



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Inadequate Protection, No Helmet

Colorado, Clear Creek Canyon, Creekside

In the afternoon of November 9, the Alpine Rescue Team responded to the report of a 22-year-old male climber who had fallen at the Creekside climbing area. The climber was on the last pitch of Black Gold (5 pitches, 5.7+), approximately 300 feet off the ground, when the fall took place. He was not wearing a helmet and was unconscious for several minutes.

Nearby climbers were able to access and assist the injured climber to the ground, where first responders were staged. Clear Creek Fire Authority assisted in the evacuation by using a ladder truck to ferry the injured climber across the creek. At the hospital, the climber was diagnosed with a head injury, broken clavicle, two compression fractures of the spine, and various contusions, but was expected to make a full recovery.

ANALYSIS

After a few weeks had passed, members of Alpine Rescue Team were able to reach the subject and conduct an in-depth interview. After climbing pitch four, the two climbers reached a bolted belay stance under a small overhang. Unclear on the route ahead, one of the climbers agreed to traverse out right of the overhang to explore the options. Prior to leaving the belay, the lead climber pulled up approximately 30 feet of rope and tied in directly to the anchor. The belayer remained at the anchor station but was not belaying the other climber. The leader traversed right about 20 feet with no protection, and then, realizing the potential for a large fall, he attempted to place a cam, but he slipped during the placement and fell.

There are several takeaways from the accident. First, had the climbers surveyed their surroundings and studied route descriptions more closely, they may have realized the route goes almost directly through the overhang above the belay and not out right, as they believed. Both Mountain Project (www.mountainproject.com) and the local climbing guidebook have ample descriptions and photos of this pitch. Additionally, several system errors were made as the lead climber traversed from the belay. The belayer should have remained in the system to prevent slack in the rope and possibly provide a more dynamic catch. Also, the leader (carrying some traditional protection) could have placed gear along the traverse to protect himself in the event of a fall. Finally, a helmet may have limited the injury to the climber's head. (Source: Curt Honcharik, Alpine Rescue Team.)

Images

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