



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock – Inadequate Protection

Colorado, Boulder, First Flatiron

The 10-pitch, 1,000-foot east face of the First Flatiron, rated 5.6 R, was my goal for August 10. I had not put boot to rock in over six months, owing in part to inactivity compelled by the COVID-19 pandemic. My partner, age 56, and I (69) both began the route fresh off the couch, though we each have long trad climbing histories and much experience on routes far harder than this day's objective.

Starting the second pitch, the route looked unclear to us. I climbed straight up from our belay stance, following a few chalk marks, and placed two good pieces in the first 40 feet. A small, shallow pocket accepted a pink Tricam for my highest piece. I placed it carefully and it looked good. I pulled hard on the piece and it flew out easily. This was disconcerting, but I replaced the Tricam, gave a gentle tug, and hoped for the best. The prospect of positive holds loomed 50 feet higher. Just before reaching them, I placed a small DMM nut.

Tired from the tension of this long, dicey lead, I thought exultantly, "I've got it in the bag." I transferred my weight onto a right foot hold, and my foot slipped unexpectedly. My first thoughts on the less-than-vertical face were to keep my feet under me and run down the face, waiting to be held by my protection. Quickly, gravity's acceleration exceeded my running ability and I tumbled, completely out of control. I came to a stop when I hit the belay ledge after several bounces, landing on my back. The rope was slack above me, having "caught my fall" only enough to rip out my top two pieces of protection. My top piece somehow came unclipped from the rope during my fall and was located by a party who followed us up the climb—it had landed nearly as high and 30 feet to the left of its original placement.

My partner and I devised a plan to rappel down a single line from the first anchor to the ground. Meanwhile, the climber who had been following us up the climb informed me I had drifted off route and taken a more difficult, direct alternative. Once we both were down on the ground, he untied our rope and we were off the face with all of our gear.

I slowly limped one mile back to the car and opted for first aid at my partner's home over a trip to the emergency room. My most debilitating injury was an extremely painful left shoulder, though the joint still had full range of motion. I also had abrasions on the left leg, a seriously bruised right big toe, a sprained right thumb, and gouges on the top of three fingers of the right hand. My back was spared injury because I'd been wearing a pack containing a half-empty water bottle that exploded on impact. No head or neck injury. I was very lucky.

ANALYSIS

To catalogue my errors:

- Too hard of an objective for an out-of-shape climber
- Too much pride to turn around when the objective proved tougher than expected
- Too much reliance on questionable gear

- And the one I really don't want to admit: I need to make concessions to the reality of growing old.

It's often said, "I'd rather be lucky than good." Only luck kept me from paying the ultimate price for my hubris. (Source: Terry Price.)

Images

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