



AAC Publications

FALL ON ROCK — Inadequate Protection

New York, Shawangunks, Mohonk Preserve

On October 23, a 27-year-old climber with three years of experience was leading the third and last pitch of Middle Earth (5.6). After completing the crux roof, the climber fell approximately 55 feet. They impacted the wall several times until their fall was arrested and they were left free-hanging just below the GT Ledge belay. A large quantity of chalk on a broken branch indicated the climber impacted the canopy of a small pitch pine, breaking the four-inch-diameter branch.

The belayer, approximately 30 feet to climber's left, was anchored to a tree. The belayer was unable to escape the belay safely and tend to the fallen partner. A climber on an adjacent route was able to reach the injured climber and secure them to the wall, ensuring they wouldn't fall further.

Responding Mohonk Preserve rangers led the lower pitches of the route to reach the injured climber, who was conscious and alert but had no memory of the events immediately before or during their fall. Due to insufficient rescue anchor potential on the ledge where they had been secured, rangers had to lead to the top of the cliff to establish anchors to safely lower the climber. Due to the terrain, several high-angle operations were required. During the final lower, the injured climber began showing signs of shock. The injured climber was carried out while belayed, and then flown to a level 1 trauma center. Injuries included a fracture of the T11 vertebra and a severe concussion, in addition to non-life-threatening injuries.

ANALYSIS

Although the climber did not have any recollection of the fall, the rescuers were able to inspect the gear and rope that remained following the accident. The fall apparently occurred following a runout of 20 feet or more, resulting in a fall of about 55 feet. This section of the pitch provides options for gear that were not used. We can't be sure exactly what caused the fall, but it seems likely that after the crux, in the lower angle climbing above, the climber chose not to place adequate protection. It's possible they had a hard time finding opportunities for protection. Whatever the reason, it is important for climbers not to get complacent when in easier terrain near an anchor or belay ledge. It's also important for climbers to understand the potential fall distances that can take place when spacing gear. (Sources: Mohonk Preserve Rangers, Dan Cassidy, and Andrew Bajardi, Chief Ranger.)

Images

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