



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Inexperienced Belayer

New Hampshire, Rumney, Armed and Dangerous Area

On June 22, George (30) was leading and Steff (30) was belaying on Toxic Gumbo, a 5.8 sport climb on the left side of Main Cliff at Rumney. On a low-angled slab above an overhang, and while out of sight to the belayer, George unexpectedly fell.

This was Steff's first time lead belaying, and the instruction she had received prior to the climb was that she would feel a strong jerk in the event of a fall. When George fell on the slab, the overhang prevented her from seeing him, and because of the low angle (and likely some rope drag) his slide pulled up the rope gradually. Steff believed George was either tugging on the rope to clip or was climbing quickly on easy terrain, and so she payed out slack. She continued to do so until he dropped into her field of vision. After a leader fall of about 30 feet, she applied the belay and stopped his fall.

(Source: Stephanie Duhem.)

ANALYSIS

Fortunately, George suffered only minor abrasions, but this accident brings up issues important to climbers making the transition to outdoor crags. The instruction Steff received in a climbing gym led her to expect a sharp upward yank with a leader fall. In this instance, the impact she felt was much less than expected, and so she mistakenly fed out rope.

In complicated natural terrain and difficult conditions, clear communication is essential. The leader can call for "slack" or "clipping" to help the belayer know to feed out a little more rope. (George had stopped yelling commands because the cliff was crowded and noisy that day.) The leader can call "watch me" before a dicey move to increase the belayer's vigilance, and always should yell "falling" to alert them to catch a fall.

With a novice belayer, it might have been wiser for the experienced leader to choose a climb having a clear line of sight, with minimal chance of a leader fall, and to have a person backing up and instructing the belayer. (Sources: Stephanie Duhem and the Editors.)

Images

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