



AAC Publications

Ledge Collapse — Severed Rope

Mexico, Chihuahua Falls National Park, El Gigante

On March 6, my best friend Nolan Smythe, 26, and I were on the second day of a free ascent of Logical Progression, a 28-pitch 5.13 big-wall sport climb on El Gigante. Nolan was leading pitch 14.

The sun had just gone down, and we had two moderate 5.11 pitches to go before our next bivy. He made it about 80 feet into the pitch and then, after manteling onto a large ledge, the refrigerator-size block of volcanic rock dislodged from under his feet. As he was falling, the rope was cut by the huge block and he fell all the way to the ground.

I was left alone on the wall with a shortened lead line and a limited number of draws. A three-day storm was forecast to start the next afternoon. Below me was a sizable traverse that I wasn't confident I'd be able to descend safely while keeping my bivy kit. On top of that, we had rappelled in to start the climb, and I didn't know the walk-out exit for the canyon; this exit route also passes very near several poppy fields run by the local cartel.

Instead, I started roped soloing up to our planned bivy. I primarily used a stick clip, but on occasion free climbing was necessary. I alerted a good friend, Sergio "Tiny" Almada, about the situation via my inReach, and he started toward the wall with another Mexican climber, José David "Bicho" Martinez, planning to rappel in so I could jumar the last 1,200 feet to the top. They arrived as the rain started, and we left my kit behind to jug out quickly. We returned a week later, after the body recovery, and cleaned all of my gear off the wall.

ANALYSIS

All told, this seemed like a freak accident more than anything else. I recall rappelling past the same ledge earlier with a large haul bag. It looked concerning, but after giving it a thorough test, I deemed it solid. Nolan must have had the same thoughts during his lead. It had been snowing for three days before we rappelled in, and this accident happened three days after the snow stopped. It is possible that a freeze-thaw cycle contributed to the rockfall, but there is no way of definitively knowing. Sometimes a rock that many people have pulled on has a day that it is going to release. Unfortunately, it released on Nolan.

Don't underestimate Logical Progression because it's a "sport route." This wall is remote, large, and committing. The weather can be really bad. Be prepared. You are on your own out there—help in case of an accident isn't as close as you think it is in Chihuahua.

We were prepared with bivy gear, a stick clip, extra draws, an inReach, and the knowledge to go up or down the wall safely on our own. Nolan and I were both well within our comfort level. We both had quickly dispatched the first 5.13 pitch on the route on the morning of the accident. Some accidents are simply a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. (Source: Aaron Livingston.)

Images

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