



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock — Lowering Error, Clipped Wrong Rope at Anchor

New York, Shawangunks, The Near Trapps Area

On October 14, Mohonk SAR rangers responded to a climber who had fallen to the ground while being lowered from Outer Space (5.8) in the Near Trapps area. They found the climber (Climber 2, female) lying in the talus beneath the route. A trailing rope was threaded through the lead protection and the route's anchor above.

Outer Space is a single-pitch climb that has an unusually long, left-trending traverse that ends at the anchor. Climber 2 was part of a three-person team. One party member led the route, clipped the anchor, and was lowered to the ground. As follower, Climber 2 was tied in to the middle of the rope. They followed the pitch while being belayed from the ground on the leader's side of the rope. As they followed, Climber 2 left the lead protection in place, unclipping their overhead rope and then clipping the trailing side of the rope into the protection. This procedure was intended to protect the third climber (Climber 3), who would subsequently follow the pitch. Re-clipping ensured that Climber 3 would not take a long pendulum fall if they came off.

Climber 2 reached the top. They unlocked the anchor carabiners and unclipped their side of the rope. They then clipped the trailing (unbelayed) side of the rope into the anchor. In doing so, Climber 2 essentially took themselves off belay. When they leaned back to lower, they fell over 60 feet directly to the ground. They landed between several rocks at the base.

Rangers assessed Climber 2, and besides finding some minor lacerations, they identified a significant spinal injury in the upper lumbar region. A carry-out was executed, and the climber was littered out to the trail entrance and transported to the hospital.

ANALYSIS

Climber 2 failed to recognize that unclipping the belayed side of the rope left them completely unbelayed. Two factors—slingshot top-roping in a party of three and the unusually long traverse—led to this uncommon rope configuration. Climber 2 essentially mimicked the actions of a lead climber while pulling up slack and re-clipping the trailing rope. This might have led to a lead climbing mindset and a subconscious impression that they were to be lowered after re-clipping the anchor.

Unclipping and re-clipping protection to safeguard a third climber is a technique more often used on multipitch climbs. It appears that the two followers did not fully understand the system, nor its nuances. Clear, precise communication among all team members is essential for safety, especially when using complex and unfamiliar systems. The belayer (who had led the pitch) reported that Climber 2 struggled to unclip the two opposite and opposed lockers at the anchor. This struggle should have been a warning. Whether based on their own observation or by the instruction of the group leader, the third climber could have put a belay on the trailing end of rope.

Understanding systems and associated risks can prevent accidents. In this case, Climber 3 deferred to the experience of the group leader. Climbers should be encouraged to speak up and ask questions. The group leader should ensure that all present comprehend the plan before starting. (Source: Mohonk Preserve Rangers.)

Images

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