



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock — Broken Hold

West Virginia, New River Gorge, Endless Wall, Party Buttress

It was November 21, and our day started by warming up on Riding the Crest of the Wave (5.9 trad) at Idol Point. We then walked to Party Buttress to attempt Harbinger Scarab (5.12c), a 100-foot, mostly bolted route that requires a couple of traditional pieces down low. Markus Kauffman (23) climbed through the roof crux, which is four or five bolts up, and was making his way up the steep headwall above. He was past the seventh bolt and about 30 feet past the roof when the accident occurred.

Markus had rested at the seventh bolt so he could work out the sequence above. He then made a couple more moves and began a final dynamic move off his right hand. At that point, I heard him scream, “Rock!” and saw Markus falling along with a softball-size piece of rock—the right handhold had broken. The rock did not strike him as he fell. There was an appropriate amount of slack in the system, and I gave him a dynamic catch as I have hundreds of other times. But what should have been a benign fall, if his body remained upright, turned into one that involved a rescue and me writing an accident report.

Pulling hard with his right hand and ripping off the hold must have thrown Markus off-balance and created enough momentum to cause him to invert and twist, so the right side of his head struck the wall. I called up to him to see if he was okay. He did not respond, and his body was limp. I lowered him to the ground and began to assess the situation. I called for help, did a primary trauma assessment, and made sure Markus did not move his neck. Another climber called 911 at 11:15 a.m.

Markus regained consciousness within one minute of being lowered to the ground and knew his name and where he was after a few minutes. A group of climbers helped me care for him while we waited for help. The Fayette County High Angle Rescue Team arrived at 1:45 p.m. via fixed lines above the nearby climb, Smooth Operator (5.9). Markus was in a helicopter around 2:40 p.m. and flown to a nearby hospital. He suffered multiple fractures on the right side of his face, multiple lacerations on his face and forehead, and was diagnosed with a small subdural hematoma in his frontal lobe at the hospital. He was discharged after three days in the hospital.

ANALYSIS

Markus was not wearing a helmet. Wearing one, even while sport climbing, can decrease the risk of injury during rockfall and in the event of bad lead fall, or at least lessen the severity of the injury. Knocking on holds and not using ones that sound hollow is a good habit. Lastly, carry a good first-aid kit and exchange the phone numbers of emergency contacts with climbing partners. (Source: Nick Rico.)

Images

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