



AAC Publications

Fall on Ice – Exceeding Abilities, Ego Pressure

Montana, Hyalite Canyon, Unnamed Wall

On January 17, climbers W (18) and T (19) met at 7:30 a.m. to carpool into Hyalite Canyon. They had not previously climbed together. They planned to climb The Thrill is Gone, a classic M4 chimney on the popular and paradoxically named Unnamed Wall. W had been rock climbing for almost five years and ice climbing for three. T was very experienced on rock and had three years of ice climbing.

At the crag, T led Thrill and cleaned the route. W then re-led Thrill. As he climbed, he noticed a bolted mixed route to the left and decided to attempt that route next. The guidebook identified it as Sharp Dressed Man (M6 R). Though often ice-covered, the route had ice only a third of the way down. W concluded the R rating was due to the bolts being iced over in most seasons. He was unfazed by the M6 rating, despite never having led that difficulty. T perhaps wisely declined to lead, but was happy to belay.

W climbed confidently up the initial section on positive and obvious holds. Fifteen feet up, below the first bolt, the holds became worse. W was not pumped and did not consider downclimbing. Instead, he placed his left tool on a precarious sloping edge and locked off. The clip was reachy, but he could not find other obvious holds. As W fumbled for a quickdraw his tool popped. He fell off the wall with a scream. W plummeted eight feet before striking a rocky ledge with his left foot. His crampon snagged on the rock and the foot caved inward. He fell the remaining distance, landing on his right foot in a soft patch of snow before rolling onto his tailbone and back.

His partner and some friends rushed over. W took off his left crampon without removing the boot. The rescuers made a makeshift splint with ice tools, duct tape, and a borrowed ski strap. With assistance from the other climbers and some butt scooting, W made it back to T's truck. The ER doctor, himself an ice climber, determined that W had broken bones in his ankle but most likely wouldn't need surgery.

ANALYSIS

When one is young and ambitious, it's not uncommon to push oneself hard, but pushing the limits on ice and mixed terrain can get out of control much faster than in other disciplines. In retrospect, W says, "The most striking error in the decision-making was my insistence on leading a difficult route with insufficient experience. Until this season I had almost exclusively climbed water ice. Though I managed a couple D6/7 top-ropes and a handful of thin ice leads earlier this year, I had never led a proper dry-tool route. Sharp Dressed Man was clearly outside my skill level, but I recall thinking I could easily climb it.

"I subconsciously believed that, because I hadn't fallen before, I wouldn't fall this time. In spite of several recent accidents in the community, I seemed to think I was somehow different and invulnerable. Equally influential was my ego and desire to be respected by the people around me—foremost my partner T. His wealth of experience, combined with the fact that we'd never climbed together before, made me eager to leave a good impression." [Editor's Note: Sharp Dressed Man was first climbed by Alex Lowe and Jack Tackle in 1984. Those who are aware of their climbing record treat their routes with great deference.]

W continued: "I incorrectly extrapolated that because the first few feet of bouldering felt easy, the

remaining 60-plus feet would be the same. Furthermore, my consultation of the guidebook consisted of a quick scan and a glance at the photos. Had I actually taken the time to read the passage, I would have discovered [this route] was a popular top-rope and rarely iced over, earning its R rating from a run-out above a final manky piton.

“The final flaw in my decision-making was my refusal to establish a safety net. As a good friend of mine said, I was ‘free soloing until the first bolt.’ Although I considered setting up a top-rope from the chains of Thrill, one of the first things to pass through my head was a concern for how I would be perceived. I also hadn’t realized that stick-clipping was the preferred method to clip the first bolt.

“Reflecting on the accident, I see how much worse it could have been. I am so grateful for the medical training of my rescuers and their calm and efficient response.” (Source: W.)

Images



W climbing The Thrill is Gone prior to embarking on Sharp Dressed Man. The latter climbs the rock to his left. Bolts are visible at the far left edge of the image.



Makeshift splint made from ice tools, duct tape, and a borrowed ski strap.



Butt-scoting out from the cliff.

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