



AAC Publications

Cleaning Error — Belayer Dragged by Climber

Kentucky, Red River Gorge, Muir Valley

My partner (49) and I (33) are very experienced climbers. I've climbed at the Red several times, and though it was my partner's first time here, he has climbed and belayed plenty of steep routes. My background is multi-pitch trad, and his is all sport. We are about the same weight.

On September 8, my partner led The Fury (5.11c sport) at Bibliothek in the Muir. I was tired and didn't feel like climbing the route, so we decided he would clean it while lowering off. He was clipped into the belayer's side of the rope with a quickdraw (a.k.a. tramming), as is standard practice when cleaning overhanging routes. At the last draw he said, "You're going to swing," so I weighted the rope as much as I could before he cleaned the lowest draw.

I was prepared to swing a few feet, but when he removed the last draw from the route, he was still clipped into my side of the rope. This caused both of us to swing about 20 feet backward. I slammed into a small boulder lying on the ground and then hit a tree. I made contact with one leg just above the ankle, and I think I hit my foot too. It all hurt right away. I was able to stand and walk slowly, so we hiked out.

I could barely walk for two weeks, and it took months before I was back to climbing. It was not fractured, but likely a severe bone bruise and tendonitis. (Source: Amanda Friedman.)

ANALYSIS

Cleaning the last draw while lowering from an overhanging route is always potentially hazardous, as the climber generally will swing out from the wall. To avoid pulling the belayer into a swing as well, the cleaning climber should completely disconnect from the belayer's side of the rope before letting go from the wall. The belayer can relocate to a good position to brace for the swing when the climber unclips the lowest bolt.

Another option is to leave the first draw on the route while cleaning and then remove it from the ground with a stick clip. (There are video tutorials online for most types of stick clips.) Muir Valley even has a few stick clips available for climbers to borrow, located underneath the awning by the parking lot. (Source: The Editors.)

Editor's Note: For detailed information about how to clean overhanging sport routes while lowering, see the Know the Ropes article from ANAC 2021.

Images



This climber has clipped in direct to her lowest draw on The Fury and has unclipped the belayer's side of the rope. Once the belayer takes up slack, the climber can clean the draw without causing the belayer to swing.

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