



AAC Publications

Rockfall – Loose Rock

Colorado, Grand Junction Area, Escalante Canyon, Zappa Wall

Less frequented than other areas, the routes in Escalante Canyon still hold loose rock. The yellow dashed outline indicates where a huge block was located before being dislodged by a climber. A climber's foot in the margin of the photo (blue arrow) conveys a sense of how big the fallen block was. Photo: Chase Smith

On December 23, my buddy Blake and I, Chase Smith, were climbing Beside the Pillar (5.10c) toward the end of the day. The route starts off bouldery before going into a nice hand crack. I led the route and noticed a stack of loose, crumbly rock to the left of the anchors. I decided to stay in the crack, though there were big holds on the stacked blocks. I lowered and cleaned my gear.

I pulled the rope for Blake to lead, and we chatted about the cruxy start. I didn't think to bring up the stacked blocks to the left of the anchor. He led up flawlessly. As the belayer I was positioned in a slot with an overhang, so the first 15 feet of the climb were visible, but not the rest. I peeked around and Blake was getting close to the anchors. I tucked back into the belay zone and heard "ROCK, ROCK, ROCK!"

I took up the slack and caught his fall. Rocks were pouring down—small at first, then a microwave-sized block. Hugging the cliff, I yelled up, "Are you good?! Are you okay?" But all I heard was groaning. I kept calling up and then noticed blood coming down the cliff. Some of it fell on me. I slowly lowered Blake, and when I asked how he was, his replies were very foggy. As he got closer, I saw the left side of his face had a major laceration running from his lips along his cheek. It was gnarly, like something out of *The Walking Dead*.

When Blake got to the ground, I untied the rope and his shoes. I checked for other injuries, but only his face was hurt. By then, he was answering questions and fully conscious. I got his hiking shoes on, gave him my trekking pole, and asked if he was good to start walking down. He said yes, and after I collected some of our stuff, I caught him on the trail. He asked how bad it was. I told him it was pretty bad, but they're good at repairing that kind of thing these days. I also told him that when we get to the truck, don't look in the mirror.

When we got the ER and they saw his face, Blake was quickly rushed to surgery.

ANALYSIS

I went back to the route with a friend the next day to retrieve our rope and gear. It looked like Blake had grabbed the choss pile and fell with it. When the last piece of protection stopped him, the rock was still falling and hit him in the face. I cleaned off the other loose rock and used water and some brushes to scrub off as much blood as I could. Today, Blake's face is all healed up: no missing teeth and just a scar on his cheek.

When I reflect back, the first thing that comes to mind is I should have communicated about the loose stacked blocks before he climbed. We also should have been wearing helmets, as it might have been much worse if a rock had hit his head. The fact that Blake was conscious and able to hike was the difference between self-evacuation and calling a helicopter. We're both Wilderness First Responders and climbing guides, so we acted pretty quickly. I was fortunate to have my med kit and a marker so I

could write down details for the hospital. It was good that I wrote down Blake's phone passcode; if he had passed out, I still could have accessed his emergency contact. (Source: Chase Smith.)

Images



Less frequented than other areas, the routes in Escalante Canyon still hold loose rock. The yellow dashed outline indicates where a huge block was located before being dislodged by a climber. A climber's foot in the margin of the photo (blue arrow) conveys a sense of how big the fallen block was.

Article Details

Author	Chase Smith
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	78
Page	
Copyright Date	2025
Article Type	Accident reports