



AAC Publications

LEADER FALL – Rope Caught on Foot

Oregon, Smith Rock, Morning Glory Wall

On October 15, Molly Workmeister (20) fell while leading Anonymity (5.9). A set of unfortunate circumstances, including loose rock, fatigue, and poor rope position, led to a serious and life-threatening accident.

Workmeister wrote to ANAC, “It was about 5:45 p.m. when my right foot slipped as I was clipping the last bolt before the anchor. That foot was on loose rock, marked with a chalk X, but the hold did not break. As I fell, my left foot got caught in the rope and I swung upside down, impacting the rock with the back of my head. I immediately went unconscious. I was not wearing a helmet.

“I suffered a large impact laceration on the back of my head, which bled profusely, especially when I was upside-down. There were other climbers there, and two of them happened to be nurses. They rushed to the scene as my belayer carefully lowered me to the ground in a supine position. (My belayer was a Wilderness First Responder.) Somebody held my cervical spine, as there was a possibility of a spine injury. They did a rapid head to toe and called EMS. I ended up in the ICU with two skull fractures, a brain bleed, and two staples in my head. I am still recovering from the consequences of a severe traumatic brain injury (TBI), but I am lucky to be alive and conscious. Wearing a helmet would have prevented the skull fractures and brain bleed. However, a helmet probably would not have prevented the TBI.”

ANALYSIS

As with many incidents, several factors converged to produce a serious accident. Workmeister recalls, “I suffered the consequences of a few otherwise minor errors, so please be aware that in climbing, small things really do matter. The most prominent red flag was how exhausted I was. We had been climbing all day, and I was already tired from climbing the day before. It was quite hot, and that contributed to my fatigue. The climb was a 5.9, which is typical for me, but my exhaustion contributed to the difficulty.

“I was using my friends’ quickdraws, and though I was ready to come down, I didn’t want to leave his draws on the wall. In my fatigue, I became oblivious to the clearly marked loose rock and unaware of where the rope was running. I was fully aware of the loose rock on the right side of the climb and actually spoke with my belayer about it before I started up. There were also white chalk X marks on the chossy holds. Regardless, I lost awareness of the hazards. My only thought was to finish the climb, get my friends’ quickdraws, and go home.”

While leading, it is important to be conscious of where and how the rope is running. Always manage the rope position to ensure it does not catch the back of the feet or legs. In general, try to keep the rope between your body and the rock. While traversing, keep the rope on the opposite side of the direction of travel. For example, if you are climbing to the left, keep the rope running across or over your right thigh while you climb.

Finally, helmets are great for mitigating the impacts of rockfall and can prevent skull fractures in a rockfall or fall-impact incident. However, they are much less likely to prevent a concussion or in this case, TBI. Helmets aren’t foolproof and while every case is different, it is better to be wearing a

helmet than not. (Source: Molly Workmeister and the Editors.)

Images



Anonymity (red arrow) at Smith Rock was the scene of a serious accident in October 2022. Exhaustion turned an otherwise routine climb into a life-threatening situation.

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