



AAC Publications

Fall On Rock — Inadequate Belay, Inexperience

Oregon, Smith Rocks State Park

On December 27, 2019, I took a long fall while attempting a sport climb at the southern tip of the Smith Rock Group, belayed by my father, who had no outdoor climbing experience. My parents were visiting me in Bend for the holidays, and we had gone to Smith to check out the park and get in some climbing. My wife, who, like me, is an experienced climber, was not available that day, so I decided to have my father belay, figuring a Grigri would lock in a lead-fall situation. I gave my father, who was a complete novice as a belayer, a quick overview of how to use a Grigri 2. I warmed up on one route, then set up a top-rope on a harder adjacent route. On the harder route, I hung on the top-rope several times to demonstrate to my father how to hold me with the Grigri.

Figuring he had belaying down, I decided to work on another sport route I had tried once before, but wasn't able to do clean: I'm Your Hate (5.11a). I started up the route on lead and asked my father to take several times as I proceeded toward the crux. I started into the crux section, which involves coming out of a dihedral and around an arête, and then fell. I was only a few feet above a bolt, but I dropped approximately 35 feet to the ground.

I landed on both feet with the rope taut, implying the Grigri had caught my weight just as or before I hit the ground. We believe my father mistakenly held open the release mechanism on the Grigri with one hand as he attempted to arrest my fall. The Grigri eventually engaged, likely when my father experienced a minor rope burn on his hand and thus released his grip.

Using a pair of crutches kept at the park for community use, I was able to self-rescue. I later learned I had fractured my right calcaneus (heel bone) in the incident, which required surgical repair.

ANALYSIS

I was so excited to go climbing and, lacking an experienced partner, I decided to recruit an inexperienced belayer. I assumed the Grigri would prevent a leader fall no matter what. However, like all belay devices, the Grigri requires proper training and experience to use effectively. I should have put more focus on belay training and practice, and stuck with climbs well within my **onsight capabilities**. (Source: Tom Bussell, age 36.) **[Editor's Note:** Since this incident occurred in late 2019, it is not counted in the data tables. We included it here as a useful reminder that assisted-braking belay devices are never foolproof. Provide or seek sufficient instruction and follow the manufacturer's recommendations when using any new or unfamiliar device.]

Images

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