



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – Uneven Ropes, No Stopper Knots

México, Nuevo León, El Potrero Chico

Brad Gobright, 31, one of the best-known big-wall climbers and soloists in North America, died in a rappelling accident at El Potrero Chico on November 27. Gobright and his climbing partner for the day (male, 26) had teamed up to attempt El Sendero Luminoso, a 15-pitch limestone route. They had not climbed together before.

The two successfully climbed the 5.12+ route, with Gobright onsighting the entire climb. To descend, they planned to simul-rappel the route from bolted anchors, using a single 80-meter rope. The descent went smoothly until midafternoon, when they reached a stance above the large bivy ledge on top of pitch five. Realizing they did not have enough rope to reach this ledge in one rappel, they decided to do two shorter rappels.

After the first rappel, the two prepared for a short rappel to the big ledge below. According to accounts provided by Gobright's partner, they did not pull the rappel rope all the way to the middle mark at the anchor, because it looked obvious they had enough rope out on both sides. One end of the rope could be seen on the ledge below, while the other strand (Gobright's side) was tangled in bushes below them.

As on the previous rappels, the two began descending together, counter-balancing each other's weight in a simul-rappel. Gobright said he would untangle the rope from the bushes en route. Suddenly, both men began dropping. The partner fell through some bushes and onto the ledge, without tumbling off the far side. Gobright continued falling and did not survive.

ANALYSIS

The evidence in published accounts strongly suggests the rope ends were not even and that the strand on Gobright's side was too short to reach the ledge. This fact was hidden by the bushes in which the rope was tangled, and he did not see the problem until the rope end passed through his rappel device.

The climbers were not using stopper knots in the ends of the rope. This was likely a conscious decision, because the many rock flakes, bushes, and cacti along this 1,500-foot descent could snag a rappel rope, and stopper knots can make ropes more prone to snagging, especially if there is any wind. However, it is also possible to keep the rope ends with you as you rappel (or one end with each climber in the case of simul-rappelling) to maintain control of the ends. If these two climbers had tied stopper knots, it's very unlikely this fatal accident would have occurred.

In simul-rappelling, when one climber unweights the rope prematurely, the other will drop, and this was the case for Gobright's partner. When he landed on the ledge, his rappel device and third-hand backup were still connected to the rope, which pulled through the anchor and dropped to the ledge after him. The partner was extremely lucky to land on one of the few sizable ledges on this entire route. He was able to descend with the assistance of other climbers. (Sources: Media reports and the Editors.)

Images

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