



AAC Publications

Lowering Error — Complacency, No Stopper Knot

California, Joshua Tree National Park, Echo Rock, West Face

A climber on Double Dip at Echo Rock. The top anchor is high and to the right of the climber. Photo by Kailey Cox

On February 8, our group of friends of varying abilities began climbing in the Echo Rock area of Joshua Tree. One of the climbers in our group was preparing to lead Touch and Go (5.9) and mentioned that an easier climb should be set up as a top-rope for those with less ability.

I (male, age 46) decided Double Dip (5.6) on Echo Rock would be good. I was arguably the most experienced in the group, with 22 years of on-and-off climbing. Several factors led to my incorrect determination that Double Dip was worthy of top-roping: I had done it several times (although many years ago); I felt a sense of urgency to set up a climb for the others; and I verified that we would be using a 70-meter rope, with the knowledge that a 60-meter wouldn't be long enough for a top-rope setup on this climb.

Rushing to rack up and tie in, I quickly chatted with my belayer, with whom I'd never climbed. I was confident that, if needed, I could comfortably solo Double Dip. My air of confidence seemed to silence any concerns my belayer may have had, and he deferred to my knowledge and experience.

At the top, I quickly set up an anchor at the bolted rappel station. Double Dip angles slightly to the right across the slab face of Echo Rock, and the fall line below the anchors lies along a 5.10 slab. While lowering, I spent my time admiring the 5.10, thinking it would be another enjoyable top-rope. At a point that people in my group estimated to be roughly 25 to 30 feet from the ground, the end of the rope slipped through my belayer's device and I began falling backward to the flat, sandy desert floor, at first backpedaling before skidding off the slab and landing on my shoulder and head.

ANALYSIS

After the accident, I was re-educated as to the length of the climb: 130 feet. Setting a top-rope required about 260 feet, and the 230-foot (70-meter) rope with stretch came up about 25 feet short.

There were several points at which the accident chain could have been broken. I could have asked the party that had just climbed Double Dip why they walked off; I could have tied a knot in the other end of the rope or had my belayer tie in; I could have asked my belayer to watch for the middle marker or to watch the rope as he lowered me; and, as an experienced climber, I certainly should have noted that I climbed more than 35 meters to the bolted anchor.

I hold my belayer faultless. For argument's sake, the only thing he could have done differently was watch for the end of the rope. However, considering the certainty in my actions, his deferral to my experience, and my emphasis that a 70-meter rope would reach, he had no reason to believe otherwise. Ultimately, I failed to follow some basic safety protocols. The jovial atmosphere and comfort of familiarity lulled me into a false sense of security.

After much speculation for the worst, my only injuries besides some scrapes and bruises were a fractured transverse process and a compression between C6 and C7 vertebra causing numbness down my left arm. The neck injury has since recovered with extensive physical therapy. Aside from

sheer luck, I credit my survival to several factors: I landed on a flat sandy surface; I was wearing a helmet; the friction through the carabiners and drag over the slab helped reduce my rate of acceleration; a few in my group had medical training and certification and leapt into immediate action; and I was afforded the fantastic and professional response of JOSAR. (Source: Anonymous Climber.)

Images



A climber on Double Dip at Echo Rock. The top anchor is high and to the right of the climber.

Article Details

Author	Anonymous Climber
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	74
Page	35
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Accident reports