Ground Fall — Rappel Error

California, Echo Cliffs, The Grotto

My wife (Kelly Perkins, 59) and I (Craig Perkins, 60) have rock climbed for 20 years. After a long hiatus, I took time to refresh my skills, including anchor building, knots, and gear placement. Our climb, Miss Pacman (5.9, sport), was fun and initially uneventful. Upon reaching the top of the 40-foot route, the open cold-shuts anchors looked worn. Over the years, deep grooves had formed in the metal. I attached two quickdraws to facilitate top-roping, one to each shut and clipped the rope-bearing end with the carabiner gates opposite and opposing. This minimized wear and tear on the shuts.

I decided to rappel from the anchors instead of lowering through the shuts. To secure myself, I attached two quickdraws to my belay loop and clipped one to each shut. Once secure, I gave the command, “Off belay.” Still tied in, I unclipped the rope from the hanging quickdraws and looped it through the open shuts to set up a rappel.

I then girth-hitched a Dyneema sling to my belay loop and tied a figure eight on a bight in the sling (Mistake #1). I slid the end loop over both open shuts (Mistake #2). The loop formed by the figure eight was so small that it created a wide angle in the loop (Mistake #3). I did not set up my rappel system before committing myself to the sling, nor did I test the sling while belayed or backed up by my anchor quick- draws (Mistake #4).

I cleaned the anchor quickdraws and sat back on the Dyneema sling. As I did so, the loop constricted and popped off the open cold shuts. I began falling. My first reaction was to grab the opposite side of the rope. While this slowed my descent, it also caused a friction burn. I instinctively let go, only to grab the rope again as I picked up speed. The rope burn caused me to let go again and I continued to the ground, landing on a flat slab at the base of the climb. Fortunately, my injuries were limited to third-degree burns on all fingers of the right hand and two fingers on the left, along with a sprained ankle, scrapes on my back, and a hematoma to my left thigh. I was very lucky.

My wife and I gathered our belongings and returned to the trailhead after a one-hour hike. We headed straight to the closest urgent care center, where my hands were treated. Suffice to say, this was a lesson learned. I hope this story will help prevent further accidents of this kind. The event scared the bejesus out of my wife. She initially thought she had made a mistake by taking me off belay. To be clear, she did nothing wrong. Also, she was a trooper by carrying extra weight during our hike out. (Source: Craig Perkins.)

ANALYSIS

Open cold shuts are thankfully disappearing as anchor hardware gets updated. Unfortunately, they are still found even on popular climbs. This incident illustrates two major hazards presented by open cold shuts. First, rope wear on the anchor reduces their already low relative strength. The second is they are inherently insecure, just like any open anchor.

The victim noted that during years of repeated lowering, “deep grooves had formed” in the shuts. Though he made a good choice to top-rope through quickdraws, a better option would have been to girth-hitch two independent slings (or the two ends of one long sling) to the shuts and equalize the

rope-bearing end.

The biggest lesson here is to weight-test the system (in this case the rappel) before unclipping from your direct tether to the anchor. A decision to rappel versus lower is a personal choice. In this case, the complexity of reconfiguring an open anchor was inefficient and paradoxically precipitated what might have become a fatal accident. The victim's desire to create "extra redundant protection" was also unnecessary and, again, exposed him to more risk. In the end, it would have been easier and safer to lower through the cold shuts, grooved as they were. (Source: The Editors.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Craig Perkins
Publication	ANAM
Volume	12
Issue	75
Page	39
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	Accident reports