



AAC Publications

Fall On Rock – Off-Route, Inadequate Protection

Wyoming, Vedauwoo, Nautilus

It always starts out like a casual day. Perfect weather, great friends, no need to push yourself. The next thing you know you're sitting on your couch in a cast and writing an accident report for ANAC.

I work for the American Alpine Club, and we were on a staff outing to Vedauwoo in early June. For the second climb of the day, I suggested to my co-worker Craig that we do a two-pitch 5.6 chimney called H&H Grunt, which would be nice and cool inside, while we waited for harder climbs to come into the shade. Craig led the first pitch, and I took the lead for the second pitch, burrowing through a vertical tunnel. It was fun and well protected until I pulled onto a ledge where I was faced with about 15 feet of unprotected face and crystal climbing to get to a bolted anchor.

I could tell I was no longer on what I considered to be 5.6 terrain, but Vedauwoo is known for sandbags and runouts. I downclimbed to see if I had missed something, but every option looked more difficult. Back on the ledge, I looked down at my last piece of protection. It was a bomber number 4 cam, but the piece was below my feet, plus I had put a long sling on it to avoid rope drag. About six feet below that piece was another ledge. I yelled down to Craig, "This looks like a bad place to fall!"

I felt confident I could make what looked to be a few 5.9 moves and then scurry to the top on easier ground. I stepped gingerly onto a couple of crystals, and almost immediately a foothold popped off. When I hit the ledge I could feel pain shoot through my right ankle. My gear had not absorbed any of the impact, although it kept me from rolling off the lower ledge. I caught my breath and took inventory: no heavy bleeding, no bones sticking out of my skin. Craig gently lowered me to the ground, and with some scooching on my butt and limping with my arms on my friends' shoulders, I was able to get to the car. A two-hour ride home got me to my couch.

After receiving X-rays and limping around on a supposed sprained ankle for four weeks, the doctor ordered an MRI and a date with an orthopedic surgeon, who said I actually had a talus fracture in my right ankle and needed surgery.

ANALYSIS

I had done the 5.6 route a few years earlier and thought I remembered using the bolted anchor above the blank slab. After the accident I reviewed the guidebook: It says to follow the chimney to a notch and then traverse right to a different set of anchors. Two co-workers who finished the route the way I tried to go to retrieve our gear said it was at least 5.9. I had been very set on where I thought the route went, and I felt I could do the moves, so I ignored some obvious warning signs.

When I was standing on the top ledge I noticed a crack at my feet. Gear placed here still would have been below my feet when I fell, but that extra piece would have shortened my fall by about three feet. If you are facing a dangerous runout, place the highest gear you can. (Source: Carol Kotchek.)

Images

Article Details

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| Author | Carol Kotchek |
| Publication | ANAM |
| Volume | 11 |
| Issue | 72 |
| Page | 109 |
| Copyright Date | 2019 |
| Article Type | Accident reports |