



## AAC Publications

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### **Leader Fall — Inadequate Protection, Communication**

California, Yosemite National Park, Tuolumne Meadows

**Some friends and I went to Lembert Dome on August 4. I was a moderately experienced sport and gym climber but new to trad climbing. One friend climbed the first pitch of Northwest Books (5.6) and left the gear for me so I could “pinkpoint” the route for my first trad lead.** However, she did not place much gear: The bolt protecting the moves to the layback crack was clipped, and then she placed only two other pieces. These were maybe eight to 12 feet apart in a layback section. One of the alpine draws was also extended.

When I reached the point between the two pieces, I attempted to place a piece with the two random cams my friends had given me to “play with” for practice. (They thought they had sewed up the route and I wouldn’t need gear for actual protection.) Neither of the pieces fit the crack. After a minute my foot slipped and I fell down the slab, rolling to the right. I impacted on my butt and continued rolling down the slab, hitting the back of my head. The foam lining of my helmet cracked.

My friends called 911, and Tuolumne Search and Rescue responded. They found tingling in my toes and tenderness in my lumbar spine, and due to the likelihood of a spinal injury, I was put into a full-body vacuum splint for the lower to the ground and carryout to the trail. At the hospital they found a fractured L1 vertebra. I was airlifted to Reno, Nevada, for possible spinal surgery, but luckily the fracture was stable and I only needed bracing. (Source: Lynn Nguyen.)

### **ANALYSIS**

Yosemite Search and Rescue listed the following takeaways from this incident:

**Wear a helmet:** When Lynn fell, she flipped upside down and cracked her helmet; the outcome could have been much worse without one. Her foam-lined helmet helped protect her head from side and rear impact.

**Be honest with yourself (and your partners):** Lynn was told the first party would “sew up” the pitch and she would not need any other pieces to protect the climb. Later, her friend clarified that she had been “spooked” in the section after the first piece she placed, which is why she didn’t stop to place more gear. If this had been communicated beforehand, Lynn might have made different decisions about the climb.

**Falls on low-angle climbs can be consequential:** Many of the climbs in Tuolumne Meadows are slabby, polished, and have sparse protection, and “beginner” routes often have numerous ledges. Climbers should be confident on the grade and style before leading these routes.

**Gym routes are not comparable to outdoor routes:** Climbing outside often requires skills not learned in the gym. Lynn mentioned not having much experience with laybacking or slab climbing. In addition, the grades do not always reflect the lack of protection, and original (“old school”) ratings can feel difficult by today’s standards.

Be cautious using preplaced gear: Each climber will have a different idea of how much gear should be placed and where it is placed. While learning to use traditional protection, consider practicing on top-rope; when ready to lead, bring extra pieces of protection. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

## Images



YOSAR at work on Lembert Dome.

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