



AAC Publications

Fatal Ground Fall – Protection Pulled

Wisconsin, Devil's Lake State Park, East Bluff, Pedestal Buttress

On March 28 at approximately 3:45 p.m., Savannah Buik, 22, fell while leading Birch Tree Crack, a 5.8 climb on the Pedestal Buttress. A witness said she fell approximately 20 feet from the crux of the climb to the ground, landing on her back on rocky, uneven terrain at the base of the climb. She was wearing a helmet. The witness believes she had placed two cams that pulled out during the fall, the first of which was a number 2 (yellow) Camalot that was attached to an extended alpine draw. The witness remembers her calling to the belayer that she was readjusting this piece after its initial placement.

After the fall, nearby climbers came to her immediate assistance, calling 911 and initiating CPR until emergency medical services arrived. EMS attached an AED (defibrillator), and after checking for signs of life, confirmed that she had passed away. (Sources: Eyewitness and published reports.)

ANALYSIS

Savannah Buik was an experienced climber and the chair of the AAC's Chicago Chapter, and this route was within her ability level. It is impossible to say why she fell or exactly why her protection pulled out of the crack, but the very hard and slick quartzite at Devil's Lake is unforgiving of imperfect protection placements (see sidebar below). The crux of this climb comes early, making any fall that pulls out protection very serious. Protect frequently, consider passive protection in slippery rock, and be vigilant in the placement and assessment of your gear. (Source: The Editors.)

CAMS IN SLIPPERY ROCK

Numerous reports document that well-placed cams can pull out of hard, slippery stone like the quartzite at Devil's Lake. What can be done to minimize this hazard?

- Lubricate cams and fix or replace units with sticky lobes or bent trigger wires.
- Avoid placements in damp or icy rock.
- Choose the right cam for a placement—it should fit in the unit's optimum camming range.
- Orient the placement in the direction of anticipated load, and extend the placement with a quickdraw or sling to maintain the correct orientation.
- Look for constrictions in the crack that will increase a cam's holding power (like a nut).
- Use more nuts: A well-placed nut may be more resistant to pulling out of slick rock than a cam.
- Never say "good enough." If a placement doesn't look great, fix it or find another.

Images

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