Ground Fall – Inadequate Belay, No Helmet

Kentucky, Red River Gorge, Roadside Crag

Early in the afternoon on August 27, EJ and LS (both age 21) were climbing Trouble Clef (5.9), an 80-foot sport route, when EJ took a lead fall above the last protection bolt as he neared the anchors. LS, who was belaying with a tube-style device, failed to arrest the fall. The resulting ground fall of approximately 70 feet caused abrasions, lacerations, and concussion/head trauma. It was LS's first time belaying, and a backup belayer was not employed. Wolfe County Search and Rescue performed a carry-out to waiting paramedics, and the subject was transported via helicopter to University of Kentucky Trauma Hospital, where he was treated for head injuries. The climber was not wearing a helmet.

ANALYSIS

The climber weighed 195 pounds and the belayer about 115 pounds—a difference of approximately 80 pounds. This resulted in the belayer getting pulled up the cliff face when the climber fell. It is likely that this jolt and the belayer's impact with the cliff caused this inexperienced belayer to lose control of the brake strand.

As a general rule, belayers should stand directly underneath the first piece of protection to minimize the distance he or she is pulled up and across the ground while arresting a fall. A ground anchor or ballast also could have been used. Perhaps most important, given this belayer's inexperience, a backup belayer should have been employed.

Two types of belay technology can help a belayer who is much lighter than the climber. The Edelrid Ohm, a device that is clipped to the first bolt of a sport climb or gym climb, is specifically designed to mitigate the effects of weight disparities between climbers and belayers. In addition, an assisted braking belay device might have prevented loss of control by the belayer. (Source: Wolfe County Search and Rescue.)

Images

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