



## AAC Publications

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### Leader Fall — Inadequate Protection

California, Yosemite National Park, Half Dome

The Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome saw a serious leader fall on July 7 (yellow circle) when a cam pulled out. Photo: Tuxyso | Wikimedia

**On July 7, two male climbers in their 30s began a proposed three-day climb of Half Dome's Regular Northwest Face (VI 5.9 C1). Their plan was to fix the initial three pitches on the first day, climb to the Big Sandy ledge the following day, and then summit on the third day.**

The climb was unfolding well until they arrived at pitch eight, the start of a long traverse up and right. The leader encountered difficult route-finding on chossy but easy terrain. He began to wonder if he was off route, as rock quality began to deteriorate and signs of wear from past climbers became less obvious. Nevertheless, the leader continued climbing in hopes of getting back on route.

Due to the wandering nature of the pitch, this climber decided to remove a previous piece of protection to prevent rope drag. The climber placed a 0.3 cam in what appeared to be solid rock, planning to lower off this new piece in order to clean the previous cam. When the climber weighted the 0.3 cam, the surrounding rock broke, causing a 40-to-50-foot tumbling fall. Several other pieces of protection pulled, contributing to the substantial fall.

After being caught by the rope, the fallen climber realized he had sustained several injuries, causing an unusable foot and back mobility issues. He had several abrasions. This climber also realized that the gear loop containing his anchor-building materials and belay device had been torn off. A short time later, the team called NPS personnel for rescue assistance and began a tedious rappel toward the ground.

The team was able to self-rescue to the ground. Fortunately, another team had fixed the first three pitches, making for easier rappels. At the base, the climbers were met by two NPS climbing rangers on a Half Dome patrol. The rangers assessed the injured climber and decided it was appropriate to extract the patient via helicopter. Two additional NPS rescuers were inserted into the scene with a litter. The patient was packaged and extracted via short-haul. The patient's partner spent the night at the base of the route and hiked out the following day.

### ANALYSIS

The Yosemite climbing rangers remind readers of the following safety measures pertinent to this incident:

- **Do not underestimate easy terrain.** It is common for experienced and inexperienced climbers to get injured or killed in easy terrain. Letting one's guard down increases the likelihood of an accident. Regardless of the relative difficulty, continue to be mindful and situationally aware.

The climber who fell, later said: "If this fall had happened on steeper or harder terrain, the consequences would have been minor. The terrain that I often consider easy or safe is actually the most unstable and consequential."

- **Contact rescue personnel ASAP.** Organizing a rescue is often time-consuming. The rangers

recommend contacting rescue personnel as soon as it is evident that outside resources are needed. In this instance, the injured climber's partner contacted YOSAR first thing, even though rescue was not immediately needed. This allowed SAR additional time to plan and launch the helicopter prior to sunset, thus retrieving the injured climber on the same day.

- **Maximize route familiarization.** Climbers should carefully study climbing and descent routes ahead of time. This information can be gleaned from topos and by seeking beta from experienced climbers. These efforts can enhance route-finding and overall safety by helping to prevent diversions onto unstable terrain. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

## Images



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