



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Speed Climbing, Inadequate Protection

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

On October 11, Quinn Brett (female, 30s) was attempting a Nose in a Day ascent with Josie McKee when she took a very long fall while leading the right side of the Boot Flake. The two women were using speed-climbing tactics: Brett was effectively roped soloing while McKee ascended a portion of their rope that had been fixed to the previous anchor, at the top of Texas Flake. Brett had back-cleaned several aid pieces between the top of the bolt ladder off Texas Flake and the bottom of Boot Flake, and she did not leave any protection in Boot Flake, a hand crack rated 5.10c. Consequently, when she fell, the fall distance was greater than 100 feet. She impacted the sloping left side of Texas Flake (her right scapula took the brunt of the fall) and came to a stop among some boulders lower down without the rope coming tight. She was wearing a helmet, but it came off during the fall or impact.

McKee, a veteran of YOSAR, rappelled to Brett, telephoned for help, and prepared the scene for a rescue. Rangers were heli-slung to the top of El Cap Tower, just below Texas Flake. They placed Brett in a litter, and she and a ranger were flown off the wall to El Cap Meadow. McKee and another ranger then rappelled to the ground.

ANALYSIS

Both Brett and McKee were expert climbers with numerous speed ascents (including speed records) on El Capitan and other walls. Brett does not remember exactly what caused her fall. She explained that when climbing Boot Flake during a speed ascent she normally would clip cams to semi-dynamic tethers attached to her harness, and she would back herself up with one or both cams as she climbed the hand crack. Just before the fall, she remembers removing a red (number 1) Camalot from the crack and watching it and the tether drop between her legs, but she isn't certain if she prepared or placed a larger cam on the other tether before falling—that is, whether a cam pulled out of the crack or if she was completely unprotected when she fell.

Speed climbing of big-wall routes often involves long runouts and tactics that shave safety margins razor-thin. Brett had climbed the Nose eight times before and had never fallen on Boot Flake. She survived a seemingly unsurvivable fall but suffered numerous injuries, the most serious of which was a burst fracture of the 12th thoracic vertebra, leading to paralysis from approximately the waist down. (Source: The Editors.)

Images



Rescue helicopter prepares to fly Quinn Brett and a Yosemite ranger from Texas Flake on the Nose. Brett fell from the right side of Boot Flake, partially hidden behind the helicopter.

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