz and Mitch, both in their early 20s), who had just finished Calculus Crack (5.8). They too intended to finish via the Squamish Buttress. We played rock-paper-scissors to see who went first, and they won the game and started climbing.

While I was leading the second-to-last and crux pitch, I heard what I thought was a substantial rockfall, then saw a body pendulum toward me, skipping and spinning off the wall, upside down. The climber stopped falling about 30 feet to my left, unconscious, very bloody, and still upside down. It was Mitch. He appeared to be dead for about one minute. I called down to Scott, my partner, to make sure he was okay, then quickly plugged in an anchor. Scott yelled up to take it slow and not to jeopardize our safety. It was a good reminder. During this communication, Mitch came back to consciousness with one enormous, gasping breath. He was reasonably alert and able to follow commands, but severely concussed. For the next hour, he would ask questions about where the blood came from and where he was.

The sheath of their rope was ripped clean for about 40 feet, and the rope showed core damage. We quickly formulated a plan for me to swing over to Mitch, clip him into me, and then Scott would lower both of us about 30 feet to his belay ledge from the temporary anchor I had built. Mitch's belayer, Franz, yelled down that he was still belaying Mitch with a Grigri and that he would be able to lower him as well.

Once down, we immobilized Mitch at the base of the crux pitch on a huge ledge. There was a lot of blood, but this was most likely from his nose; there were no open wounds on his head. We called for a rescue, and Mitch was airlifted off the Chief within two hours of the accident. We finished the climb as a team of three and walked down with Franz. Mitch survived with a serious concussion.

ANALYSIS

Mitch was leading the last pitch (5.6) when he fell. He had placed two small C3 cams right next to each other in a poor flaring seam, and both cams pulled out. He fell about 50 vertical feet and also pendulumed about 50 feet. Franz was flipped upside down, and I think he might have lost control of the belay if he had been using a tube-style device instead of a Grigri. I don't think Mitch would have survived if he had not been wearing a helmet. Both climbers were new to traditional, multi-pitch routes, and my partner and I observed that neither seemed to have solid technical skills.

On a separate note, it's a good idea to leave your car keys hidden near your car. Franz's shoes (and car keys) were in the backpack that fell off Mitch while he was upside down, and after descending the Chief in bare feet, he was somewhat stranded. (Source: Peter Morgan.)

Images



Helicopter rescue from Squamish Buttress.

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