



AAC Publications

Fall From Anchor – Rappel Error

Kentucky, Red River Gorge, Muir Valley, Sunnyside

On April 27, Seamus Hehir (26) fell approximately 50 feet after incorrectly setting up a rappel to clean the route Suppress the Rage (5.12a) at Sunnyside wall. According to his belayer, Jake McCrary (32), Seamus hit a boulder at the base of the climb and continued falling down an embankment roughly 20 feet. McCrary called 911 while another member of their climbing party, a physician assistant, began first aid. Wolfe County Search and Rescue responded, and Hehir was airlifted to a Level I trauma center in Lexington. He sustained a broken back, a broken neck, and a head laceration. He was not wearing a helmet.

Due to the nature of the injuries, the climber has little memory of the accident or setting up the rappel. The climbers at the base of the route removed Hehir's rappel device from his harness after he fell, and McCrary said that only one line was clipped through the tube-style device. After the incident, the rope ran from the base up through the quickdraws on the route and then down to the climber on the ground, but it was not threaded through the anchors. McCrary concluded that Hehir had only clipped his device with the side of the rope that ran from the ground through the draws, then pulled the other side through the anchors during his fall. Hehir typically cleans routes by rappel and says that he regularly attaches an autoblock, but does not recall if he used an autoblock in this instance. McCrary is also unsure if he removed an autoblock following the incident.

ANALYSIS

From the accounts of the event, it seems as if only one strand of the rappel rope was threaded through the tube-style rappel device and clipped to Hehir's harness with a locking carabiner. As noted above, he may have used an autoblock backup, but autoblocks are not effective safeguards when the two strands of rappel ropes are pulling in opposite directions, as they would when a rappeller fails to clip both strands properly. (See p.105 for a similar incident in Wyoming.)

Hehir had over five years of outdoor climbing experience at the time of the incident and usually cleans gear on rappel unless the route is very steep. His recommendation is to stay attentive and present, take your time, and carefully perform safety checks before rappelling. He said he was on his feet in a comfortable stance as he prepared to rappel, and thus may not have fully weighted his rappel system before unclipping his tether from the anchors. Hehir also suspects he may have been rushing through the familiar steps, as this was the last climb of the day and the group was attending a pre-wedding event later that evening. (Sources: Seamus Hehir, Jake McCrary, and Wolfe County Search and Rescue.)

Editor's note: In the Red River Gorge, it is generally an accepted practice to lower off anchors to clean a route.

Images

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