



AAC Publications

Ledge Fall – Inadequate Protection, Speed Climbing

California, Yosemite National Park, El Capitan, The Nose

On May 3, Hans Florine and a climbing partner started a climb of the Nose of El Capitan at approximately 7 a.m. Both are highly experienced. Florine has made over 100 ascents of the Nose and has held the speed record on the route; his partner had climbed El Cap multiple times, including speed ascents of the Nose with Florine. The two were planning to do the route in 10 to 12 hours.

At some point in the first half of the climb, the team dropped a gear sling that contained some of their smaller cams, leaving them with only a set of small nuts and Camalots 0.5 and larger. The two decided that it was reasonable to continue up the route, improvising in spots with the gear that they had.

On pace for a 12-hour time, the team arrived at the Pancake Flake (pitch 22) with Florine in the lead. To move quickly through such technical terrain, the team was “short fixing.” This technique involves pulling up the excess rope at the end of a pitch and fixing it for the second to jumar. The leader then self-belays into the next pitch until he runs out of rope or his partner arrives at the anchor and puts the leader on a normal belay. This is an advanced speed climbing technique that saves time but can increase risk to the leader.

After climbing the initial hand crack on Pancake Flake, Florine arrived at Triangle Ledge, a stance that marks the start of a thin crack just before the next anchor. Not having the ideal gear for this section, Florine started up the corner, placing three small nuts and one cam. His next piece, a nut, failed when he weighted it. He fell approximately 20 feet, striking Triangle Ledge along the way, before the cam he had placed arrested his fall. He was still self-belaying at the time.

Both legs were injured in the fall (a pilon fracture in one leg and a shattered calcaneus in the other). The climbers were unable to rappel the route because of Florine’s injuries. He pulled himself up onto Triangle Ledge and had already called 911 for help by the time his partner arrived at the anchor below.

Due to the non-life-threatening nature of the injuries as well as high winds, it was decided that a “top down” rescue was the safest option for accessing the patient. The plan was to shuttle the SAR team and gear to a landing site on top of El Cap using a helicopter. Then the decision to raise Florine to the top or lower him to the bottom would be made, based on environmental conditions at the time.

While talking to the SAR team on the phone, Florine asked about trying to rappel to a larger ledge where pain management would be easier. It was decided by both parties that rappelling to the Gray Ledges, about 300 to 400 feet below the site of the accident, was the best option.

By 7 p.m., rescuers had reached the climbers, and soon the decision was made to raise the patient to the summit. After being treated for pain and packaged into a litter, a long-hauling operation began, and at approximately 10 p.m., Florine and the two rescue team members arrived at the summit. (Florine’s partner rappelled to the base of El Capitan.) The patient spent the night on top of the Nose with the SAR team, receiving medical care from paramedics. Early the next day, he was flown down to El Cap Meadow.

ANALYSIS

Protect yourself over ledges. While a 20-foot fall in overhanging terrain or on a blank wall can present little risk, any ledge or protrusion can introduce serious consequences. If climbing above a ledge, place gear early and often.

Reassess risks during a climb. After dropping the gear sling with the smaller cams, the team could have chosen to turn around. Although both climbers were very knowledgeable about the terrain above, the loss of those pieces of protection greatly enhanced the seriousness of the upper part of the climb.

Speed climbing. Speed climbing techniques—and mindset—can put climbers at greater risk. Less gear, non-standard belay techniques, and haste add risk and consequences to already difficult climbs. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

An interview with Hans Florine about this incident is featured in episode 30 of the Sharp End podcast:

Images



Yosemite rangers Brandon Latham (left) and Philip Johnson, having lowered from the top of El Capitan, arrive at the Gray Ledges to retrieve an injured Hans Florine (right).

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