



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – Uneven Ropes, Inexperience, No Helmet

North Carolina, Pilot Mountain State Park

On October 21, JM (40) attempted a rappel from the top of the climb Honey Pot (5.5), located in the Three Bears area. As she rappelled, one end of the rope passed through her device and she fell approximately 30 feet, hitting a ledge, and then fell to the ground, striking her head. Climbers with medical training were on the scene immediately and were able to perform basic first aid. EMTs arrived on site approximately 30 minutes later. She was conscious immediately after the fall. She had a large head laceration, four missing teeth and two fractured neck vertebrae. She was not wearing a helmet.

Multiple witnesses noted seeing JM at the top of the rock face and saw her throw her rope down to rappel. They also reported noticing that the doubled rope was uneven and that one end did not reach the ground but extended only about 10 feet down from the anchors. All witnesses stated that the time between noticing her rope being uneven and when she began the rappel was only a matter of seconds and that no one could stop her before she came to the short end of the rope and it passed through her device.

ANALYSIS

The climber failed to ensure both ends of the rope were on the ground before beginning to rappel. She also did not tie stopper knots on the rope ends. She had been told by her partner earlier in the day not to set up an anchor unless someone else was there to observe. Another witness watched her set up a top anchor earlier in the day, and although it was set up correctly, the witness said she displayed a lack of safety awareness as she worked at the top of the rock face.

It's apparent that JM rushed the rappel setup and moved quickly onto the ropes. For critical transitions like going on a rappel, take an extra moment to verify everything is correct. In addition, if JM had yelled "Rope!" or "On rappel!" to the climbers below before starting down, this might have given them additional opportunity to warn her. Experienced climbers need to speak up immediately when they observe a technique or behavior that puts a climber in imminent danger. (Sources: Karsten Delap, Pilot Mountain State Park, and Aram Attarian.)

Images

RAPPEL CHECK

Before any rappel, use the BRAKES acronym for a quick safety check:

Buckles: Harness properly buckled and doubled back?

Rope properly threaded through rappel rings? Rappel device properly loaded and clipped to belay loop with locked carabiner?

Anchor setup and materials thoroughly examined?

Knots all OK?

Ends of rope equal, reach the ground, and closed with stopper knots?

Safety backup (“third hand”) or belay in place? Any sharp edges threatening the rope?

The BRAKES acronym is a useful checklist for rappelling safety.

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