



AAC Publications

Lead Fall Onto Ledge – Off-Route, Inadequate Protection

New Hampshire, Cathedral Ledge, Barber Wall

On September 8, Sean Goodrich (45) and his partner planned on climbing Funhouse to Upper Refuse, the classic moderate link-up on Cathedral Ledge. After finishing Funhouse (5.), the pair eyed what they thought to be Upper Refuse (5.5), a right-leaning corner above a big ledge. In reality, they were looking at Retaliation (5.9), a route notorious for its tricky- to-protect crux, one buttress to the left of Refuse.

Goodrich led up Retaliation's initial ramp, placing sparse protection because of the easy climbing. When he got to the crux, he was run-out. At this point, he fell approximately 25 feet. He hit his left side against the wall and landed on the mid-height ledge that separates Retaliation from Upper Refuse. No gear blew, but his pieces were widely separated and there was some slack in the belay. He had fallen backward, possibly due to the rope catching his feet, and landed on his back, hitting his head. He was awake, alert, and in a lot of pain.

The belayer lowered Goodrich to a small ledge above the base of the climb and called 911. Responders from Bartlett-Jackson Medical Service, North Conway Fire Department, and Mountain Rescue Service quickly reached the accident scene by way of the summit road. Nearby climbers also came to Goodrich's aid and were able to get the climber into a litter and lower him the remaining 25 feet to the base of the climb. The litter was then carried across the exposed area below the climb and up to the summit area. He was air evacuated to Maine Medical in Portland. He suffered serious injuries consisting of a torn aorta, fractures in his pelvis, back, ribs, neck, and arm, and a concussion.

ANALYSIS

Goodrich was coming off an injury but expected to be able to climb Upper Refuse without difficulty. Just before the fall, a nearby climber heard him say to his belayer, "This feels hard for 5.5." Retaliation and Upper Refuse share many distinguishing features, and it is not hard to imagine mistaking one route for the other; both start in the same general area, and both start with a right-trending ramp. However, carefully reading the route descriptions shows that Upper Refuse includes a chimney, gully, and tree ledge features, while Retaliation follows a single, prominent right-trending crack system the whole way.

Route-finding on traditional climbs is an important skill that takes experience to develop. Read guidebooks and websites (including the comments) for descriptions of a route new to you. Continually check the route description against what you find as you progress up the route. If you are in doubt, you can always stop, re-evaluate, and consider downclimbing, lowering, or rappelling. If you choose to "go for it," make sure to place solid protection before proceeding into unknown terrain. Protecting an easy section of a climb sometimes seems like a chore, but it's an important one.

(Sources: Tyler Smith, Sean Bjornsson, and the Editors.)

Images

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