



## AAC Publications

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### **Simul-Rappelling Error – No Backups**

Washington, Methow Valley, Goat Wall, Sisyphus

**About 9:15 a.m. on May 29, Shelby Withington, 20, and three other climbers finished the seventh pitch on Sisyphus, a multi-pitch 5.11 sport route. The group decided to descend there rather than finish the easier last three pitches.**

In order to save time, Withington and his crew opted to simul-rappel in pairs rather than do individual rappels. Withington and his partner went first. The two were not in sync, and Withington's partner reached the belay ledge at the top of the sixth pitch first and then apparently let go of his strand of the rope (as one would typically do upon reaching a ledge in a normal, solo rappel). The climbers had not tied stopper knots in the ends of the rope, so the rope slipped through the partner's device, allowing Withington to fall. One of the climbers at the upper anchor attempted to grab the rope as it pulled through the anchor and was seriously burned but unable to stop the rope. Withington fell about 300 feet before he struck a ledge, then fell another 200 feet or so to the base of the climb. Another team preparing to climb Sisyphus witnessed the accident and called 911. A rescue team helped Withington's partners descend. (Sources: Okanogan Search and Rescue and published accounts.)

### **ANALYSIS**

Simul-rappelling relies on counterbalance, with each side of the rope weighted simultaneously and continuously. Withington and his partner could have ensured they were descending at the same speed and arrived at the ledge at the same time, so they could unweight the system together. A stopper knot and/or friction-hitch backup on the partner's rope might have prevented the rope from slipping through his device.

Simul-rappelling has been the cause of several fatalities in recent years. Although it is theoretically faster than rappelling one at a time, the extra care that must be taken to ensure a safe simul-rappel erases much of that benefit. It is not a recommended technique. (Source: The Editors.)

## Images

## Article Details

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