



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock — Climbing Unroped

Colorado, Longs Peak, North Chimney

The Diamond on Longs Peak. (A) Approximate location of fatal fall from Broadway ledge in another 2020 incident. (B) Approximate location of fall from the North Chimney approach to the face. The ledges had less snow at the time of these accidents. Photo by Stefan and Richard Hollos

On September 5, I planned to climb D7 (5.11c) on the Diamond of Longs Peak, approaching via the North Chimney. This is the most common approach to the Diamond and is a 500-foot rock climb rated 5.4. My partner and I had started up the trail at 7 a.m., arriving at the base of the North Chimney around 9:30 a.m. We were with two friends who would be roping up at the base of the North Chimney just below us. My climbing partner and I had soloed the North Chimney together earlier in the summer, so we didn't discuss if we were comfortable with this—it was implied. Additionally, with our relatively late start time, there was nobody on the route above us, which was positive, considering the high risk of rockfall on this route.

As we began ascending the North Chimney, my partner stopped after about 100 feet to switch into climbing shoes. I was wearing my approach shoes, and I felt comfortable continuing in them, as I frequently climb low 5th class in them and had already done this approach in them twice before. As we climbed, my partner was moving faster than me and stayed 10 to 30 feet in front. I noticed that we were going a different way than I usually go. I didn't worry about it, because my partner is a strong and experienced climber and I generally trust his route-finding skills. About 200 feet up, I suddenly realized I was kind of stuck. Backing off seemed very tenuous. My climbing partner was out of sight, maybe 30 feet ahead of me. I thought about mentioning my predicament, but it felt overly dramatic. After about a minute, I decided that I could not stay in the position I was in much longer.

I do not remember if I committed to backing off or going forward, but I slipped off. I tumbled to climber's right onto some snow. As recounted by my climbing partners after the incident, I alternated between sliding on my front and back as I fell down the snow, but stayed head up. There was a break in the snow about 30 feet above the mouth of the North Chimney that likely slowed my fall. I continued to slide down the snow below the chimney and stopped in the talus field below. I don't recall the exact details of the fall, but my helmet had a crack in the back.

The friends below us were first to get to me. One of them is an EMT and was my primary rescuer until the RMNP ranger team arrived and prepared me for a helicopter flight to the hospital. I suffered two fractured front ribs (right side), a small closed pneumothorax (right side), a 20 percent compression T6 back fracture, seven stitches to repair a bone-deep laceration to my left eyebrow, sprained right ankle, bone-bruised/sprained (unknown) left foot, and a multitude of abrasions on my chin, arms, back and chest. Additionally, I likely had a mild concussion.

ANALYSIS

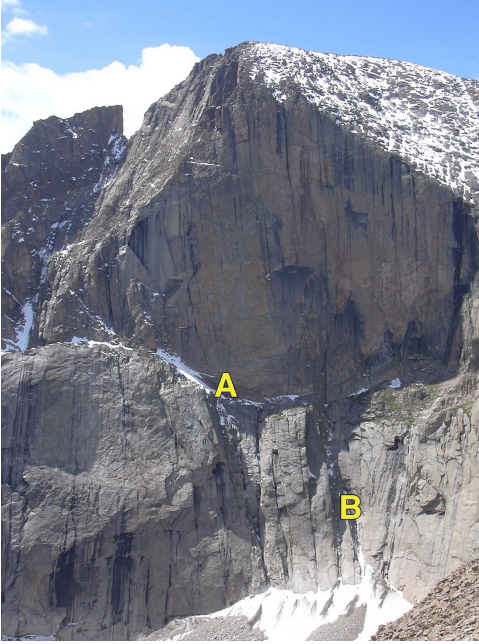
Accidents usually involve bad luck, but sometimes they also reflect the absence of good luck—as in when you are doing something incorrect or sloppy and don't get away with it. In my case, I think both situations apply. Alpine climbing and scrambling have inherent risk, and bad things can happen even if you do everything right.

Because we both felt comfortable on the terrain, the choice between roping up and soloing the North Chimney felt obvious to me; the North Chimney is notorious for rockfall, and roping up increases the

chances of knocking off loose rock. Soloing is also significantly faster, which means less exposure time in the rockfall zone. On the other hand, as I demonstrated, the consequences of soloing are very high.

I didn't know the route as well as I thought I did. Though this approach route may be 5.4—well within my ability level, even in approach shoes—15 feet away from the best line could be much harder. I wasn't paying much attention to the exact route we followed because my climbing partner was more experienced than me, we climb together frequently, and I assumed he would pick the path of least resistance. I also felt a competitive need to keep up with his pace. Expert halo, ego, and lack of attention are three serious human factors highlighted here. (Source: Annie Weinmann.)

Images



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Article Details

Author	Annie Weinmann
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	74
Page	
Copyright Date	2021
Article Type	Accident reports