



AAC Publications

Lowering Error – No Stopper Knot

Colorado, Clear Creek Canyon, Creekside

On April 28, three buddies and I set out to climb Playin' Hooky, a three- or four-pitch bolted 5.8. By the time we made it to the crag, there were two other parties waiting to get on the same route. We checked the book and decided to get on the route next door: Furlough Day, reported to be a 125-foot 5.9. I loaded up on quickdraws and set off.

The belay platform was a shelf of rock about 20 feet above Clear Creek. The route traversed climber's left for about 20 feet to the first bolt. After clipping this bolt I was feeling relieved, because a fall before then would have taken me straight into the river.

I climbed the route with one fall. On the way down, my belay partner, who has more climbing experience than me, lowered me at a good pace. He stopped me at the third bolt to unclip the rope, then lowered me to the second bolt to do the same. (This was in hope that the rope would stay clipped to the first bolt when we pulled it, so the next leader would not have to make the same unprotected traverse.) I remember unclipping the rope from that second bolt and then free-falling.

I saw my belay partner reaching for the falling rope, and I heard and felt a thump as I hit the belay deck. Seconds after that, I fell into the icy river below. I shot up out of the water, stunned but alive. I felt no pain at that moment, just utter disbelief. I had cuts and scrapes on my body, and blood was soaking my pants.

Once my belay partner got down to me, he patched up my elbows, which both had some nice splits in them. After I'd sat on the bank for about 10 minutes, the pain started to set in. I had a feeling that my left shoulder or wrist, and maybe my ribs, were broken. However, I determined that I did not need a rescue. I limped about a quarter of a mile to the car, and we drove to the closest urgent care center.

I ended up with a collapsed lung, two broken ribs, two stitches in my elbow, and contusions in my right elbow and right buttock. I was transferred to a hospital and admitted for the collapsed lung.

ANALYSIS

We were climbing on a 70-meter rope, which is considered adequate for lowering from the first-pitch anchors of Furlough Day. [Editor's note: Although this pitch is longer than one half of a 70-meter rope, it is possible to lower to the belay ledge with a 70m with care. One of the two current guidebooks to this area and Mountain Project stress the length of the pitch and the importance of tying a stopper knot at the belayer's end of the rope. It's also important to note that rope lengths vary, generally shrinking with use and age, and not all "70s" are the same.] **As I was lowering, my belay partner did not notice the rope had almost run out even though I still needed to descend another 20 feet. The end of the rope zipped through the belay device, which led to my fall. We both shared responsibility for the mistakes that were made. We should have tied a stopper knot in the rope and taken more time with this exposed descent. I blame this a lot on myself and my anxious tendencies to go, go, go.** (Source: Patrick Stefanik.)

Editor's note: Patrick Stefanik was interviewed about this incident for episode 32 of the Sharp End podcast:

Images



The Creekside area of Clear Creek Canyon, showing the approximate location of Furlough Day (5.9). The first pitch ends just above the top of the photo. When a climber was lowered off the end of his 70-meter rope, he fell past the belay ledge and into the creek below.

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