



AAC Publications

Fall on Ice — Collapsed Ice Curtain

Vermont, Bone Mountain

We were climbing at a remote location in the hills of Bolton, in search of new ice lines. Bone Mountain is an obscure cliff that takes about an hour and a half to reach in summer and about two hours of skinning in the winter. I was very familiar with the area, having developed many of the routes. Two young friends joined me on February 17 to explore for winter lines.

At one of the furthest reaches of the cliff, we saw three distinct ice lines. The largest was a free-standing column around 25 feet tall, and the second was easier. After doing both of these climbs, we looked at a line that began with a free-hanging curtain of ice and talked about how to mitigate the risks. We knew we had a party of three, cell phone reception, and a med kit, and I placed one ice screw uphill from the ice to prevent sliding down the hill if I needed to jump off while leading. The bottom of the ice was roughly two feet from the ground.

The curtain required very slow movement and precision to climb. I ascended the curtain to the point at which it met the rock about 15 feet up, and then, while repositioning one of my tools, the curtain gave way with me on it. I hit the ground and the curtain landed on me, breaking an ankle and lacerating my upper lip. It is unclear if my ankle broke on impact with the ground or from ice landing on it. The lip injury was caused by falling ice.

My partners assessed my injuries and found nothing other than the fractured ankle and lip. I never lost consciousness. We took off my ice boot and put on a ski boot before swelling could occur, mitigated the bleeding from my face, and then proceeded to ski for three-plus hours back to the car. Before leaving, we called a number of friends to give them updates on our situation and then checked in every hour or so on the way down. I was treated for a low tibia/fibula fracture, and the lip required 12 stitches.

ANALYSIS

Simply put, I made a risky call and landed on the wrong side of that call. I knew what I was attempting to climb was dangerous, and ultimately I was either not skilled enough to handle the terrain or I just got unlucky on that day. It's worth noting that the first climb of the day was likely much more dangerous, and a successful lead of that free-standing column may have impacted my decision-making later in the day. This is something I've been reflecting on ever since.

At a more micro level, I was one move away from solid ice when I reached for the ice with my left tool. I felt stretched out and came back down to reposition my right tool. One could argue I should have just completed the initial reach up to good ice. The other wrong call was believing I was above the break line on the curtain—I thought I had reached the point where the ice had bonded to the rock when I was repositioning the tool. In hindsight, this was obviously not true. (Source: Anonymous climber.)

Images

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