



FALL ON MIXED TERRAIN – Severed Rope

Oregon, Eastern Ranges

I, Sam Bedell (35), and my partner, Kyle Tarry, were attempting an unclimbed buttress in a remote range with complicated access. The temperature was warm, but the objective was in the shade, and we decided to attempt the line knowing we would have to dry-tool several pitches.

Firm sun-crust snow and short rock bands led to a large cliff that would be the first crux of the route. My partner said he was not comfortable leading it, but I saw a weakness in the cliff, so I went to take a look. It appeared within my climbing abilities, and I saw some cracks and pockets that might yield gear placements.

The initial rock had good holds and was not too crumbly. Above, the cracks I found were behind loose blocks and the pockets were crumbly. The higher I went, the more the rock quality deteriorated. I got in one cam in this section but was not confident in it. I found a good stance and dug through choss to try to find pro but was unsuccessful. I then decided to move up to a higher stance, where I saw more potential to place pro, but again the opportunities were worse than they had appeared from below. I got in another marginal cam and traversed left on a ledge to a groove. Above me was a dishwasher-sized block at chest height that was clearly loose. I did not want to dislodge it and risk hitting my belayer or the rope, and I tried to move past the block without touching it. However, I couldn't help brushing it, and the whole thing came off and pushed me off the wall.

Both cams ripped out, and the block completely severed the rope. I fell roughly 40 feet and glanced off the steep, icy snow below the rock band, hitting another rock outcrop before stopping in slightly softer snow after traveling approximately 150 feet. I had hit the slope somewhat prone, with the long axis of my torso perpendicular to the slope. I punched through sun crust into soft isothermal snow, which arrested my fall and saved me from serious injury. I could have easily continued falling over smaller rock bands and steep snow slopes to the base of the route, which would have been close to 1,000 feet. Miraculously, I was able to stand and move without major pain, so I climbed over to my partner and the anchor.

To escape, Kyle led us across two leftward traversing pitches on steep, firm snow into a gully system. We used photos we'd taken of the face to navigate the weaknesses around the gully to the base of our route, managing to downclimb by pitching out the steep, icy snow. While I was exhibiting signs of shock and had some serious bruising, I was still able to move. We decided that as long as I could still walk, self-extraction was best option.

We reversed our three-hour off-trail approach over a major pass and down canyons to our car by headlamp. While I had some bruising, minor scrapes, and some neck/back tightness, I appeared to be mostly fine.

ANALYSIS

"This was my one opportunity in the surrounding months to go alpine climbing. My partner was similarly experienced, and we had a three-day weekend. I viewed this as a unique opportunity to establish a route on this face. Based on a debrief with my partner, I believe the feeling of scarcity of time played into my decision to try this pitch despite uncertainty and a remote location.

"I was very busy in the weeks leading up to this trip and had not been getting out to climb as much as in past years. I also did not take time to assess my mental state/ goals/motivations leading up to this climb as I would normally do. The rock was "seductive" in how it was initially of good quality before deteriorating higher on the pitch. Similarly, it appeared to have opportunities for pro, which were worse or non-existent upon closer inspection.

"The weather had been unusually warm, which was one of the reasons we opted for the buttress: to avoid overhead hazard and climb rock instead of rotten ice. However, we did not consider how recently warmed temps could have loosened the rocks that would have been frozen in place in the past. Previous missions to this area had all been in colder temperatures, giving a false sense of rock stability.

"Finally, there were clearly several unknowns on this pitch, so it would have been reasonable to not climb it (bailing or searching for a bypass) or at least to have downclimbed early, once it was clear that rock quality was deteriorating and pro was not as good as perceived from below." (Source: Sam Bedell.)

Images



Sam Bedell approaches a still-unclimbed buttress in the “Eastern Ranges” of Oregon. Potential access issues kept Bedell from specifying the name of the range.

Article Details

Author	Sam Bedell
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	76
Page	75
Copyright Date	2023
Article Type	Accident reports