



## AAC Publications

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### Ground Fall – Rappel Error, No Helmet

Colorado, Devils Head, Waffle House

**On May 27 at approximately 12:30 p.m., a man in his late 20s was rappelling down Bacon Is a Food Group (5.10 sport) and cleaning the draws when he lost his footing and swung over the side of an arête.** He swung about 20 feet before slamming head first into a rock wall. He didn't have a helmet or a third-hand backup on his rappel. After he hit the wall, he fell at least 10 feet to the snow-packed ground.

A bunch of us rushed over to him. He had a huge, bulging bruise on the left side of his head and blood was coming from his ear. After about seven minutes of drifting in and out of consciousness, he became more alert but was not fully oriented.

We didn't have phone service, but eventually we were able to find a ranger who alerted search and rescue. They sent a helicopter, but it could not land near us due to tree coverage. First responders arrived on foot about an hour after the initial call. The climber was placed in a litter, and a difficult evacuation began through complex terrain, involving multiple agencies. At the trailhead parking, he was transferred to a Flight For Life helicopter. He was talking and responsive when they left. I spoke with his wife the next day, and she told me he had fractured his skull and had brain bleeding/bruising but was not expected to need surgery. (Source: Brooke Silagy.)

### ANALYSIS

When cleaning a route, it is often safer to remain on belay and be lowered as opposed to cleaning on rappel. On this route, the bolted anchor is off to the side of an angled arête. When the climber lost his footing, the angle of the rappel ropes created a pendulum effect. When a climber lowers to clean a route, they can reduce swing potential by clipping their harness to the belayer's side of the rope with a quickdraw; however, the climber must beware of pulling the belayer off their stance after cleaning the last piece. When rappelling, a fireman's belay from an anchored belayer at the bottom also can help prevent such swings.

It's worth noting the lack of helmet or backup for the rappel. Wearing a helmet likely could have reduced the injury when the climber's head struck the rock, and using a third-hand backup would have kept the injured climber from falling to the ground after losing control of the brake strands. (Source: The Editors.)

**Images**

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