



AAC Publications

Leader Falls — Cams Pulled Out

Utah, Wasatch Range, Little Cottonwood Canyon

Salt Lake County Search and Rescue (SLCOSAR) was called out in the afternoon of October 19 for an injured climber in Little Cottonwood Canyon. The very experienced climber (male, 59) had been leading the first pitch of Crescent Crack (5.7 trad) when he took a lead fall and a cam placement failed to hold. The climber dropped about 25 feet and flipped upside down with the rope caught behind his leg. He landed head-first on a ledge (he credits his helmet with saving his life). The belayer, his 20-year-old son, lowered the injured climber to a ledge, where he shakily slung a tree for another anchor (nearly dropping the rope in the process), and then was lowered to the ground. The climber later wrote: “I had already placed much of the gear on my rack in the crack below me and lacked the size I needed to protect the next move. I reached down, grabbed my last cam, and bumped it up higher—keenly aware that the next piece below that one was now more than 10 feet down. I reset the cam a few times. It wasn’t the ideal size for the crack, but I believed I finally set it securely. [This was] possibly the first time in 30 years of climbing that a piece of gear I’d placed didn’t hold when I fell on it.”

The leader was evacuated to the hospital, where scans revealed fractured C1 and T3 vertebrae and a massive contusion on one thigh. Fortunately, he recovered completely from the serious spinal injuries.

The day after the Crescent Crack incident, SLCOSAR was called for another injured climber in Little Cottonwood. A climber was leading Bongeater (5.10d trad) when he fell at the crux near the top of the route. His climbing partner said he fell about six to ten feet to the last cam placement below him, and that cam pulled out. The next two cams below that also pulled out. The fourth piece of gear held, but the climber hit a ramp. Two broken ankles were suspected. The climber also had the rope briefly wrapped around his neck in the fall, causing ligature marks. The belayer lowered the climber and called for help. Unified Fire and SLCOSAR brought the patient to the trailhead, from which he was transported to a local hospital. (Sources: Salt Lake County Search and Rescue and climber account.)

ANALYSIS

In the first accident, a cam placement failed; in the second, multiple placements failed. The first climber knew his final cam placement was poor but continued anyway. He wrote: “I’ve castigated myself ad nauseam over my decision to continue upward instead of lowering to a ledge where I could have built an anchor, belayed my son up, and had the full rack to finish the pitch. I may have misled myself, in part, because the difficulty rating of that pitch was relatively easy—a grade on which I’m not sure I’ve ever fallen before. Despite all the good reasons to back off, I convinced myself: It’ll be fine.”

On Bongeater, the crux is a layback crack that can be protected well with cams, but on such strenuous moves it’s common to skip or rush placements; the result in this case was three cams pulling out. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

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