



AAC Publications

Lowering Error — Distraction, No Stopper Knot

Colorado, Clear Creek Canyon, Little Eiger

On August 10, I got off work at 5 p.m. and my partner and I set out to Little Eiger, a crag we had never visited. I knew from reading some route descriptions that we would need a 70-meter rope and at least 16 draws. We first climbed Busch Gardens (5.10), directly above the approach trail, and I took a few falls near the top. It was obvious that I was tired from work, which I feel contributed to what happened next. My partner top-roped Busch Gardens and I belayed. We had forgotten the rope bag, which I use as a safety tool; I always tie a triple barrel knot and then overhand it around the red marker on the rope tarp. This was the first deviation from our normal practice. We finished up Busch Gardens and moved onto Is Our Children Learning? (5.9+) at the far right end of the crag. I coiled the rope directly into my pack and did not tie a stopper knot, though I didn't think about it at the time.

The route starts with a large overhang protected by a bolt, leaning out over a small, eroding landing zone, which sits above a steep, rocky hillside that falls to the road about 80 feet below. As I belayed my partner's lead climb, I noticed the middle mark on the rope pass through my Grigri, but it did not pass the first bolt before she reached the anchor so I didn't think too much about it. My partner was planning to clean the draws off the route, which I figured would allow for enough extra rope to safely lower her.

Given the arching nature of the route, cleaning the pitch was more difficult than normal and I was distracted with trying to help her. When she was about four feet above the ground, I heard the horrific sound of the rope snapping through the Grigri. I tried to grab for the rope, which sent me tumbling after her down the steep hillside. We rolled about 40 feet and came to a stop on a tiny shrub. I am sure going the rest of the way would have resulted in a much worse outcome. We were extremely lucky and were left with bad bruises and some good cuts, but nothing major.

ANALYSIS

Tying a knot and closing the system would have prevented this entire scenario. In my studies of avalanche accidents, the human factor is something all the experts talk about. This was not a breakdown of knowledge or systems—this was human error. Was it simple complacency? Was it a lack of focus? Stupidity, fatigue, arrogance? Most likely all of these and yet none of them. The best single explanation I have come to is that we failed to follow through our system/safety checks 100 percent. My takeaway for the future—and the takeaway I hope to convey to the community—is to never skip a full safety check before every route. (Source: Anonymous climber.)

EDITOR'S NOTE: This route and others at this crag require a full 70-meter rope to lower safely. Although it was not a critical issue in this incident, dynamic ropes often vary from their stated length, and with age they can shrink by up to 10 percent of their initial length (that's more than 22 feet on a 70-meter rope). Moreover, according to Petzl, ropes may shrink unevenly, meaning a middle marker may become inaccurate over time. All of which reinforces the climber's main point: Close the system and do a full safety review with your partner—harness, tie-in, stopper knot, belay set-up, and a plan for cleaning the anchor—before every climb.

Images

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