



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – No Backup, No Helmet

California, Yosemite Valley, Glacier Point Apron

At 6:59 p.m. on June 10, Yosemite dispatch received a report that a climber had rappelled off the end of her rope while descending Harry Daley (2 pitches, 5.8). Barbara (mid-30s, not her real name) was now on top of the fourth-class pinnacle that marks the start of the climb. By the time YOSAR arrived on scene, Barbara's boyfriend (early 30s) had rappelled down to join Barbara on top of the pinnacle. Barbara was not wearing a helmet and had suffered major head trauma, but was alive and able to communicate with SAR personnel. The boyfriend told responders that she had lost consciousness for several minutes after the fall.

Once the SAR team stabilized and packaged Barbara in a litter, they lowered her from the pinnacle and carried her out to an ambulance at the parking area. She had multiple spinal and skull fractures, a broken nose, simple pneumothorax, a broken rib, and a number of more superficial injuries, but she lived.

ANALYSIS

To the best of her recollection, Barbara had been rappelling the second pitch of Harry Daley. She had descended about 10 to 15 feet past the usual belay stance atop the first pitch and swung left to pick up some equipment they had dropped while climbing. She retrieved both pieces, clipped them to her harness, and moved back right. After this, she stated, the last thing she remembers was noticing that there was not very much rope left below her tube-style rappel device.

The rappels from this two-pitch route can be done with two 60-meter ropes or a single 70-meter, but the first rappel is a stretcher with a 70. It is believed the climbers were using a 70-meter rope. Barbara did not have any knots tied in the end of her rope, and did not have a hands-free back up. Barbara, who had six or seven years of climbing experience, five of which involved outdoor lead climbing, stated in a follow-up interview that she used to always tie knots in the ends of her rope while rappelling but stopped due to friends making fun of her.

A hands-free backup (such as an autoblock) might not have prevented this accident, but it would have given Barbara more control during this rappel. Because she has no memory of her fall, we don't know whether she simply rappelled off the end or lost control of the rope.

Finally, Barbara's head injuries may have been less severe had she been wearing a helmet. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images

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