



AAC Publications

Ground Fall — Failure to Clip Bolt

Colorado, Shelf Road, Cactus Cliff

In September, during a weekend trip to Shelf Road, my wife took a ground fall while leading Ian's Climb (5.7+) at Cactus Cliff. She couldn't clip the second bolt, fell and hit the ground, tripped backward, and hit her head. She was wearing a helmet. She was dazed and after a few minutes started to complain of memory loss; she didn't know where she was or what had happened. Nearby climbers with medical training checked her out and said there was a hematoma on the back of her head; one of them who was a nurse urged me to get her to medical attention soon so internal bleeding could be ruled out. We left our draws on the route, asking other climbers to retrieve them for us, and walked back to the parking lot, from which I drove her to the hospital for a CT scan.

ANALYSIS

My wife decided to lead the route even though she wasn't feeling super psyched about it. I had grunted and hollered a bit as I led it, and that might have made her a bit nervous. She wanted to top-rope, but the rope's fall line went straight down a 5.10c because I had left no directionals. She then said, "I'll just lead it." The route's description says the crux is at the second bolt, with some bouldery moves, and that's where she missed her clip. Later, my wife and I agreed that, since she was not feeling confident about the climb, she could have downclimbed a bit and lowered off. [Editor's Note: Nervous leaders also can consider stick-clipping the second bolt of a sport climb, which substantially improves the odds against a ground fall in case of a slip above the first bolt.]

I screwed up in my position as the lead belayer, standing down on the ground instead of up on a higher ledge directly below the route. My belay position lengthened the amount of rope in the system, and she continued to stumble backward even as her feet hit the ground. I was trying to move closer to that ledge, taking up slack as I did, when my wife went for the clip.

We're so glad she was wearing a helmet, without which she might have suffered a worse head injury. (Source: Samir Chopra.)

Images

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