



AAC Publications

Fatal Leader Fall — Protection Pulled Out

Oklahoma, Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, The Narrows

In a photo taken from the team's second belay on Leaning Tower Direct, Jordan Cobb is attempting the third pitch prior to Levi Wilkins' fatal accident. The key 0.4 Camalot placement (behind Cobb's leg) is marked by the yellow arrow. Photo by Jake Warren

On September 22, Levi Wilkins (36), Jake Warren (34), and Jordan Cobb (27) were climbing Leaning Tower Direct (2 pitches, 5.9) in the Narrows. Warren recounted to ANAC:

We turned the two-pitch route into three for belay-building and multi-pitch practice. At the base of our third pitch we belayed on a sloping stance (angled 30°). Jordan attempted to lead this final pitch (~45 feet, 5.9), placing a number 2 Camalot and climbing higher and then placed a 0.4 Camalot. He got pumped, lost some confidence, and asked to lower.

I attempted, using the gear that was in place. I also failed and fell onto the 0.4, putting me at eye level with the placement. It wasn't solid anymore. The rope may have caused it to walk. I lowered and I told Levi about the cam. He climbed up while I belayed. He got to the 0.4, removed it, evaluated the rock, and replaced the cam. He climbed above the gear, tried the moves, and fell.

Levi was 15 or 20 feet above us. The 0.4 was two to three feet below his tie-in and four feet to the left. The cam blew out of its pocket. Levi's feet struck both the belay stance and Jordan's head. Levi flipped upside down and backward. The number 2 held and caught him about five to ten feet below the belay ledge. The total fall was 20 to 30 feet, but the tension in the rope accelerated the top half of his body down and backward in an arc. The back of his head (below his helmet) struck the rock. He was unconscious.

Jordan was momentarily dazed from Levi hitting him. The next thing he remembered was me yelling "get him up!" All three of us were wearing helmets. I lifted Levi with one arm, and we grabbed him by the harness and arms. Jordan anchored Levi and helped me lower him until his head was lying on my lap. I angled his head to open his airway. At this point, he took a huge gulp of air. Once Levi was situated, I lowered Jordan to the ground to find help and cell service. Once I had a hand free, I checked my phone. Miraculously, I had enough service to call 911.

I described landmarks and talked the dispatcher through Mountain Project for pictures and descriptions. Fortunately, they were able to get my GPS coordinates. I knew it was a race against time. Having SAR experience, I told dispatch that the only way Levi would survive was if he got helicoptered out.

Levi's breathing was ragged and unsteady. I carefully placed our rope under his shoulders and lifted his chest with my foot up so I could better tilt his head. By then I had found a wound across the base of his skull. I applied pressure with my left hand while steadying his head and neck. His blood ran down the granite. It was bright red and the flow was very slow.

The whole time I was talking to him, even though he was unconscious. When his breathing slowed, I would yell at him to keep fighting. Levi was a Stage IV cancer survivor. I yelled at him that he didn't beat cancer only to die up here. Then, he would take a huge gulp of air. This happened about eight times.

His breathing slowed and became shallower. Jordan returned with two EMS personnel and I relayed everything I could. They told me a helicopter and high-angle rescue team were on the way.

Finally Levi's breathing stopped. The dispatcher told me to begin chest compressions. It was nearly impossible to maintain good form on the incline, but she counted cadence while I gave compressions for two hours.

The chief of the high-angle rescue team had hiked in, and called down from above. He said, "Brother, there's no easy way to tell you this: You can stop giving Levi compressions now." I stood next to Levi's body for another 45 minutes. I dropped the rope to Jordan, and he gathered everything up at the base. The rescue team hoisted me out and an Army helicopter recovered Levi.

ANALYSIS

The rock in the Wichita Mountains varies in quality, and the protection can be tricky and sparse. In this case, the key piece of protection unpredictably failed after holding repeated falls. As Warren wrote to ANAC, "Days later, I inspected the cam and it was in perfect working order. The only thing that makes any sense is that the rock around the placement crumbled when loaded."

Placing more protection is usually a good idea, but options were limited. The runout above the critical piece was short, and Wilkins was only ten to 15 feet above the belay. That last fact, along with compromised rock in the key placement, must have contributed to the placement failure. With a short length of rope out, energy absorption is lower. The elevated load applied an unavoidably high impact force onto the failed placement.

That Wilkins flipped, striking his head, was bad luck. Cobb had retreated from the same place, and Warren took a similar fall (slightly below where Wilkins fell) and remained upright. Warren recalled that the inversion "may have been that he hit Jordan harder than the ledge. It was all so fast. I'm 80 percent sure his feet hit the ledge; but the medical examiner reported no injuries to his ankles/feet. They did report that he fractured his C1 and C2 vertebrae." *Editor's Note: These top two vertebrae in the spine are considered a very serious place to suffer injury.

Unfortunately, getting flipped was probably the fatal factor. In an article on falling safely, Climbing magazine wrote, "The difference between hitting the wall softly and hitting the wall hard can, when you're falling upside-down, be the difference between minor injury or serious injury, life or death." (Sources: Jake Warren, Jordan Cobb, and the Editors.)

Images



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