



AAC Publications

Belayer Pulled Into Rock – Poor Position

Canada, British Columbia, Skaha Bluffs, Plum Wall

On March 23, my climbing partner and I were finishing our day of climbing on a 5.9 sport route called Sagging Bumline. It was a sunny day, we felt rested, and the climb was well within our limits. This is a 35-meter sport climb, and we were using a brand-new 70-meter rope. I was belaying my partner with an ATC. We were both wearing helmets, and I had approach shoes on.

Sagging Bumline is the sister climb to the very popular Plum Line (5.9) just to its left. Plum Line is notorious for accidents due to the length of the climb (35 meters), and various climbers have rappelled off the ends of their ropes or dropped their second. Therefore, a rappel station was added at a ledge approximately eight meters off the ground, reached by scrambling. This station allows climbers with a 60-meter rope to complete a second rappel or scramble to the ground. This ledge is also where you clip the first bolt of Sagging Bumline.

Below the ledge and slightly to the right is a large alcove or cave feature, which is directly under the first bolt of Sagging Bumline. We recognized that there was a risk of the belayer being pulled into the roof of the cave should the leader fall, and we decided to stand farther left under the first bolt of Plum Line.

We completed our safety check, and the leader cleanly led the rest 30 meters of the route to the final bolt and crux move. He attempted to make the final clip but dropped the rope. As I began pulling in extra rope and trying to move into a squatting position to brace for a potential fall, the leader fell off. I was pulled off the ground approximately seven or eight meters, swung to the right toward the first bolt, and pulled into the wall. I bent my knees and put my feet up to brace for impact against the wall, but I was rotating slightly so my left foot made contact first. I heard a very loud cracking sound and knew I had broken my left leg.

As I hung off the ground, I maintained control of the brake rope and the lead climber hanging above. I began to call for help, and two climbers ran over to assist. I explained I had broken my leg and still had my lead climber on belay. I lowered myself to the ground, where the assisting party was able to enter the system and remove me safely. They then lowered the lead climber to the ground without incident.

One climber made cell phone contact with 911 and Penticton SAR while others splinted and elevated my broken left leg, and kept me warm and calm while the rescue team was assembled. A ground team from Penticton SAR attended the scene first. Due to the steep access and snow on the ground, the team decided that a helicopter lift would be the safest extraction method. At Penticton Hospital, I underwent surgery the next morning for a mid-shaft transverse tibia/ fibula fracture. I was discharged four days later, and I am back climbing today.

ANALYSIS

Belayer positioning and a substantial weight difference between the leader and belayer were the main factors in this accident. I did not want to be under that roof if my partner fell, so I decided to stand farther left. Unfortunately, this meant there was a lot of extra rope out and I was pulled up and into a

swing by the leader's fall. I still feel it was the right decision to stand further left because I might have broken my neck by hitting the roof instead.

A ground anchor might have prevented the dangerous swing. There were no good opportunities to build an anchor in the rock at the base, though a small tree nearby might have withstood the force of the swing. The other option would have been to scramble up to the ledge and tie into the intermediate anchor at the rappel station in order to belay the leader.

My climbing partner is 45 pounds heavier than I am, which is right on the limit of what is considered safe. To compensate for this, we could have used the Edelrid Ohm, which is clipped to the first bolt of sport climbs and reduces the force on the belayer. Prior to the leader falling, I was in the midst of pulling in extra slack, and I was not bracing in my harness, ready to catch him. I have caught him many times when I was better positioned, and I have never been pulled so far up or with such force.

I was using an ATC-style device to belay. Had I lost control of my brake hand, the leader would have fallen 30 meters. Since the accident, we have purchased a Petzl Grigri, an assisted-braking device that lowers the chances of dropping the lead climber in this type of incident. I also recommend wearing a helmet while belaying. If I had hit my head instead of my leg, I might have been knocked unconscious and dropped the leader. (Source: Allison Beynon.)

Images

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