



## AAC Publications

---

### **RAPPEL FAILURE – Unclipped from Device**

New York, Shawangunks, Trapps Area

**On June 3, at approximately 5 p.m., a leader (male) and follower (female), both in their late 20s or early 30s, climbed the two-pitch Easy O (5.2 trad).** They intended to descend via the two-bolt rappel anchor at the top of Son of Easy O (5.8). A single 70-meter rope makes it to the ground when doubled through the anchor.

Greg van Inwegen, a nearby witness, reported to ANAC, “The leader appeared to be relatively inexperienced. Given what happened next, it appears likely that this was the follower’s first-ever rappel. The leader pre-rigged the follower’s rappel device and locking carabiner above his. He instructed her that after he was on the ground and off rappel, she should unclip her personal anchor system (PAS) from the anchor chains and rappel, using her ATC device and autoblock.

“Once the leader completed the 100-foot rappel, he yelled for the follower to descend. The leader applied a fireman’s belay to back her up. In the process of transferring into her rappel system, the follower mistakenly removed both her belay device from the belay loop and the PAS from the anchor. I don’t know if her autoblock was attached to her harness belay loop or leg loop. Nor do I know if her rappel device was extended or attached directly to her belay loop. But when she was hanging, she was symmetric with respect to her rope, so more likely her autoblock was on her belay/rappel loop.

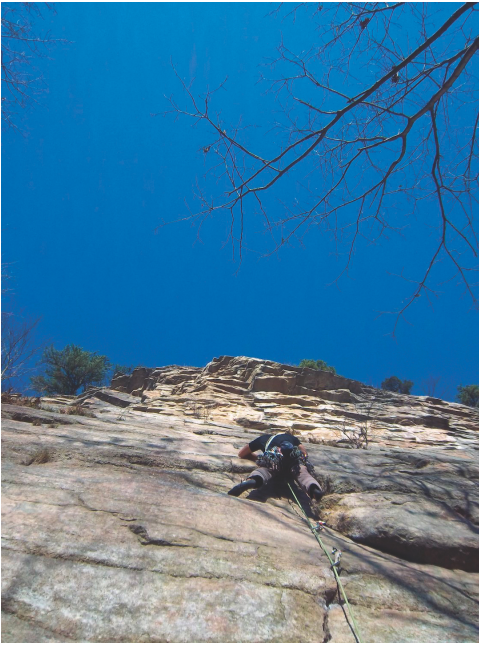
“Despite this error, she managed to lower herself, attached to the rappel line by her single autoblock. She did so by hanging one-handed from the doubled rope to de-weight her autoblock, then sliding the autoblock down. The rappel includes a free-hanging section of approximately 40 feet. Finally, at the last 15 feet of the rappel, the follower’s autoblock did not grip and she fell to the ground. She was exhausted but uninjured. After this, the belay device, still attached to both strands of the rope at the top of the crag, prevented the leader from pulling the rope.”

### **ANALYSIS**

Van Inwegen notes: “It is miraculous that the follower was able to descend uninjured, attached only by an autoblock. She must have had significant upper body strength to lower down the rope in the manner she did, without dropping. A more experienced leader would have trained the follower on the ground on the rappel system and then selected a shorter, less intense first rappel. While the leader thought he was backing up the follower with a fireman’s belay, obviously this backup was totally ineffective in absence of the follower being attached to the belay device.”

In this situation, there are several methods in which the leader might have assisted the follower more effectively. The leader could have set up a belayed rappel—this would have required another rope or having the leader belay from on top with one end (having set up a single-strand rappel). Perhaps a simpler solution would have been the leader lowering the second to the ground before rappelling himself. The latter would forego the rappel lesson. (Source: Greg van Inwegen.)

## Images



Looking up Son of Easy O. The line of the rappel starts from the overhang on the skyline and then free-hangs for about 40 feet. This was perhaps not the best location for a novice climber's first rappel.



The follower's orphaned belay/rappel device and locking carabiner, just below the rappel anchor of Son of Easy O.

## Article Details

Author	Greg van Inwegen
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	76
Page	63
Copyright Date	2023
Article Type	Accident reports