



AAC Publications

Long Leader Fall – Protection Failures, Fatigue

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan, Salathé Wall

In mid-June, Rylan Knuttgen and John Shields started up the Salathé Wall. Both were experienced climbers with four decades of trad climbing between them, including multiple big walls. They had been prepping for the Salathé Wall specifically for the last 18 months and felt physically and mentally prepared for the route.

The climb went well until, on June 15, they trended too far right on pitch 26, leading to Sous le Toit ledge from the Block. After encountering tricky aid and loose rock, they realized they were off-route and were able to rappel back to the Block and then continue on the correct line. However, this cost them about seven hours, and they didn't arrive at Long Ledge, their planned bivy site, until 4:30 a.m. on the 16th.

By midmorning they were awake and preparing for the final four pitches of the route. They had received a weather report the previous day calling for a chance of thunderstorms in the afternoon, and they wanted to be off the wall before bad weather arrived.

At this point they had to decide between the original aid route off Long Ledge, which heads up a C2 crack on the far right side, and a free variation that follows bolts up steep rock above the left side. The free variation is given a grade of 5.11d/5.12a, whereas the climbing above the C2 crack is rated 5.8 in the Supertopo guidebook. However, they also had a topo from MountainProject.com that showed "5.10b R polished knobs" on the right-hand line, and they were aware of the notoriety of that pitch.

[Editor's Note: There have been many long falls from this pitch, including ones causing serious injuries.]

When gathering beta for the climb in the Valley beforehand, they had not found anyone who had climbed the left variation, and so were hesitant to go that way, despite their topo suggesting it might be the "best way." After discussing their options, they opted to follow the right-hand line.

John took the lead and was feeling good despite their lack of sleep. At the top of the crack, he found a fixed gray Fixe Alien Revolution that looked to be in good shape, and he clipped it as pro. (He had approximately seven pieces of pro in the crack below that.) Here, the available gear placements start to dwindle and then disappear. Above the fixed piece, John was able to place a black (tiny) Alien, but had very little confidence the piece would hold a fall. John had to switch to free climbing and communicated that to Rylan. He also noted that a piton shown by Supertopo was missing. As John climbed through the polished knobs, he shouted down to Rylan that it would be "a hell of a whipper" if he fell, and as he was readjusting his feet to reach the final jug he slipped.

John fell from approximately 12 feet above his last piece and swung to the right as multiple pieces failed under load. He narrowly missed hitting Long Ledge and ultimately stopped about 20 feet below the ledge, after taking a fall of 50 to 60 feet. He had hit the wall several times on the way down. John immediately recognized he would need a rescue because of injuries (multiple broken bones), but took it upon himself to ascend his rope and get back onto Long Ledge.

Attached to his rope was the black Alien (an expected failure), part of the fixed Alien, which had broken at the stem, and one extra sling that most likely came unclipped from a piece below the Alien. John was most likely caught by a number 1 Black Diamond C4, which was approximately 20 to 25 feet below his fall point.

After a quick assessment, during which they determined John had no head or spine injury, Rylan tried to call 911 multiple times but was unable to get through. Knowing there were parties below them, they started shouting for someone to call for help. A party on Mammoth Terraces (nearly 2,000 feet below) heard them and called 911.

A helicopter was ordered to make contact with the parties, and though unable to communicate verbally, John and Rylan indicated that they needed help by waving. YOSAR team members were flown to the top of El Capitan to launch a top-down extrication of the party, who were about 400 feet below the rim. A rescuer was lowered to the pair and then raised back to the top with John in a litter and then again with Rylan. John was flown from the summit. He sustained multiple injuries to the left side of his body, including a fractured ulna, tibia/ fibula, and talus bones.

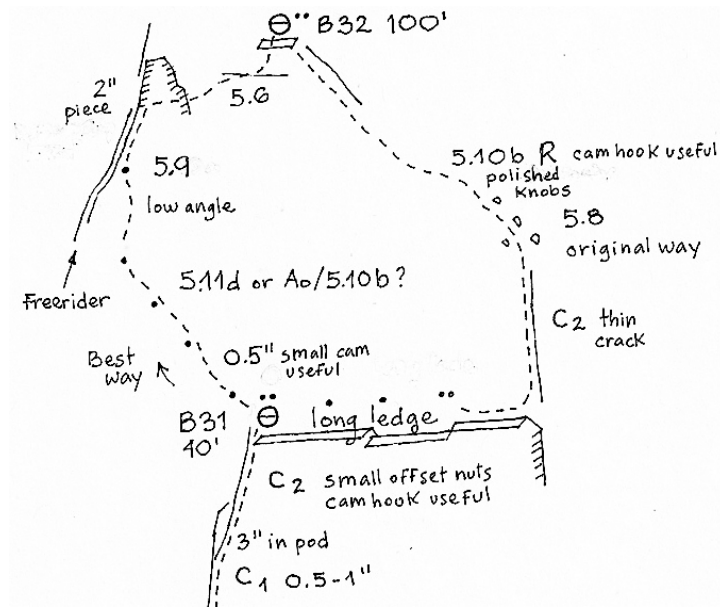
ANALYSIS

The failure of two or more pieces was a major factor in turning what might have been a long but reasonably safe fall into a very long and damaging fall. Be extremely cautious with fixed gear, which may be significantly damaged or weakened (or poorly placed). There's a chance John could have removed the fixed cam and used his own piece in that placement. It's also possible that a different piece than the black Alien might have caught his fall. Especially with micro-cams, slight variance in size (often necessitating a different brand of protection) can make a huge difference in the piece's holding power. When facing a runout above critical pieces, take the time to be confident of the quality of each gear placement.

After three days on the wall and their late night beforehand, this team was not at their peak climbing shape. They were also feeling the pressure of possible thunderstorms. John and Rylan had enough food and water for extra time on the wall and a fly for their portaledge to wait out a storm. It's possible that if they had rested and recovered, they might have avoided the fall.

These climbers had thoroughly researched their climb by looking at multiple topos and talking to others who had been on the route. Their decision to take the right-hand variation off Long Ledge made sense, given the information they had gathered. However, had they been able to talk with a climber who had done the left-hand variation, which goes with reachy 5.10+ free climbing and aid off bolts, they might have gone that way. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images



Topo showing two options for the notorious pitch above Long Ledge, high on the Salathé Wall. The best choice will depend on the leader's Yosemite free climbing skills.

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