



AAC Publications

Fall From Anchor — Rope Detached from Open Anchor

California, Bay Area, Mt. Diablo State Park

This ram's horn anchor on a route called Two for One in Mt. Diablo State Park was involved in a near-fatal accident in October. It is possible the climber did not set the rope in the lowest and most secure position in the horns before she attempted to lower. Photo: Sean Burke/Kim Harrison

I was top-roping a 10a called Two for One (left variation). I reached the anchor and secured myself with a PAS (personal anchor system) to clean the quickdraws. I hadn't seen this type of hardware before, and it was a type that wasn't fully enclosed—a drop-in anchor like mussy hooks. The adjoining link wasn't big enough for me to thread the rope, so I put my rope across the hardware, stood up to unclip my PAS, sat on the rope, and fell. I have no memory of the fall. I blacked out and woke up in a hospital operating room.

I broke my left ulna, two ribs on my right ribcage, part of a vertebra, my sacrum, and the ball joint on top of a femur. My helmet broke, and there was a small gash on the left side of my head. I also hit my left butt cheek; the nerve endings have no feeling in that area. I had one surgery to cut off part of the fractured vertebra and to drain a hematoma. I was hospitalized for four days.

ANALYSIS

My climbing friends and I determined that it was ram's horns that I encountered at the anchor. I hadn't wiggled the rope underneath the curled part of the horns that would have prevented the rope from slipping out. Either that or, when I unclipped my PAS, the rope came out. I fell 30 feet and rolled at least ten feet more downhill, along with the rope. It happened quickly, and K (my friend) didn't see what happened at the anchor, because my body blocked her view. K ran to get cell reception and called 911. (Sources: Jenna Chan, Bay Area Climbers Coalition, and the Editors.)

***Editor's Note:** Confusion can exist on how to use any unfamiliar fixed hardware. The ram's horn is an open fixture, similar to mussy hooks but much less common in the United States. While there's an advantage in having fewer necessary steps before lowering (including untying and retying), ram's horns are inherently less secure than closed anchors. Two fatalities occurred in Austria—Peilstein (2022) and Martinswand (ca 2020)—in which climbers died when the rope became detached from ram's horns while rappelling. This accident illustrates the peril when anchor hardware attempts to balance convenience and safety. That said, no anchor is foolproof, and no design can negate human error.

Images



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