



AAC Publications

Fatal Fall on Rock – Off-Route, Unable to Clip Bolt

Colorado, Poudre Canyon, Eden Area

Fish and Whistle in Poudre Canyon, with the second and third bolt locations shown. The belay was on the bushy pedestal. Photo by Victor Pinto

Mitch, Hunter, and I arrived at the Eden Area, a roadside crag, at around 2 p.m. on May 18. Mitch elected to lead Tree of Knowledge (5.10b sport), and I put up the route East of Eden (5.9 trad). We swapped top-rope belays and discussed our dinner plans as the sun began to drop behind the hills. As we were packing up, I saw Mitch racking up draws and eyeing the route Fish and Whistle (5.11a/b sport), which climbs the arête above the road. I had done this route during my spring break trip, and we discussed the low crux and the potential for ground fall, but Mitch decided he wanted to give it a try.

This route starts only a few feet off the highway, so I built a ground anchor for myself to prevent us from rolling into the road in the event of an early fall. We did our final checks, and Mitch started up the route. He clipped the first two bolts without issue and started through the crux. He took a short (one meter) fall at the crux and rested for a moment. He then proceeded to make quick work of the crux and continued toward the third bolt. Here, he struggled to find a good stance to clip and quickly went from looking strong and calm to distressed. He continued up and right until the waist of his harness was level with the third bolt. He managed to attach a quickdraw to the hanger and tried to clip the rope. He nearly had the rope clipped when he fell off.

I felt the rope go tight and was pulled off the ground. Because of his position, he fell slightly back and impacted a rock outcropping, with the back of his head and the upper part of his torso striking first. He was unconscious, not breathing, had no detectable heartbeat, was bleeding profusely from his head, and I strongly suspected he had spinal or neck injuries.

I took command of the situation and instructed Hunter to stabilize Mitch's head and neck, and I lowered the two of them from the raised area where I was belaying to flatter ground near the highway. I had a good base of first-aid skills, and I performed CPR on Mitch for approximately 15 to 20 minutes, which resulted in a detectable heartbeat and him breathing under his own power. I quickly assessed Mitch for any other treatable injuries, but found nothing. The bleeding from his head had slowed significantly, and he appeared to be breathing on his own. Blood had been pooling in his airway, so we monitored him extremely closely to keep him from choking.

We did not have cell reception, but were able to flag down several passing cars within minutes. Eventually an ambulance and several vehicles from the Larimer County Sheriff's Office arrived on scene. A helicopter later landed on the road and brought additional personnel and equipment. Unfortunately, Mitch slowly began to deteriorate; his breathing slowed, pulse faded, and he became completely unresponsive. Hunter and I were ushered away, and we were sitting behind our car, away from the scene, when one of the paramedics came over and informed us Mitch had passed.

ANALYSIS

Mitch (age 22) and I were regular climbing and training partners. He was strong, often flashing my gym projects and placing in local climbing competitions. But most of his climbing had been done in the gym, and though his basic skills were pretty solid, he had much to learn about outdoor climbing. Fish and Whistle would have been his hardest sport climb to date. Learning to read the rock, where

the best line and clipping stances are found, and how to back off when things turn ugly are vital skills that I don't think Mitch had fully developed. It's also possible that a long stick clip could have been used to clip the first few bolts, in order to minimize ground fall potential.

Most climbers doing this route make crux moves onto the left side of the arête and then reach a good hold for clipping the third bolt; Mitch stayed in a corner on the right until the third bolt was at his waist but out of reach. After this tragic accident, the local climber who bolted this route decided to add an optional bolt on the right to protect climbers who stray onto this path. (Sources: Eric Burrell and the Editors.)

Images



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