Leader Fall on Rock — Flipped Upside Down

Alaska, Hatcher Pass, The Monolith

On July 14, I met up with two partners to climb some trad routes in Hatcher Pass. I had been leading trad for more than four years and regularly traveled outside of Alaska to get practice outside of our very short summer climbing season.

After warming up on an easy climb, we moved over to a two-pitch 5.9+ route called Orangutan Overhang that I had not climbed before. I led the first pitch clean and built an anchor on the ledge between the pitches. I brought up my followers, and we discussed whether to continue up the second pitch, which you could not see from the ground. It looked slightly easier than the first pitch, and I decided to head up.

The pitch started in a corner that protected well and felt a bit steeper than it looked. I got in a few pieces of gear before reaching a large chockstone that looked and felt loose. I moved past it quickly and did not protect close to it due to concern about dislodging it. I found myself on a thin ledge that traversed right to a roof. I found a very small horizontal placement (black Totem Cam, the smallest in their range) before the move to the right. It wasn't a great placement, but there was mud and water running in the larger crack under the roof (typical for this area), and I didn't think I could safely protect there.

I reached a pretty comfortable stance to check out the moves over the roof. There was a short hand crack right above the roof and what looked like an OK high-step on the right side. I checked that my left hand felt solid in the jam and then moved my right foot up to the high-step. I don't recall how I fell, but I pretty much immediately flipped upside down. I have some recollection of my head (and helmet!) impacting the rock, after which the black Totem pulled out and I slid down the face. I fell another 20-plus feet before my other gear held me and I came to a stop close to the belay ledge.

I stood upright on the ledge to try to assess the situation. I had trouble speaking and had to hold my neck stable to be able to breathe comfortably, so I lay down in the recovery position and kept my neck supported out of concern about a spinal cord injury.

One of my partners rappelled the first pitch, activated my personal locator beacon (PLB), and helped coordinate rescue support. He was able to send up water, warm layers, etc., while my second partner stayed on the ledge with me. At close to 9 p.m., I was rescued by helicopter from the ledge.

At the hospital, I was diagnosed with multiple fractures to my C1 vertebra, an occipital skull fracture, multiple fractures to my upper jaw, cheekbones, and nose, and a broken molar. A couple of weeks later, we found that I had a full tear to my scapholunate ligament in my left hand and a partial tear to my MCL on my left knee. Fortunately, I have recovered well except for some loss of range of motion in my neck and left wrist.

ANALYSIS

I was aware that I didn't have good protection nearby (and even verbally noted that to my belayer), but decided to try the move anyway. I was accustomed to being a little above my gear, especially on various alpine climbs that I've done. I expected the gear that was good to keep me off the

ground—which it did—but I grossly misjudged the fall risk in that spot. I just didn't consider that I might be flipped upside down in the fall. (All I can think is that my high right foot put my center of balance in a weird place.) Unfortunately, I think I may have been just as injured if the piece had not pulled—my gear was too far down and left of my fall line.

I also think that while I was feeling physically strong, my technique (specifically footwork) might have been worse than usual due to the gym closure earlier in the year. I had climbed very little since the COVID-19 closures in early March. (Source: Katherine Cooper.)

Images

Helmet damaged in the Hatcher Pass fall.

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