



AAC Publications

Ground Fall – Protection Pulled Out

North Carolina, Pilot Mountain State Park

On August 1 a party of three, Michael Hall (26), M. Johnson (26), and D. Jones (28), were climbing Cowboys and Heroes (5.7), a 40-foot route in the Foreign Trade Zone area. Hall was leading the route and fell from a harder variation near the top of the climb after he weighted his highest piece and it pulled out. In the resulting ground fall, Hall suffered open fractures of the tibia and fibula on his right leg, a laceration to the left leg, and a fractured sternum.

Hall described what happened: We arrived at Pilot Mountain around 9:30 a.m. and got on a trad climb to warm up, and followed with some top-roping and projecting two 5.10s. Around 11:20 a.m., we moved to a new area and I decided to attempt to onsight Cowboys and Heroes.

I placed my first piece at around 10 feet in a horizontal crack. The next 10 feet of climbing leads to a ledge 18 to 20 feet from ground. The second placement was a blue number 1 TCU, also in a horizontal crack. I tested this piece by grabbing the sling and giving it two quick jerks. The final portion of the climb has a number of finishes. Rather than take the 5.7 finish as I had intended, I started working up a vertical crack (5.10).

At this point, with my feet approximately 25 to 30 feet from the ground, I started to get pumped. I placed a clearly under-cammed (tipped out) number 2 cam, and as the pump intensified, I began looking for a placement to back it up. While trying to grab a number 3 cam from my rack, my arms began to give out. I grabbed the draw attached to the number 2 cam to help me place the larger piece, but this resulted in the number 2 cam pulling out. As I fell, the blue TCU also pulled from the rock. I fell past the ledge, hitting my left knee on the way down, and landed on the ground with both my feet taking the full force of the fall, before falling backward and coming to a rest on my back and side.

One of my partners tried to immobilize me while the other called 911. A climbing guide and off-duty fireman were in the area and reached me within a few minutes. A ranger and Surry County EMS responded to the 911 call, and I was transported to a waiting ambulance. (Sources: Michael Hall and Pilot Mountain State Park ranger Jesse A. Anderson.)

ANALYSIS

Hall noted: “I believe that not placing additional gear, climbing on rock that had moisture and was dirty, and not staying on route were the factors contributing to my fall. By downclimbing five feet or so [to regroup], I may have been able to prevent the fall. Luckily, I was wearing a helmet. A life-changing accident can happen on an easy climb as quickly as it can on a hard one.”

Many climbers opt to top-rope the traditionally protected routes at Pilot Mountain because bands of poor rock exist throughout the climbing area. In addition, the routes are often quite short, making a ground fall a real possibility when cam or nut placements fail. (Sources: Michael Hall and the Editors.)

Images



The route Cowboys and Heroes is interrupted by several ledges, requiring a leader to place abundant and solid protection for a safe ascent.

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