



AAC Publications

Fatal Rockfall

California, Yosemite National Park, Leaning Tower

On the afternoon of June 19, two teams were descending from Leaning Tower. The descent, which is known to be challenging, was the site of a devastating accident and a male climber in his 40s lost his life.

While the lower team was trying to find an anchor, the climbing team above them began rappelling atop the same gully. One of the climbers in the second team was rappelling when they dislodged a four-foot by two-foot by six-inch rock. The climbers yelled, “Rock” as the block fell down the descent gully and began dislodging additional rocks and debris along the way.

The fixed haul line on which one member of the lower team was descending was severed by the rockfall approximately 50 feet below the anchor. The climber on the cut rope fell approximately 300 feet and died on impact. Both teams called 911 to report the accident as they continued descending to render aid.

ANALYSIS

This unfortunate incident highlights the risks inherent to descending, especially when traveling or rappelling through loose rock. The Leaning Tower rappels follow a notoriously loose gully and are especially dangerous. Climbers often focus heavily on managing risks during the ascent but should also dedicate the same meticulous attention to safety during descent.

The Yosemite climbing rangers provided the following reminders for readers:

- **Rappel Safety.** Climbers should exercise extreme caution during rappel descents, particularly in areas with loose rock. It’s imperative to be mindful of the potential for rockfall and to take precautions to minimize risk.
- **Helmet Use.** Wearing a climbing helmet is of utmost importance, not only during the ascent but also during descent. A helmet can provide protection against falling debris and significantly reduce the risk of head injuries.
- **Communication and Spacing.** Climbing teams should communicate with other teams during rappel descents. Maintaining ample spacing between teams can mitigate accidental rockfall incidents. Though it is not always convenient, consider spending additional time before beginning a descent to allow adequate spacing between parties.
- **Rope Management.** Proper rope management is essential to avoid entanglements and ensure ropes do not dislodge debris during rope retrieval. Consider rappelling with ropes connected to a climbing harness; the “saddlebag” technique minimizes the risk of rope tails dislodging debris.
- **Route Assessment.** Prior to descent, climbers should assess the route for potential hazards, such as loose rock and other dangers. Research online updates and information. This evaluation can inform decision-making and tactics.

• **Community Impact.** This incident is a somber reminder of the collective responsibility within our community to prioritize safety, communicate openly, and adhere to best practices. Climbers should remain vigilant, respect risks, and continually work to minimize accident potential. The loss of a climber's life underscores the need for a shared commitment to safety and preparedness. As a reminder, the climbing community has resources, like the Climbing Grief Fund, for those experiencing hardship secondary to a climbing-related accident. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images

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