



## AAC Publications

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### **Rappel Error – Inadequate Equipment, Removed Backup**

North Carolina, Pisgah National Forest, Looking Glass Rock, South Side

**Jed (42) and I (28) climbed frequently at Looking Glass Rock, specifically the South Side area.** On February 2, a sunny, bluebird day, we had planned to get on a different route and carried only one 60-meter rope with us. However, when we passed Dinkus Dog (5.10b) and saw that it was available, we decided to give it a go, as it was also on our tick list. We climbed the two pitches of Dinkus Dog to the top, alternating leads. We are both comfortable leading 5.10 trad and had no issues climbing the route.

We knew we needed two ropes to rappel from the anchors straight to the ground, but also knew there were convoluted rappel options to get down with one rope. A comment on Mountain Project mentioned a solid tree about halfway up and to the left of the route, and our analysis from the ground confirmed this was a viable option.

Once we were at the top, we decided to rappel to the tree and set up a sling anchor there to rappel to the ground. As it was a slightly diagonal first rappel to the tree, we placed a cam about 20 feet to the left of the anchors as a directional, so the rappel line would run straight down to the tree. The plan was that Jed would rappel first to set up the lower anchor. When it was my turn, I could remove the cam and then follow the diagonal rope to his anchor at the tree. We typically simul-rappel, as we are similar in weight, but did not this time. We always tie knots in the ends of our rope, use an ATC with an extension, and use a prusik backup. This rappel was no exception.

While our cam placement made the rappel safer from a directional standpoint, it left Jed about three feet short of the tree. I shouted down for him to place a cam and anchor himself to it so I could remove the directional up top and thus release enough rope for him to safely reach the tree. However, he shouted back that he had the situation under control, as he was able to unweight the rope using a small shelf for his feet. His plan was to extend his belay device with a long sling. However, in a lapse in judgment, he also removed his prusik and untied the knots from the ends of the rope, thinking he would need as much rope as possible to reach the tree. Due to the new extension, he couldn't easily grab the brake strands of the rappel rope. He apparently either lost his balance or weighted the rappel system expecting the back-ups he had removed to hold him. The ends of the rope passed through his device, and I watched him free-fall more than 100 feet to the ground.

I thought that he had died and started screaming, alerting other climbers in the area. I also immediately dialed 911 and set a rescue in motion. An amazing community of climbers, including an ER nurse who was first on the scene, was able to stabilize Jed at the bottom. He hit ledges, trees, and brush on the way down and landed on dirt as opposed to the slab. He never lost consciousness and recalls "actively falling." He was wearing a helmet.

Once I heard he did not appear to have life-threatening injuries, I pulled up the rope and saw the knots we had tied in the ends were no longer there. I lowered one end to a climber below, and he tied on a second rope, which I pulled up and then was able to make a single rappel to the bottom. Upon assessing that Jed had no damage to his spine, we carried him from the base of the cliff toward Slick Rock Trail, where we met a rescue team who helped carry him the rest of the way out in a litter. He was airlifted to Mission Trauma Center in Asheville. Miraculously, he sustained only three broken ribs, broken spinous processes, a ruptured right Achilles tendon, and abrasions down his right side.

## ANALYSIS

The accident happened because of a lapse in judgment and the removal of rappel safety backups. It was entirely preventable. Similar accidents can be avoided by never removing these backups and carrying two ropes where necessary to rappel as opposed to attempting convoluted rappel options.

**[Editor's Note:** An additional consideration is that the climber may have weighted the system without having his hand on the brake strands of the rappel, trusting his third-hand backup to hold him. Although resting on a prusik or autoblock is often useful for cleaning gear or untangling rope while rappelling, it's safest to do with the rappel ropes held in one's hand or otherwise secured. (Source: Amanda Ellis.)

**Images**

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