



AAC Publications

Leader Fall on Alpine Rock – Haste, Climber Out of Sight

California, High Sierra, Incredible Hulk, Red Dihedral

On the morning of September 9, Dan (28) and Jon (30) started up the Red Dihedral route (12 pitches, 5.10) with a party of three climbers close behind. The leader of the first party, Dan, had nearly finished the second pitch when he slipped and fell about 30 feet, despite being only five feet above his last protection. Dan quickly realized that his ankle was severely injured.

After conferring with the party below them, Jon lowered Dan to the ledge where the second team was stationed, approximately ten feet below Jon's belay. The second party had added three pieces of gear and a thicker cordelette to their anchor to accommodate this larger load. Anticipating a potential lower, the second team attached Dan to their anchor with a Munter mule hitch. Dan then untied from his rope so Jon could rappel down to the group.

The second party had a satellite communication device, and after considering the difficulty of the descent and hike out, which includes third-class terrain, Dan and Jon decided to use the device to call for a rescue.

The group decided to lower Dan and Jon with both parties' ropes tied together. Using a Munter hitch, they first lowered Dan, then pulled the rope back up to lower Jon. They then untied the ropes and tossed Dan and Jon's rope back to them. Though the second party initially intended to keep climbing, they eventually decided to rappel, and they helped Dan and Jon back to their camp at the base of the talus. A California Highway Patrol helicopter transported Dan to the hospital in Mammoth Lakes, where it was confirmed he had fractured his right ankle in two places. (Sources: Dan and Jon.)

ANALYSIS

The direct cause of this accident was a fall on less-than-vertical terrain. Especially in remote areas, climb conservatively to avoid falls in terrain where lack of protection or ledges indicate injury potential. Dan acknowledged that this climb was at the top reach of his limits, and because of a biking injury he had sustained two months prior, he had not been climbing much in the lead-up to this trip.

Jon was unable to see Dan when he fell and may have had more slack in the belay system than normal. It can be tricky to manage the rope when the leader is out of sight, and care is required to prevent slack from inadvertently piling on ledges or in cracks. Dan also indicated that he felt rushed by the second party catching up to them, despite everyone's apparent patience. He was trying to climb quickly to be courteous, when he should have prioritized climbing safely. In popular areas like the Incredible Hulk, finding multiple parties on the same route is common. While it can be frustrating to be stuck behind a slower party, patience and good communication usually will lead to an opportunity for the faster team to pass.

The second party in this incident is to be commended for having the skills to execute an effective self-rescue, having the appropriate communication device to call for assistance, and helping Dan and Jon down the talus. The climbers were fortunate the accident was early in the day, the weather permitted a helicopter to fly, and the second team carried a satellite communication device. (Dan and Jon had a cell phone, but there is no reception in this area.) Without these things, the injured party might have

endured a long wait for help. (Sources: Dan, Jon, Will (member of the second party), and the Editors.)

Images

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