



AAC Publications

Bouldering Fall — Insufficient Pad Placement

California, San Diego, Santee Boulders

On the afternoon of March 6, Joseph Chen (33) fell from near the top of American Express (5.9). The climb is described on Mountain Project as a top-rope. However, the 15-foot granite slab is often climbed as a boulder problem. Chen was unroped.

Chen wrote, “The group I was with was highballing this climb. I was not familiar with the area, and it seemed higher than something I would normally boulder. I tried two times but bailed halfway up. I tried one more time as my last climb of the day and pushed beyond where I would normally feel comfortable. I had relatively good feet but somehow lost my footing while searching for the last hold.”

Chen fell down the slab, landing directly on his heels on a single crash pad placed among a scattering of other pads. He was evacuated by two other climbers and driven to urgent care. X-rays revealed a severe burst compression fracture of the L1 vertebra that necessitated a complete replacement of the vertebra with a cage, along with fusion of the T11 to L3 vertebrae to stabilize his spine. The trauma doctor was surprised that he was able to self-rescue and considered Chen very lucky to have escaped paralysis.

ANALYSIS

Bouldering is dangerous. Chen spent the next seven months in bed for most of the day. He started climbing again but at a much lower level due to loss of flexibility and strength.

Chen says in hindsight that one crash pad was insufficient, and he should have personally repositioned the multiple pads rather than relying on placement by others. He also would do his own research instead of going with the will of the group; he noted that he wouldn't have attempted the route as a highball had he known it was considered a top-rope. Finally, his spotters failed him. They were inattentive, and he noted that some had started drinking. (Source: Joseph Chen.)

Images

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