



AAC Publications

Ground Fall – Belay Error

Kentucky, Red River Gorge, Muir Valley

Around noon on October 3, a climber took a lead fall near the top of Trundling Kentucky (5.7 sport) at the Bruise Brothers Wall. The belayer failed to arrest the leader's fall, resulting in a 35- to 40-foot ground fall onto rocky terrain at the base of the climb. Eyewitnesses reported the climber impacted at free-fall speed and that the rope whipped through the quickdraws but did not seem to slow the fall.

Climbers who responded, along with Erik Kloeker of Wolfe County Search and Rescue, determined there was a possibility of spinal injury and executed a carryout to an awaiting ambulance. Hospital scans revealed the climber had a fractured vertebra and sacrum; she was expected to make a full recovery.

The climber was not wearing a helmet, and the belayer was not wearing gloves. The belayer had been climbing for four years and was using a Mammut Smart device, which has some assisted-braking capability. The rope was a newer 9.8mm Edelweiss.

ANALYSIS

All equipment was inspected and found to be in good working order. It's suspected the belayer did not have their hands in the correct braking position during the fall, and the initial load was not adequate to engage the assisted-braking function of the device. The belayer also may have inadvertently held the device in its open position, and the slickness of a newer rope could have been a factor. Despite not wearing gloves, the belayer showed no signs of burns on the hands. Regardless of which assisted-braking belay device you use, the brake hand must retain control of the rope throughout the process of feeding out or taking in rope or catching a fall. (Sources: Erik Kloeker, Wolfe County Search and Rescue, and the Editors.)

Images

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