



AAC Publications

Lowering Error – Inexperience, No Stopper Knot

California, Yosemite Valley, Reed's Pinnacle

On May 7 two climbers headed to the route Lunatic Fringe (single-pitch 5.10c). The leader was fairly experienced (four to five years), and the belayer had about 1.5 years of experience. The two had climbed together the day before in the Valley. Lunatic Fringe was at the leader's limit for traditional lead climbing in the area, and he hung twice while on the route. After arriving at the anchors, the leader clipped in direct and then pulled his blue 65-meter rope up through the gear he had placed and dropped an end back down to the belayer. The leader then tagged up a second rope (green 60-meter). The climb is roughly 43 to 45 meters high and requires two ropes to rappel or top-rope.

Once the leader had hauled up the green line, he tied the ends together using a flat overhand with a backup. He rigged the knot on the side of the anchor that would allow the green line to be pulled to retrieve the two ropes. At this moment, the leader was perfectly set up to rappel to the ground safely. Instead, he tied a bight in the green rope approximately one meter below the joined ends and clipped this to his harness with a locking carabiner. (Rock & Ice magazine reported that he had forgotten his rappel device and thus decided to lower instead of rappel.) He unclipped from the anchor and asked the belayer to lower him with the blue rope that was threaded through the anchor; essentially he would be lowering on his single 65-meter lead rope. When the end of the blue rope reached the belayer, it passed through her tube-style device and the leader fell approximately 10 meters to the ground. He suffered numerous serious injuries.

ANALYSIS

Rappelling from these anchors with two ropes tied together is the preferred option. If the leader forgot his rappel device, he could have asked the belayer to tie it to a rope and then hauled it up. Instead, the leader switched plans to lower but did not have a good understanding of the consequences of his chosen method, nor did he and the belayer communicate clearly about the new plan. Despite the faulty lowering plan, closing the belay system still could have prevented the leader's ground fall. A knot was found at the end of the green line, but the blue rope (on which the leader effectively was lowering) had no stopper knot and was not tied to the belayer. (Sources: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers and the Editors.)

Images

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