



AAC Publications

Ground Fall – Protection Pulled Out

California, South Lake Tahoe, Lover's Leap

The Line (5.9), a popular traditional route, has been on my tick list for a couple of years. There's normally a conga line of climbers at the base, so my partner, Ben (30) and I (30) woke early on July 2 to make sure we were the first ones on the route. I had been climbing a lot, so I was confident that the route would be well within my abilities. I racked up quickly with only a brief check of the beta for which cams to bring. I didn't read the route description in detail, which said that the crux was 20 feet off the deck and difficult to protect.

The first 15 feet was very easy terrain (<5.6). I remember skipping a placement, thinking that it was too close to the ground and wouldn't do anything in a fall, and that there was no way I was going to fall. About 20 to 25 feet above the ground, the jugs disappeared, and I realized I was at the crux. I fiddled around, trying to get a piece into a small flared crack until I was satisfied with the placement of a 0.3/0.4 Black Diamond X4 Offset. The crux above the piece consisted of thin, slippery 5.9 face moves. I started getting nervous because I was expecting a crack crux—I was less confident in my face climbing than my crack climbing.

Because the cam was right at my feet and I thought it was a great placement, I decided to just go for it. As I began to make the move, my foot slipped. I started falling and watched as the cam popped out of the rock. I hit the ground (luckily missing some boulders) and presumably landed on my right side, with my right wrist absorbing most of the impact. I rolled several feet before stopping.

Luckily, there was a wilderness EMT waiting to get on the climb who assessed my injuries while another climber called 911. Due to the amount of pain in my wrist as well as some pain in my lower spine, I could not hike out. I ended up being airlifted to a nearby trauma center where I learned that I had not broken my back but had shattered my right wrist, broke my left thumb, and had a mild concussion.

ANALYSIS

There are a number of things I could have done differently, with the most important being that I should have done more research on the climb. If I had, I would have known that the crux was face climbing, not crack climbing, and that it had ground-fall potential, so I probably should not have skipped the lower placement. I did not extend my only piece with a quickdraw or sling, so it's possible that the cam got dislodged from its original placement. I also could have placed a backup piece in the crack. Finally, one should never just "go for it" in trad climbing—no piece is 100 percent bomber.

(Source: Jean C.) Editor's note: This particular route has seen a number of ground falls, including one earlier this year (2018), suggesting leaders who are near their limit should be taking additional care to protect the crux moves.

Images

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