



AAC Publications

Stranded — Exposure and Weather

California, Yosemite National Park, Half Dome

In the evening of October 17, two climbers, Kate (28) and Nick (26), started up the Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome (23 pitches, 5.9 C2) after completing the Nose on El Capitan (31 pitches, 5.9 C2) earlier in the same day. Nick and Kate were both experienced climbers attempting a sub-24-hour link-up of the two walls. They failed to summit Half Dome when they were caught in a winter storm, five pitches from the top.

After finishing The Nose, Kate and Nick ate lunch and started up the approach to Half Dome. The weather forecasted a 90 percent chance of precipitation around 1:30 a.m. Despite that, neither talked about rescheduling.

Kate and Nick started climbing the Northwest Face around 6 p.m. They made good progress, but around midnight they were engulfed in a winter-like storm. At this point, Nick and Kate were simultaneously climbing through 5.9 and 5.10 terrain, with snow and ice accumulating on ledges and in cracks. Around 12:30 a.m., they arrived at Big Sandy Ledge, atop pitch 18.

Nick began leading the first pitch of the “Zig Zags” (pitch 19) with increasing difficulty. He was scraping ice out of the cracks and, at one point, slipped off a large foot ledge and fell back onto his daisy chain. Their gear was freezing solid, and Kate’s hands were losing their ability to function.

Nick still wanted to try and summit, but Kate did not think safely continuing was possible. At this point, they had not sustained any injuries, but the pitches ahead included Thank God Ledge and multiple slab pitches, none of which is inconsequential, especially if covered with ice and snow. They called 911 at 1:50 a.m. and were told to call back at 6 a.m. In a few hours the snow stopped falling, the wind died down, and the temperature dropped. At first light, the conditions on the route were even icier. At 6 a.m., they called search and rescue back and confirmed they needed assistance.

Shortly afterward, Yosemite Search and Rescue (YOSAR) gathered for a technical rescue on Half Dome. The plan was to fly rescuers, ropes, and all necessary equipment to the summit with a helicopter and lower one member of YOSAR to Nick and Kate and then haul them up to the summit. Due to the cold winter conditions, the helicopter got delayed because the rotors needed to de-ice.

Later that morning, conditions allowed the helicopter to fly. A rescuer was lowered to Nick and Kate, carrying jackets and warm beverages. Once the rescuer attached to Kate and Nick, two teams on top raised the climbers to the summit. Miraculously, neither Kate nor Nick sustained any cold-related injuries.

ANALYSIS

Heed the forecast. Severe storms can roll through Yosemite any month of the year, but early spring and late fall often catch climbers unaware. In this case, the team saw a forecast for the Valley floor (4,000 feet elevation) with precipitation starting at 1:30 a.m., and they were surprised when the storm started two hours earlier. The conditions on Half Dome (8,846 feet) were not surprisingly much more

intense and severe.

Don't allow the goal to blind your judgment. The link-up of Half Dome and El Capitan in under 24 hours is an admirable goal for any Valley climber. After a season of training and a plan set in motion, it can be tough to decide to bail, especially given that the climbers had completed El Capitan and were "on track" for a sub-24-hour time. They ignored a known weather risk to complete their goal.

Communicate openly with your partner. Many accidents and rescues can be avoided with better communication between partners. Any reservations or concerns should be immediately communicated. Especially with disappointment on the line, it can be challenging to start the conversation. Partners, particularly new partners, should regularly check in and practice their communication like other climbing skills. Sure, one partner might be disappointed at first, but if it means not having to spend the night in a winter storm or worse, it might be worth it.

Although they discussed the weather, there was no conversation about a worst-case scenario. The climbers didn't discuss the possibility of not making it to the top nor what the upper pitches would be like in a storm. The final pitch of the Regular Northwest Face is slab climbing with limited opportunities to aid. There should always be a conversation about how to retreat if there is no real possibility of going up.

Pack the proper layers. If you know there is a chance of precipitation, you should pack suitable layers. Kate and Nick both had warm gloves (Kate was not initially wearing them), base layers, and hardshell jackets. However, neither had hardshell pants, and they felt like that was a major mistake. Both Kate and Nick have experience with ice/mixed climbing in winter conditions and thought they could have possibly self-rescued the following morning with the appropriate layers.

Know when to call for a rescue (and have the ability to communicate). It's tough to know when the right time is. Ultimately, Kate decided they should call for help when she felt like she could not safely use her hands. The need for a rescue became more apparent when they were rappelling back down to Big Sandy after attempting the Zig-Zags. The ropes were extremely icy, making the rappel dangerous. They rappelled with Grigris and used slings as "third-hand" backup prusiks, and did not feel it was safe to try and retreat further. There were legitimate concerns that if they attempted to continue upward, Kate and/or Nick could have gotten injured; this would have made the situation much worse and the rescue more complex.

They only carried one cell phone with them, and fortunately they were able to make a phone call to 911. To communicate with YOSAR, they kept the phone off when not in use and kept the phone next to their bodies to keep it warm and preserve the battery. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images



Nick and Kate being hoisted to the summit of Half Dome after a mid-October storm. Big Sandy and Thank God ledges are clearly outlined below by the plastering of fresh snow.



The climbers can be seen on Big Sandy Ledge (right center) before their rescue off an icy Half Dome.

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