



RAPPEL FATALITY—Top-Rope Soloing

California, Auburn Quarry, Scale Well

On April 1, climber X (female, 45), was top-rope soloing Landslide (5.8), an 80-foot sport route on the extreme right of the popular Scale Wall, a limestone cliff in Auburn State Recreation Area, northeast of Sacramento. A group of climbers including Christian Kiefer (51), witnessed X fall to her death. Kiefer's report follows:

"Climbers on the scene noted that X (the female climber) was alone and seemed inexperienced. X had walked around to the top of the crag and fixed a single rope as her top-rope solo system. Others there had seen her do the same thing on previous occasions. I did not see her climb the route, but I talked to all the others who were present. They reported that she successfully reached the top and, though no one said exactly how long X was at the anchor, it was long enough that she was likely switching from top-roping to rappelling.

"At that point, she fell approximately 80 feet to the ground, bringing the entire rope down with her. Her body was on its right side, the rope threaded through one slot of her Petzl ATC-style device. The bight was clipped to a locking carabiner. A Petzl Ascension ascender was attached to her harness via a locking carabiner but was not attached to the rope. Her prusik loop was 10 to 15 feet away, not attached to the rope. X was not breathing, so climbers on scene administered CPR. Local authorities arrived within 15 minutes. An automated external defibrillator was administered without effect. The climber was evacuated and declared dead within an hour of the accident."

ANALYSIS

Kiefer says, "The climbers on scene collectively believe that X made an error at the top of the route, untying from the anchor without securing herself. At the two-bolt anchor, the left chain was observed swinging after the fall, indicating that the rope likely ran only through that single anchor. One end of the rope lay some distance from the cliff, further indicating that one end had pulled through the anchor chain quickly. After the accident, I talked with a local guide who said he had taken X aside a few weeks earlier and told her that her system did not meet recommendations.

"During her talk with the guide, it was revealed that X had used her top-rope solo set-up approximately 12 times in the past. Her brother later said that she had been climbing for less than two months at the time of the accident.

"We believe the use of a single strand in her top-rope system may have distracted her into believing the rope was fixed, even when she had untied it from the anchor. Rather than threading both rope strands through her ATC, she had only threaded one, indicating that she thought she could safely [rappel on] only one strand even after untying from the anchor."

Editor's Note: It is possible X threaded the rope through the chain(s) to perform a doubled-rope rappel and mistakenly clipped only one strand of rope. However, X had set up her system by walking to the top of the crag, and it would make sense that she planned to clean the rope in the same manner, after rappelling the single strand, especially if she wanted to climb another lap. While her self-belay system was not the direct cause of the accident, the rappel error was influenced by the complex transition from a top-rope solo to rappel.

As Kiefer notes: "Climbing is a skills progression that requires mentorship. Top-rope soloing is no different; nonetheless, as that style has become increasingly common, some new climbers are starting their journey as top-rope soloists. While YouTube is a great place to find information, it is no substitute for hiring a guide and/or snagging a more experienced partner to help you gain the skills needed to engage in this activity safely. (Sources: Christian Kiefer and Mark Paden.)

Images

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