



AAC Publications

Fall on Ice – Fatigue, Dehydration

New York, Adirondacks, Chapel Pond

I took a 40-foot fall on ice at Chapel Pond, smashed my face, and suffered a traumatic brain injury, but lived to tell about it. It was February 8, and I was guiding Rhiannon, a 200-foot WI4+ line in the Power Play amphitheater, above Chapel Pond. It was a warm day, and I was not feeling well as we headed up to the base. I was moving so slowly while getting ready that my client asked me if I was okay. I told her I didn't feel great, but I figured I'd be fine as soon as I started climbing.

A lot of people climb Rhiannon in two pitches, but I usually do it in one with 70-meter half ropes. The first part of the climb is a steep slab up to a ledge, then a long vertical piece with a short, steep headwall at the very top.

The ice was wet above the ledge, and I didn't want my client to have to stop in the dripping ice to take out protection, so I placed my last screw at the ledge (that's normally how I climb the route anyway). About 20 feet above the ledge, I stopped just below the steepest part of the climb and got ready to place another screw. My tools were firmly planted when it happened: My brain shut down—I short-circuited and blacked out. I didn't blow out any ice, my tools didn't pop, my feet didn't pop. I literally just let go of my tools for a split second. I came to immediately and was very confused. I knew I was falling, but I didn't know why. I had enough time to think, "This is not going to be good."

My client said that, watching from below, it looked like I was climbing normally and then she saw my body kind of slump, and then I was off.

I fell about 40 feet and smashed into the ice, face-first, and then slid another 10 to 20 feet. I'm sure there was some rope stretch, as there always is with half ropes. You always fall a lot farther than you think you're going to. When I hit the ledge I got knocked out, I don't know for how long, and then I woke up. My first thought when I came to was, "OK, I'm alive." My second thought was "Holy, s***, there's a lot of blood."

My client lowered me to the base and untied me from the rope, and I got up and walked out with her. At the hospital in Burlington, Vermont, the doctors said I had a cerebral hemorrhage and I had broken every plate in my face; I broke my nose in 10 places. I also had some minor soft-tissue injuries. Luckily, my face has healed, and I didn't need reconstructive surgery. My brain continues to heal.

ANALYSIS

I'm still not sure why I blacked out, but it was probably a combination of things. I was pushing really hard last season, climbing in the backcountry a lot and just pushing, pushing, pushing. I may have been quite dehydrated as well, and I wasn't eating well, especially for that kind of output. After my hospitalization, in a follow-up appointment, I had my Vitamin D level tested and it was very low. I don't know if that had anything to do with the accident, but I'm on a supplement now. I've also changed my diet and lost weight. I'm back to climbing hard routes and guiding.

If there's a lesson here, it's take care of yourself and pay attention to how you feel. I always had a tendency to push through things and say, "I'll be fine." And this day I knew I wasn't feeling well. This accident made me think about my health and also got me into a renewed frame of mind. It's sort of

like, “Wow, I got another shot, let’s try to be a little smarter about this.” (Source: Matt Horner.)

Editor’s note: Working guides often run it out to make seconding easier for their clients, but the consequences of a mistake or outside factors (rockfall, illness, etc.) can be severe, not just for the guide but potentially the client as well.

Images



A climber on the crux of Rhiannon, above the sloping ledge where Matt Horner impacted.

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