



## AAC Publications

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### **Leader Fall – Inexperience, Inadequate Belay**

California, Santa Monica Mountains, Echo Cliff

**On December 3, my climbing partners Dave and Sam and a newly introduced third partner, Johnny, met up at Echo Cliffs and hiked to the crag called Easy Street.** We split into teams of two, setting up ropes alongside each other. Dave and I began on Charlie Hustle (5.10a), while Sam and Johnny climbed Casey at the Bat (5.10b). Dave, a much stronger and more experienced climber than me, led our pitch. We were in direct sun and were all quickly drenched in sweat.

I successfully top-roped the route, feeling good and strong, and we decided to switch routes with Johnny and Sam. "You should lead this one, Sarah. I think you'd really like it," Sam told me as we transitioned. I hesitated, but my ego cushioned my nerves and I agreed to lead. Though I had been introduced to climbing as a child, I had just started to get serious about climbing four months prior to this trip. I had led a number of sport routes but had never taken a lead fall.

As I began the route, clipping the first three bolts, I began to feel more confident. At the third bolt, on a roof, I moved right using a ledge below. I took my time to feel for the best holds and calculate my moves over the roof. Dave had given me some slack, and I noticed that there was too much out, considering the ledge below. I felt inclined to voice this concern, but at that moment someone passed by and caught Dave's attention. Instead of interjecting for the sake of my safety and success, I decided to make the move. I reached with my left hand onto a positive but greasy hold, and as my weight transferred onto it I fell. The slack in the rope from the traverse and excess down at the belay resulted in a fall of 10 to 12 feet, past the ledge and onto an outwardly curved rock just below. My right foot took the complete force of the fall.

With the help of my partners, who piggybacked me much of the way, we made it back to the parking lot. The next day, I was diagnosed with a fractured right talus that required surgery, leaving me with a five-inch incision, two screws, and one plate to stabilize the fractured pieces of my ankle.

#### **ANALYSIS**

As a novice leader, I was naive when it came to observing fall lines, the risks involved in roofs and ledges, and the effects of the warmer weather. I was also insecure when it came to voicing my concerns to my belay partner when it was crucial to do so. Plus, my belayer was distracted during a crucial part of my climb. The belayer should always be "with me," with eyes focused on my climb and assessing risk from his/her viewpoint. In addition, none of us had a first-aid kit. A helpful climber offered me some anti-inflammatory medicine before we hiked out, but having NSAIDs of our own and splinting supplies would have been helpful. (Source: Sarah Trudeau.)

Editor's note: Falling is a part of sport climbing and is a learned skill. Though it might not have prevented this injury, practicing short leader falls in a safe environment (such as a gym), with an experienced mentor, can help novice climbers learn to take relaxed falls with feet and legs prepared to absorb impacts.

## Images

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