



AAC Publications

Lowering Error – Rope Too Short

Colorado, South Platte Region, Devils Head

This accident occurred after a climber completed a long route (Sex Face, 5.12a) during which he linked two pitches from the ground. While descending from the top of the second pitch, the climber was lowered off the end of the rope, resulting in a ground fall of approximately 25 feet. The climber landed on his back on uneven rocks, resulting in significant injuries necessitating helicopter evacuation, hospitalization, and surgery. Injuries included abrasions, lacerations, fracture, spinal injury, internal injuries, hemopneumothorax, and subsequent pulmonary edema.

ANALYSIS

As is often the case, a series of “small” errors overlapped to cause a large accident.

Rope too short. The climber was told by multiple people that the two pitches of this climb could be linked and lowered using a 70-meter rope. The climber’s rope originally had been 80 meters long but had been cut down. The climber believed his rope was still more than 70 meters long, but was incorrect. It was later measured at just over 55 meters.

Belay system not closed. The climber had tied a stopper knot in the end of the rope at the beginning of the day. However, while seconding the route just prior to the one where the accident occurred, the belayer untied the stopper knot in order to tie in to her harness. After completing that route, she pulled the rope and the stopper knot was not replaced. Neither party caught the error.

It also may have been a factor that the belayer climbed primarily indoors and was not in the habit of placing stopper knots or otherwise closing the system. As a climber, checking the stopper knot should be part of your pre-climb ritual, just as you would check your knot and make sure you’re on belay. Use this habit indoors to ingrain it into your practice.

Belayer failed to keep track of the end of the rope, thus allowing it to pass through the belay device. Focus primarily on the end of the rope while lowering rather than the climber. Lower slowly. Tie the rope to the rope bag, which would provide an auditory and visual clue the rope end is near.

Distraction. During the lower-off, another person was talking to the climber and belayer. It’s possible this small distraction contributed to the belayer and climber failing to notice the inadequate rope remaining.

Situational awareness. Racking more than 20 quickdraws and linking two pitches should have been red flags for the climber and belayer, reminding them that this long route would require extra care while lowering. (Source: Anonymous report from the climber.)

Images

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