



## AAC Publications

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### **Fall on Rock – Communication Error, Taken Off Belay**

Colorado, Boulder Canyon, The Dome

**On August 5, I and another emergency physician witnessed a horrific fall from the Dome.** We were scouting locations for an upcoming practice session, as we both volunteer for Rocky Mountain Rescue Group. I saw the climber bounce several times, then fall out of sight. I called 911 to report an estimated 60- to 70-foot fall and let dispatch know a technical rescue would be needed.

When we reached the scene, the climber was suspended on his rope about three feet off the ground, unconscious and bloodied. A bystander cut the rope with a knife, and the injured climber was lowered by several people to the ground. The climber, age 27, regained consciousness after several minutes. He was loaded in a litter and carried down the Dome approach trail, and was in an ambulance less than an hour after the accident occurred. He ended up with multiple injuries, including a concussion, wicked road rash, and some fractures, but no surgeries. I ran into him at a local pub (using crutches and with a neck brace) about a week later!

#### **ANALYSIS**

The climber, who had some experience, was with two beginners. He had climbed East of the Sun (5.7) and was planning to set up a top-rope on the East Slab using his single rope. After building an anchor at the top, he leaned back to lower, but he had been taken off belay. The climber bounced down the entire slab until, miraculously, an overhand knot in the end of the rope caught in a carabiner clipped to his first piece of protection. I don't know if this knot was placed intentionally, but this piece, a wired nut about 30 feet off the deck, kept him from hitting the ground. The fall was well over 100 feet.

When talking with him later in the pub, the climber accepted responsibility for what had happened, as he was the most experienced one there. He did not remember the fall or the rescue. The party's inexperience resulted in a classic communication error: The climber was taken off belay before being lowered.

Before leaving the ground, the climber should always explain to the belayer his or her plan for when the pitch is completed (lower, rappel, bring up the next climber, etc.). The belayer must not take the climber off belay without audible or visual confirmation that the climber is anchored and off belay. As a side note, the plan to top-rope this formation with a single rope was flawed: Even a 70-meter rope will not reach the ground at this point when doubled. (Sources: Dr. Alison Sheets and the Editors.)

## Images



The Dome in Boulder Canyon. A climber fell from the top to the approximate area marked by the arrow, before a knot in his rope snagged and prevented him from hitting the ground.

## Article Details

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