



AAC Publications

Lowering Error – Miscommunication

Virginia, Richmond Area

On January 6, after a prolonged cold spell, my climbing partner (36) and I (33) checked to see if a small cliff that continuously seeps water had frozen into something climbable. We found a 30-foot wall of poorly bonded ice, with a free-hanging pillar that descended along the roots of hanging ivy from the top of the wall. We set up a top-rope anchor around a thick tree about 20 feet up the slope above the ice flow.

I top-roped the pillar and found it surprisingly stable. Upon reaching the top, I agreed to move the rope farther right, around a small corner, to better align the climber with another aspect of the ice flow. My partner and I did not communicate whether he would lower me or I would rappel. Unfortunately, I assumed that I would be lowered after I repositioned the rope, while my partner assumed I was going to rappel. We couldn't see one another, and we each were wearing multiple hood and hat layers, making it difficult to hear each other despite the relatively short distance between us.

Readying to lower and feeling some resistance on the climbing rope, I yelled to my partner, "OK!" My partner replied, "OK, I'm taking you off belay!" Unfortunately, I didn't hear him. Not hearing any objection and not detecting weight or movement in the rope, my partner proceeded to take me off belay. I took another step and leaned back. Suddenly I was airborne, falling 30 feet to the snow-covered rocks and frozen mud below. After hitting the ground, I slid 25 additional feet, headfirst on my back. My partner called 911, and eventually I was transported to a local trauma center, where I was diagnosed with three compression fractures, two broken right ribs, a broken right scapula, a broken left ankle (talus), and a concussion. Fortunately, I was wearing a helmet.

ANALYSIS

As a longtime climber, I can't attribute this accident to inexperience; rather, insufficient communication between partners was the root cause. In hindsight, we should have (1) clearly communicated the plan to lower or rappel for the next climb, (2) followed standard belay communications (i.e., the belayer waiting for an "off belay" command prior to taking the climber off, and (3) followed a clear communications protocol prior to weighting the rope to be lowered. (Source: Rick DeJarnette, with assistance from belayer Dan Durst.)

Images



Scene of an ice climbing accident involving miscommunication while attempting to lower from the top of the climb.

Article Details

Author	Rick DeJarnette
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	72
Page	91
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Accident reports