



AAC Publications

Amputation — Leader Fall, Rope Wrapped Around Pinkie

South Dakota, Spearfish Canyon, Warm-Up Walls

Spencer Drewelow demonstrates how, while clipping an anchor in Spearfish Canyon, he fell and the rope amputated his pinkie. Reattachment surgery was successful, as was the follow-up leech therapy. His finger ultimately survived, and he is climbing again. Photo: Spencer Drewelow

My partner and I, Spencer Drewelow (37), were climbing in Spearfish Canyon over the Labor Day weekend. On our third day of climbing, I tried to onsight Black Rainbow (11b), my third route of the day. The first half was on easier terrain, but on the second half the difficulty picked up.

I clipped the last bolt and paused to read the moves to the anchor. I made a move, but it didn't feel right so I reversed to an okay stance near the last bolt. Pausing, I looked for another sequence. The forearm pump was building, and I decided to go for it. The anchors were open-shuts, the kind where you drop the rope into the hooks. With my left hand on a crimp, I stepped up with my right foot on an edge. I bore down and as I was stepping up, I grabbed the rope with my right hand in order to clip above my head. I touched the rope to the shuts but was not able to drop it in. Then I fell.

As I fell, the slack looped and cinched around my right hand. My body weighted the rope and I bounced lightly off the wall, and then I knew something was wrong. At first I thought I had a really bad rope burn. Then I saw my right pinkie. It was dangling by a thin piece of skin. I gave out a loud roar, and my partner lowered me to the ground.

I sat down and fell into shock. A nearby climbing party heard us and came over. Fortunately, one of them was a doctor and bandaged my hand. It was a 20-minute hike down the trail and a half-hour drive to the hospital in Spearfish. The on-call orthopedic doctor performed basic surgery to reattach my finger. We considered a helicopter airlift, but ultimately they advised me it would be okay to drive home. My climbing partner drove us back to Colorado that night, and the next day, in Denver, I had an advanced emergency replant of the right pinkie.

ANALYSIS

It's not a good idea to fall with the rope in your hand. I had assessed that a fall would be clean, but when I made the move to the anchor, I felt a little desperate and did a little lunge. As I tried to clip the open-shut anchors, my right hand and wrist did a rotating motion, and performing this motion twisted the loop of rope around my hand.

A couple of things might have prevented this outcome, including finding a better clipping stance or climbing closer to the anchor to make the clip. Clipping above one's head adds a lot of slack to the system. This can create the opportunity for a limb to get caught and also will lengthen the fall.

(Source: Spencer Drewelow.)

Images



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