



AAC Publications

Ground Fall – Broken Hold, Inadequate Protection

West Virginia, Seneca Rocks, Green Wall

On April 14, Tom H. (44) and Chris C. (35) were climbing at Seneca Rocks for their first outing of the season. It was Tom's first trip to Seneca. They started with Pleasant Overhangs (5.7) on the Green Wall, and at 7:30 a.m., after scrambling up to the belay ledge, Tom began leading the first pitch by way of a variation start. After climbing ten feet, he felt the protection was too sparse and uncertain to continue. Rather than downclimb, he decided to traverse 15 feet across an unprotected, blocky, and slightly overhanging face to gain the primary route. During the traverse, a handhold broke off and he fell 17 to 20 feet into a gap between the cliff face and a large boulder. Tom suffered a closed pilon fracture of the left ankle (tibia) and a broken right middle finger. He was wearing a helmet.

After determining that it was not possible to self-evacuate, Chris downclimbed 5th-class terrain from the belay ledge to summon additional help. Within minutes, four climbers responded, and within one hour 10 to 12 additional climbers came to assist, one of whom secured a litter from the rescue cache on the approach trail. Initial responders had limited wilderness first aid or high-angle rescue skills, which made it difficult to rig the litter for a safe lower, as the area consisted of mostly 5th-class terrain, talus, and trees. A guide with Seneca Rocks Climbing School eventually joined the rescue, and his knowledge greatly assisted the lowering process.

ANALYSIS

Tom, though an experienced climber, was unfamiliar with this crag. The better choice when deciding against the variation would have been to downclimb. Instead, the off-route traverse took him over loose, blocky rock. After two surgeries, Tom uses a prosthetic brace for mobility. (Source: Tom H.)

Images

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