



AAC Publications

Leader Fall – Huge Broken Hold

Montana, Drummond Area, Rattler Gulch, Sidewinder Butte

On April 22, I (male, 35) was out in Rattler Gulch, climbing an easy stretch of limestone. Since spring in Montana usually means a lot of loose rock from the freeze-thaw cycle, I was testing every hold. I was about 10 to 15 feet above my last piece of protection, a slung tree, and thumped a half-fridge-size block slightly above my head. I had a gut feeling that it was not totally trustworthy, but hitting it showed no movement. I pulled up onto the block and the entire thing crumbled apart, causing a long fall.

Luckily, my belayer was attentive and took in slack rapidly, or I would have hit the deck. My shirt and pants were ripped front and back, with a sharp stick poking through my shirt in two places. My belayer assisted in freeing me from the stick and lowered me safely to the ground. Somewhat dazed, but understanding the danger of rockfall, we moved to a safer area. My feet, arms, right knee, legs, chest, and left hand were all deeply abraded and bloody. As I hobbled over to safety, one last fist-size rock ricocheted off my helmet, cracking it but protecting me from injury.

Shaking with the rush, I sat down. My partner conducted a head to toe assessment. The only other party at the crag came uphill to check on me, bringing water to wash out my wounds and offering their old first-aid kit. They provided me with a pair of ski poles to use on the walk out and assured us they would get the rope and gear I had left on the route. I hobbled down the steep scree slope to the base of the canyon.

ANALYSIS

I was surprised at how easily the large block fell apart after I tested it. This was my first spring on Montana limestone, and most of my experience has been on granite and a little sandstone.

What went well:

Rockfall after the initial accident cracked this helmet, which likely prevented a more serious injury.
Casey Brown

- (1) I wore a helmet. This may have saved my life or prevented a severe head injury.
- (2) My partner and I had medical and first-aid training. While he's newer to climbing, he is a resident physician. I'm in nursing school and have worked in health care.
- (3) My belayer was really attentive and started taking in slack when I fell.
- (4) We moved away from the wall after the accident to avoid additional rockfall.
- (5) I talked honestly about my fears and emotions with my partner after the fall.

Doing that helped me to think analytically in a stressful situation, react appropriately, and feel less powerless in the situation.

What went poorly:

- (1) I had some tape, toilet paper, and a few knickknacks in an emergency bag in my backpack. I pretended this was a first-aid kit. It was inadequate.
- (2) I knew the rock quality was going to be poor, but I decided to climb anyway. I was being careful and testing things, but that isn't always 100 percent.
- (3) My belayer wasn't wearing a helmet. His positioning was safe, as I had mentioned he should stay

out of the fall line in case I knocked a rock down, but a helmet would have been prudent.

(4) I probably should have stuck to an established route. This area has mostly sport climbs, but I had carried my rack and wanted to show my climbing partner how to place gear, so it seemed logical to just shimmy up an easy alpine-style climb and have a little adventure. (Source: Casey Brown.)

THE SHARP END (EPISODE 41): Casey Brown tells this story in detail in "A Montana Mishap (Why More Leaders Should Wear Helmets)" on the Sharp

Images

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