



AAC Publications

Belay Error – Rope Burns

Washington, Vantage, Frenchman Coulee

On June 12, Climber 1 planned a day of instruction and climbing at Frenchman Coulee for his friend, Climber 2, who had no experience climbing outside. Following instruction on knots, equipment, and belay techniques, Climber 1 provided on-the-spot feedback as Climber 2 belayed him on short, easy routes. Climber 2 verbalized and demonstrated proper belay technique with both a Grigri and an ATC-style device. Feeling comfortable with Climber 2's abilities, Climber 1 proposed a more difficult route. At approximately 1:20 p.m., Climber 1 fell while attempting to clip the last bolt on Ride 'Em Cowboy (5.9 sport, 70 feet). Climber 1 shouted "falling!" and Climber 2 mistakenly used his left hand to grab the rope exiting his ATC-style belay device and running up to the leader. The belayer regained control with his right (braking) hand and caught the fall after about 55 feet. The leader came to a stop at eye level with the first bolt on the route.

The leader instructed the belayer to lower him and immediately untied from the rope. They poured cool potable water on Climber 2's burns. (Climber 1 and Climber 2 are both trained emergency nurses and understood the gravity of the injuries.) The two self-rescued to a Level II trauma center, where the belayer was diagnosed with a full-thickness burn to the left index finger and partial-thickness burns to the other digits and palm of the left hand.

ANALYSIS

Climber 1 should have established a pre-climbing plan determining which routes would be suitable and produce the least likelihood of a fall on Climber 2's first outing. Further, Climber 1 should have equipped Climber 2 with the assisted-braking device in lieu of the ATC. This might have prevented the uncontrolled fall and the burns to the belayer's hands. [Editor's note: If the belayer holds tight with the guide hand on the climber's strand of the rope in a fall, this can partially or fully defeat the effectiveness of assisted-braking devices such as Grigris. Whatever device is used, the belayer must use the brake hand to control a fall.] This situation also highlights the usefulness of belay gloves.

In the end, despite severe burns, Climber 2's ability to regain control of the belay prevented Climber 1 from a likely fatal impact with the ground. (Source: Anonymous report from the climbers.)

Images

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