



AAC Publications

Top-Rope Solor Fall – Device Jammed by Sling

California, Sequoia National Park, Angel Wings

Whitney Clark's progress-capture device failed when the as-yet-unused retention sling got stuck in the device as she was ascending. It is common practice to use a sling and an elastic connection to hold the progress-capture device upright as one climbs along a fixed rope. Photo: Luka Krajnc

On October 8, Whitney Clark was ascending a fixed rope at the start of Valkyrie (17 pitches, 5.11+) when her single ascension device was jammed by a sling. She fell 30 feet to the ground.

Clark wrote to ANAC:

"We woke at around 6 a.m. and made our way to the fixed line from the day before. The days were short, and we had many pitches to do. My partner, Luka Krajnc, went first, using a Grigri to jug and then transitioning to climbing. About 40 feet up, he clove-hitched the rope to a bolt. I then started jugging with a single Micro Traxion. Thirty feet up, I leaned back on the rope. My body weight wasn't supported because the sling around my neck [part of the top-rope solo setup] got sucked into the device and caught in the teeth of the Traxion. The rope was sliding against the sling. I hadn't tied a backup knot."

Clark attempted to wrap the rope around her leg. But her rope was new, thin, and slippery. She wrote, "I grabbed the rope and slowly started sliding down. Eventually the rope burn was too painful and I let go. I hit the ground, landed on my feet, and fell backward. I struck my lower back and then my head. I was wearing a helmet. Because the ground was angled, some of the force was dissipated, though I landed six inches from a large rock spike.

"I never lost consciousness, but was in a bit of shock. Luka rappelled down and did a spinal exam. He got me comfortable, and I sat there for a while. I had pain in my back and my left ankle. I used my inReach to call for a rescue while Luka retrieved our stuff. I started crawling and butt-scooting to where a heli could reach me. I would have loved to have self-rescued, but it's a 16-mile hike out. It took about 2.5 hours of crawling to make it to a flat place. Four hours later, a helicopter airlifted me to the Visalia Level III trauma center."

ANALYSIS

Solo top-rope is integral to many forms of modern climbing. It allows a climber to self-belay when no partner is available, for a team to work on individual sections of a route without the need for a belayer, or for two climbers to move simultaneously, as in this situation. The errors Clark made were using only one device to safeguard her progress and not tying a backup knot.

"I was jugging by pulling on the rope, syncing up the slack, and sitting back," Clark said. "The route was meandering, and the fixed line didn't allow me to readily climb, so I decided to jug straight up the initial blank slab. The sling around my neck was going to hold the Traxion upright [allowing the rope to feed freely] once I started climbing. I haven't done any top-rope soloing since the accident. I probably will at some point, but I will definitely use two devices. This was the first time I only used a single progress-capture device." (Source: Whitney Clark.)

Images



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