



AAC Publications

Leader Fall on Rock — Off Route, Loose Rock, Protection Pulled

Colorado, Glenwood Canyon, Grizzly Creek Wall

On November 11, Cory Jones and I, Max Conway (23), went to climb Mudflap Girl (10 pitches, 5.10+) on the Grizzly Creek Wall (a.k.a. Mudwall). We knew it was to be a chossy climb that entices the adventure seeker.

The approach was not straightforward, and we began climbing around 10 a.m., a bit later than we had wanted. Cory is much stronger than I am, so we planned to break up the pitches accordingly. The first pitch was mine, and Cory had the next three. Soon, it was my turn to lead the fifth pitch.

The belay was a large ledge with two bolts. Mountain Project said, "Angle up and right to two bolts on the face then trend left to the belay." We could not see the bolts. About ten feet off the belay, I placed a 0.4 Friend, which I felt was solid. A bit later, I placed a number 2 Friend that did not feel great. It was in a horizontal crack and slightly over-cammed in poor rock. The climbing was 5.9, so I felt relatively confident. I remember yelling down to Cory, "I should find more pro, but we're burning daylight!" Since Mountain Project mentioned two bolts in my near future, I figured it wouldn't be long before I was safe.

I didn't find the bolts. Before I knew it, something broke. I vaguely remember it being a handhold, but I am not certain. I had climbed about five to ten feet above the number 2 Friend. Unfortunately, it failed and I fell 30 feet. I decked on the belay ledge and bounced off, falling about ten feet past Cory. The 0.4 Friend held.

I was unconscious for about two minutes. After coming to, I asked Cory how I had fallen so far. Then, I told Cory not to make an SOS call and that I would walk it off, we would bail, and it would be fine. Cory instructed me to climb up to him. When I tried, I couldn't move. I was in agony. Any sort of movement in my midsection caused intense pain. I knew I was in trouble. Cory fixed the rope and came down to me. He grabbed my inReach and initiated SOS.

Somehow we also had cell service on the ledge. We were contacted by 911 and by Garmin operators. They assured us that a rescue was coming. Four and a half hours later, the Army National Guard helicopter arrived. They lowered a crewman. After ensuring I wasn't in grave danger, he yelled, "I know you're in a lot of f***ing pain right now, but I need you to get off your a** so I can get this harness under you!" I let out a scream and did what he said. He secured me and off we went, dangling from the aircraft. I had sustained multiple pelvic fractures and two rib fractures. The pelvic fractures required surgery.

ANALYSIS

Our late start influenced my decision to place gear sparsely. I knew the danger and chose to ignore it. While there weren't obvious placements for gear, I could have taken the time to get creative.

Also, I had only been climbing for a little over three years. This accident could have happened to anyone, but I think my inexperience allowed me to ignore the risk. There was some detachment from how dangerous climbing really is.

Looking back, I had begun to follow a line that was off route. After conversations with the one of the first ascensionists, I learned that the route-finding here stumps many.

Despite my mistakes, I did a lot right. I was wearing a helmet, which may have saved me from a serious blow to the head. Additionally, my inReach allowed us to expedite the rescue. Though it's not a "get out of jail free card," it definitely saved me from more time on the wall. (Source: Max Conway.)

Images

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