



AAC Publications

Lowering Error – Rope Too Short, No Stopper Knot

Vermont, Bolton Quarry

On September 29, DP and JC (both age 23) were climbing Wandering the Halls, a 5.8+ sport climb, at Bolton Quarry climbing area. DP described himself as a novice climber; JC was the more experienced of the two. DP was top-roping, with JC belaying from a wide ledge at the start of the climb. DP trailed a second rope that was 50 meters long. When he reached the top of the climb, he cleaned the anchor and threaded the trailing rope through the rappel rings, and JC switched belaying from the lead rope to the trailing rope in preparation to lower DP. It was now dark and both climbers were using headlamps.

To attach himself to the trailing rope, DP tied a figure-8 on a bight somewhere near the middle of the rope and clipped this bight to his harness with a carabiner. This meant there was approximately 25 meters of rope between DP and his belayer available for lowering. The climb is approximately 15 meters high, which meant there was not enough rope to lower DP all the way to the bottom of the route. The climbers had failed to put a stopper knot at the end of the rope, so when the end reached JC, it passed through his belay device. DP fell to the ledge, then fell another three to five meters to the ground. He suffered multiple injuries, including a spinal fracture.

ANALYSIS

The primary causes of the accident were the climber tying into the middle of the rope instead of the end, which resulted in insufficient length to complete the lower-off, and the climbers failing to put a stopper knot in the other end of the rope to close the system. Either action likely would have prevented the accident.

It is unclear why DP trailed a rope to lower off instead of simply using the rope with which he was top-roping. This decision added complexity to their rope management. In addition, finishing in the dark and using headlamps is not ideal for situational awareness. The late hour of the climb also may have led to a sense of urgency, resulting in some carelessness. (Source: Neil Van Dyke, Vermont Department of Public Safety.)

Images

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