



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Inattentive Belay

Oregon, Smith Rock, Smith Rock Group, Northeast Face

On November 21 at around 11 a.m., two experienced climbers were attempting a multi-pitch sport route called Lost in Space (5.10b). Climber 1 (male, age 28) was leading the third pitch of the route. After clipping the third bolt, a foothold broke, causing him to fall approximately 15 feet, hit the belay ledge, knock off a large chunk of rock, and continue to fall an additional five feet before being caught by his belayer. The climber sustained injuries to his left ankle that were later diagnosed as a non-displaced fracture of the talus and calcaneus. Climber 2, the belayer (male, age 35), was clear of the path of the falling rock and escaped unharmed.

The climbers were using a 60-meter rope, which was of insufficient length for rappelling to the ground from their location. Climber 2 led the rest of the climb and assisted his injured partner up the remaining pitches to the top, from which they descended by an established rappel route.

ANALYSIS

Despite being friends for a number of years, the two had only climbed together on rare occasions. Prior to the day of the accident, they had climbed for two days at Smith Rock. During this time, Climber 1 reported noticing Climber 2 had a nonchalant attitude toward belaying (e.g. sitting down, excessive slack in the system) but did not express his discomfort with these belay methods. While on Lost in Space, Climber 2 sat on the belay ledge with his back to the Climber 1 and doled out slack at regular intervals without being cognizant of the amount of slack in the system and the climber's position on the wall. Climber 1 had just clipped the third bolt, above his waist, when the foothold broke and initiated the fall. With appropriate slack in the system, he should have fallen only about five feet.

The takeaway here is to speak up if a climber is concerned about the belayer's technique, including maintaining positive control of the brake strand of the rope, maintaining visual contact with the climber on the wall, and adjusting the slack in the system to avoid ledge falls. (Source: Climber 1.)

Images

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