



AAC Publications

Leader Fall on Rock – Loose Rock, Inadequate Protection

California, Sierra National Forest, Windy Cliff

I try to climb a first ascent on my birthday, October 20, every year, and this time my friends Vitaliy and Adam and I had selected the south face of Windy Cliff. It lies on the north side of the South Fork of the Kings River, just outside of Kings Canyon National Park. The rock is marble, which can have notoriously bad sections.

After a search for the best looking rock on the cliff, Vitaliy took the first pitch, and Adam and I followed up to a small stance. I started hesitantly up the second pitch, testing the rock carefully before every move. When I reached a short bulge, I placed a bolt above the lip, as there was no adequate protection nearby. I placed a number 3 Camalot about four feet above the bolt, and the rock quality improved noticeably. There was a nice ledge ahead, with a number 3 size crack above it, so I reached down and back-cleaned the Camalot below my feet before continuing.

There were a couple of thin moves before the ledge. After knocking on one grapefruit-size hold, I could tell it wasn't super solid, but the climbing was less than vertical so I thought it would stay in place if I didn't pull out on it. However, as I began to transfer my weight, the hold came loose. My reflex was to push the rock back into position to keep it from hitting my partners or the rope. This worked, but I came off and began sliding down the rock with my hands extended straight up and my toes pointing straight down. After falling about 15 feet, I hit a small ledge about the size of a license plate. I bounced off this ledge and fell six feet more before the rope caught me.

Only the balls of my feet had hit the small stance, which forced my toes toward my shins. The tendon of my calf muscle (flexor hallucis longus) in both legs tightened until it fractured the inside of my calcaneus in my left foot and shattered the calcaneus in my right foot. My feet quickly swelled and I had to remove my shoes. Vitaliy and Adam lowered me to their stance, then down to the ground with our other rope.

Vitaliy is an emergency department nurse, and Adam is a physical therapist, and they made the wise suggestion that we use my emergency beacon to call for help. However, I was not comfortable with asking rescuers to try to reach me in this windy canyon without a life-threatening injury, so I put tape on my hands and started scooting down the gully toward the river. Adam and Vitaliy carried all the gear, setting rappels on the sections that were too steep to scoot. They carried me across the Kings River, and I crawled the remaining stretch up to the road.

ANALYSIS

I made a beginner mistake: I knew there was a chance of loose rock, and yet I was moving quickly to make up for lost time. If I had not back-cleaned the cam (or had brought more protection), I would have stopped falling above the impact point. I am generally very careful to protect routes to avoid hitting the ground or ledges, but was not as careful as I should have been here. A tiny ledge can have the same effect as a large ledge if you hit it wrong. (Source: Daniel Jeffcoach.)

Images

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