



FAILURE TO CLIP INTO AUTO-BELAY

North Carolina, Asheville

“I feel very lucky to be alive and not paralyzed.” On December 14, Adam Herzog (43) suffered severe head trauma, 15 fractures, spinal injury, and other trauma after failing to clip into an auto-belay in a climbing gym. Upon finishing the climb, he simply let go and fell 45 feet to the floor. In Herzog’s words: “The fall resulted in a skull fracture, bilateral pulmonary contusions, three spinal fractures, right proximal radius fracture, left distal radius fracture, right pilon fracture (ankle shattered), left fibula fracture, and severe concussion. I was in the ICU on a ventilator for two days, and in the hospital for 15 days. I am expected to make a full recovery. The pilon fracture may have some long-term effects, and I lost some extension in the right arm.”

“Friends reassured me: ‘It was an accident, man. It happens.’ A surprising number of people had similar stories of friends who took big falls on auto-belays.”

ANALYSIS

Herzog writes, “I’ve been a paramedic for 22 years and a nurse for 14. In the medical field we refer to the ‘Swiss Cheese Model’ of medical errors. All the holes line up and, boom, somebody dies. My accident was a perfect storm of mistakes that coincided with catastrophic results. They are listed here in the interest of preventing other climbers from falling into the same trap:

Hubris: I am not an expert climber. But I am an elite whitewater kayaker. I have been paddling for over 30 years. The morning of my fall, I paddled the Green River at high water. Once off the Green, I thought my risk exposure was over for the day. I didn’t treat the gym with the same respect I brought to the river. I should have.

Heuristics: Heuristics are mental shortcuts. They help us navigate our daily lives and can be useful or harmful. In my mind, “outside = dangerous, inside = safe.” For climbing outdoors, I neurotically practiced setting up belays, cleaning routes, and rappelling before going out. I saw gyms as contrived and manufactured. But a 50-foot wall is a 50-foot wall. even if there are four walls and a ceiling around it.

Inattention: I don’t bring my phone to the climbing wall so that I am not distracted. But the day I fell, I was preparing for a paramedic recertification exam. I studied a book between routes. I wonder if that distraction contributed to my fall.

Deviation: I have a system I usually stick to religiously. I climb a route, unclip, walk away, and take five to ten minutes to rest before I approach the wall again. Before I fell, I climbed halfway up a route and dropped back down to the ground. I unclipped but instead of walking away, I immediately got back on the wall. The small deviation from my normal routine removed the visual cues that usually lead to me clipping into my harness.

No Partner Checks: I was climbing alone so there was no one to double-check my system. In top-rope and lead belaying, we constantly check each other’s knots. But on the auto-belay it’s up to the climber to double-check his or her system. In my haste I neglected to check anything.

Focus: The route I was on was a 5.10. That grade is the upper limit of what I climb.

Because I was at the edge of my ability, I was ultra-focused on the route and holds. That is why I didn't notice the rope was not retracting as I climbed. Had I been on an easier route, I suspect I would have been more attentive.

These six factors led to my fall. I sit in a wheelchair typing this up, grateful I will only have to live in it for a couple of months. I hope that by writing this, I may prevent future incidents.

Auto-belay devices almost never fail. But people do. As long as humans are involved, mistakes happen. Are there steps gyms could take to prevent other terrible falls? Maybe, but ultimately it is the climber's responsibility. The gym can provide measures to mitigate risk, but we must engage those measures and know that if we work around them, there is nothing between us and the gym floor.

(Source: Adam Herzog.)

Images



A typical auto-belay gate. Herzog, the climber who failed to clip into the auto-belay, is 6-foot-4, so his line of sight may have been above the gate. We do not know which auto-belay system was in use on that day, and the company was not at fault in any way.

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