



AAC Publications

Leader Fall — Protection Pulled Out

California, Joshua Tree National Park, Upper Freeway Wall

In November 2023,* D and M (female, early 30s) were on day three of a visit to Joshua Tree National Park from the U.K. It was D's third trip to the park and M's first time visiting. M had been climbing for ten years, primarily sport climbing (up to 5.12), and was using this trip to get more experience leading trad climbs. D had been climbing for 12 years and was comfortable leading trad routes up to 5.12b.

On the day of the accident, D and M had been climbing routes in the 5.6 to 5.8 range, with M leading and D following to check the former's placements and provide feedback. On all of the previous routes, D had felt that M's placements were solid and safe. Their fifth route of the day was Cakewalk (5.8+) on Upper Freeway Wall. It was both climbers' first time on the route. D led the route, built an anchor, then lowered and left all of his placements in the rock, reinspecting each piece on the way down. The party then pulled the rope and planned for M to lead the route while clipping the preplaced gear for protection.

Roughly a third of the way up, the crux of Cakewalk involves traversing leftward about eight feet. This section crosses a thin, slightly grainy horizontal crack from one vertical crack system to the next. D had protected the traverse with a black Totem Cam—the smallest in the Totem range—placed at the top of the initial vertical crack. M was nervous about the moves. While leading, she removed the cam and replaced it farther to the left in the thin horizontal crack. While doing the traverse, M slipped. The black Totem pulled out, and M fell six to nine feet, flipping upside down and striking the back of her helmet on the wall. The rope had not been running behind her leg, and the flip was possibly caused by the sudden change in force on M when the cam placement failed. No other pieces were pulled out, and the fall was caught on a nut three to five feet below the failed cam placement. The black Totem showed no damage during later inspection.

D lowered M to the ground. M was unconscious, and her helmet was broken. D alerted a nearby climbing party and, with their help, evaluated her injuries. D did not have cell service, but one of the other climbers was able to call 911. While awaiting response, the group kept administering first aid as she regained consciousness. (D was trained in first aid and another climber had a Wilderness First Aid certification.) Rescuers from JOSAR and the Riverside County Sheriff's Department responded. M was hoisted from the scene with a helicopter and transported to the hospital.

ANALYSIS

Wearing a helmet may have saved M's life, as it provided some degree of protection to the back and sides of her head, where the most significant impact forces occurred.

Small cams like the black Totem have more limitations and are more likely to pull out in suboptimal placements than larger cams or passive protection. While it is not uncommon to move a piece closer to crux moves to reduce the length of a fall, the grainy "kitty litter" rock at the traverse may have contributed to the placement failure. When in doubt, place multiple redundant pieces, including passive protection. This will increase the odds of a fall being successfully arrested. For more information, see the 2017 ANAC Essentials article on microcams.

Consider carrying a satellite communication device. The Freeway Wall (the location of Cakewalk) is

an exception in Joshua Tree because there is a single bar of cell service at the base. If there had not been other climbers nearby, D (whose phone did not have a signal) would have had to leave M and make a fairly involved descent to his car (20 to 30 minutes) and then drive to the Hidden Valley emergency phone (ten more minutes) before being able to call for help.

Being first aid/first certified and carrying a first-aid kit is advisable while climbing. Both D and the other climbers did an excellent job of assessing and stabilizing M while waiting for help. Many climbing accidents can happen in locations that are difficult to access by medical personnel or SAR. In a serious accident like this, knowing basic first aid can significantly increase the odds of survival. (Source: Joshua Tree National Park Search and Rescue.)

***Editor's Note:** While this accident occurred in 2023, we chose to include it here because small cams pulling is an issue with novice to professional climbers.

Images

Article Details

Author	Joshua Tree National Park Search and Rescue
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	78
Page	
Copyright Date	2025
Article Type	Accident reports