



AAC Publications

Belayer Hit By Rockfall – Saved By Borrowed Helmet

Utah, Wasatch Range, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Hellgate Cliffs

On August 7, Avery Guest (female, 20) was climbing with her partner for the day, Jake Bowles (21), at Hellgate Cliffs, a limestone area high in Little Cottonwood. It was Avery's second time climbing/belaying outdoors. Jake is an experienced climber.

They chose Monkey Paw (5.9), a single-pitch sport climb, for their first route of the day. Jake was leading, and he got about four bolts up the route (approximately 50 feet off the ground) when he reached for what looked like a good hold. When he weighted the hold, a torso-size rock detached from the wall. It split into three pieces, and one of them landed on Avery, knocking her unconscious. Jake fell approximately 10 feet, pulling Avery about a foot off the ground. She was using a Grigri, which caught Jake's fall.

Avery regained consciousness quickly and noticed she had an open fracture on her right arm. She managed to lower her partner with her left hand, and he untied her from the belay system. She had post-traumatic amnesia, repeating questions multiple times. They called 911 at about 10:20 a.m. United Fire Authority paramedics and Salt Lake County Search and Rescue responded to the scene within 30 minutes. They gave her pain medication and improvised a litter with Jake's rope bag in order to carry her about 100 feet down and away from the base of the rock, where Lifelight could hoist Avery and transport her to the hospital for treatment.

She had two broken bones in her right arm that needed surgery, plus lacerations on her forehead and leg. She also had bleeding in her brain, but managed to avoid brain surgery. Jake suffered only minor scrapes and bruises during the fall.

ANALYSIS

Avery did not have a helmet, so Jake let her use his, knowing there might be rockfall in the area. If Avery had not been wearing Jake's helmet, her head injuries could have been much worse and possibly fatal. The belay stance for this route was small and surrounded by steep, rocky slopes. Otherwise, she may have been able to move out of the way of the falling rock. (Source: Avery Guest.)

Editor's Note: Although such incidents are thankfully rare, this is an excellent example of a case where an assisted-braking belay device likely prevented serious injuries to the leader, because the belayer's device stopped his fall even though the belayer had been knocked unconscious by rockfall.

Images



Using a rope bag as a makeshift litter for a short, steep carry to a helicopter landing zone.

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