



AAC Publications

Fall On Rock – Huge Loose Block

Kentucky, Red River Gorge, Miller Fork, Camelot

On June 10, Jason Harbin (47) and I (45) climbed the Keeper (5.9), a relatively new (2017) sport route at Camelot. We stick-clipped the high first bolt and I led the route with no issues. Jason (12 years of climbing experience) opted to clean the route on top-rope. As Jason approached the first bolt, he pulled off an approximately four- by eight-foot block (eight to 12 inches thick).

The block released and fell so quickly that Jason held onto it, causing him to invert and dragging him down the wall. The weight of the fall pulled me toward the wall, and the block landed about six inches away from me, shattering upon impact. Two large pieces remained on our packs and shoes. Jason was left hanging upside down about 10 feet from the ground, his back covered in a bloody rock rash but with no other injuries. (Source: Patrick Miller.)

ANALYSIS

We were very lucky that everyone was able to walk away from this event. If I had not been paying attention or if Jason had decided to lead the route, the consequences could have been much worse. Since Camelot is a newer crag in Miller Fork, the route had not seen a lot of traffic. It is important for developers to identify and mitigate potential hazards as they clean and bolt their routes, keeping in mind that future climbers may apply more force on holds in varying directions.

This was a pretty typical block/flake feature seen throughout the Red. Before Jason released the block, I had pulled, manteled, and stood on it, unaware of the hazard. As climbers, we need to be aware that routes, especially new ones, are prone to breakage, and we need to be vigilant about our safety. (Source: Patrick Miller, Lindsay Auble, and the Editors.)

WET SANDSTONE

Two reports in 2019 edition of Accidents describe climbers being injured after pulling off large sandstone flakes. In neither case was recent rain believed to be the culprit, but wet sandstone is very susceptible to breaking. In addition to potentially ruining a good climb by destroying holds, serious injury is possible from broken holds or insecure protection. There are many variables—relative softness of the sandstone, duration and intensity of rain or snow, sun exposure, etc.—but a good rule of thumb is to stay off any sandstone climbs in the desert Southwest for 24 to 48 hours after a steady rain or snowstorm. If in doubt, scuff the soil or sand under a climb to see if there is moisture beneath the surface; if so, the rock may also still be wet and fragile.

When it comes to sandstone climbs, remember this motto: “Mud on your feet? Retreat!”

Images



Pulling off a large block while top-roping in the Red River Gorge. Luckily, neither the climber nor belayer was seriously injured.

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