



FALL WHILE RAPPELLING

New Hampshire, Whitehorse Ledge, Beginner's Easy Variation

On July 9, Jeff (male, 60) and his wife, Pam, were climbing Beginner's Easy Variation (8 pitches, 5.3 R) on the slabs of Whitehorse Ledge. Another climbing party of Damon (male), his father Graham (77), and son Taylor (8) were climbing nearby on the Beginner's Route. Damon's party and Pam shared the tree belay atop pitch one (P1).

After Jeff led pitch two (P2), he and Pam decided to descend. Jeff opted not to bring Pam up to the P2 anchor tree. To give Jeff full use of the rope for his rappel, Pam untied from the rope and remained attached to the P1 anchor tree with a sling. After a first rappel from the P2 anchor tree, Jeff rigged a second rappel from a secondary tree lower down and farther right. During the rappel, Jeff abruptly lost his balance at an area with a thick mat of pine needles. He swung about 30 feet, dropping onto a slab below. The fall caused him to hit his head. Although he was wearing a helmet, he was knocked unconscious. He was rappelling with a figure-eight belay device, and his body pressed against it, stopping his fall.

Damon's party shouted to the climbers below to call emergency services. Damon began traversing right while on belay to assist. He managed to establish a solid anchor using cams and a tree root about 25 feet above the injured climber. Damon attached the belay loop of his harness to Jeff's harness using an extender and took control of Jeff's rappel.

Jeff was unconscious, foaming from the mouth, and bleeding from his head. Due to the blood loss, Damon decided to immediately perform a joint rappel to get off the route. During the joint rappel, Jeff started to regain consciousness.

At the base of the climb, Damon found no additional injuries other than the head wound. He applied compression to control bleeding from a large cut above Jeff's helmet line. Although the ground was steep, it was in a position where the newly arrived first responders could work. Graham belayed down both Taylor and Pam to the ground.

Around 15 first responders and climbers supported Jeff's evacuation from the base of the slabs. He was fitted with a cervical collar, and a local guide rigged an anchor to help position a litter that arrived 25 minutes after the accident. Jeff was flown to Portland, Maine, and diagnosed with subarachnoid hemorrhage, intraventricular hemorrhage of the brain, and a broken clavicle. He received 11 stitches for his head wound. He later reported remembering being on rappel and then waking up in the hospital.

ANALYSIS

Whitehorse Ledge's low-angle slab climbs have limited traditional protection and sparse fixed protection. Most slab routes are runout and intimidating for the grade. This may have contributed to Jeff and Pam's decision to retreat. However, rappels here cannot be set up at will. The established fixed anchors and anchor trees do not necessarily allow half-rope rappels.

When the decision was made to descend, Jeff was more than half a rope length above his partner. Since they only had one rope, Jeff needed his partner to untie so he could complete two half-pitch

rappels. The tree Jeff chose for rappel was in a poor position and led to the pendulum fall.

Bringing two ropes or half ropes would have allowed a safer retreat and would have allowed the partner to remain tied in. Also, protection could have been placed during the rappel to reduce the pendulum risk.

A rappel safety measure such as a prusik or autoblock was not used. When Jeff fell, he was fortunate to have the rappel device jam against his body. If he hadn't fallen directly onto the rappel device or if the rock face had been steeper, it's likely he would have fallen considerably farther—perhaps another 100 feet. Also, when Jeff started to regain consciousness and move before being rescued, he may have continued to fall. This is another reason a prusik or autoblock is highly recommended, as are knots at the end of rappel ropes.

Fortunately, the incident occurred near the ground, in an area with cell phone reception and other climbers nearby. In a more remote setting, the incident would have been more serious. (Sources: Damon Clark and Jeff.)

Images

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