



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Protection Pulled Out, Loose Rock

Colorado, Durango Area, Cascade Canyon

I was climbing with three friends in Cascade Canyon on Fourth of July weekend. Luke and Ben had climbed in the area before, but Will and I (female, 20) had not. Will and I chose a route called Funky Crack (5.8 trad) that was well within both of our abilities. Will led the route first and left the protection that he had placed. I climbed it after him, re-placing all the gear to work on my own placements. I remember clipping one last nut before starting to traverse over to the upper anchors, at the top of the cliff. The limestone was loose and crumbly. The last thing that I remember was calling down to Will and asking, “Hey! Where did you go from here?” I am guessing my hand slipped on the loose rock, and I fell. I was told the rock where my last nut was placed basically exploded from the force of my fall. With the nut gone, there was too much slack in the system to stop me from hitting the ground 60 feet below. I was told that I also clipped a ledge with my feet as I fell.

Somehow I landed on my feet but had so much momentum that I catapulted forward and hit my jaw on the rocky ground. Will and Ben, who are both wilderness emergency medical technicians (WEMTs), went to work stabilizing me while Luke ran to the top of the canyon to call search and rescue. Both of my lungs collapsed before SAR could get to me, but Will performed a needle decompression and was able to keep me conscious. I was taken in an ambulance to the Purgatory ski resort, then helicoptered from there to a hospital in Grand Junction, where preliminary scans determined that I needed to be in a Level I trauma center. From Grand Junction, I was flown to a hospital in Denver.

I fractured my left medial malleolus and calcaneus, shattered my right calcaneus, fractured my right tibia and femur, fractured my pelvis in five places, sustained an L2 compression fracture, fractured four ribs, fractured my jaw in multiple places, lost four teeth and fractured seven more, and sustained a labyrinthine concussion.

ANALYSIS

I had never climbed in the area and was not familiar with the quality of the limestone. Had I known it was poor on this route, I would not have chosen to climb it. I was a new trad leader, but I don’t think that was a big factor in my fall. If I had tested the rock more, I might have noticed that my last placement wasn’t in super-solid rock, but that didn’t cross my mind at the time. [Editor’s Note: This climb is considered reasonably protected until a midway anchor, but has sparse protection in the upper section, where the climber fell.] (Source: Ella Hall.)

Images

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