



AAC Publications

Ground Fall — Missed Clip

Tennessee, Foster Falls, The Left Bunker

Everything about Eclipse (5.12c/d) is classic, except for the third clip. In February 2024, Brian West fell from near this spot, ending up in the hospital—he was not wearing a helmet. Here we see the helmeted West on an earlier attempt. He has the second bolt clipped. The third bolt is up and to the right of his head. Photo: Brian West

On the second day of a weekend trip to Foster Falls, Randall Ladd (34) and I, Brian West (28), decided to work on our project, Eclipse (5.12c/d). The route is very steep, with mostly clean air falls and no overhead hazard. I decided not to wear a helmet, though I almost always wear one.

At the bottom of the route, the ground rises and follows the wall. This means that if you fall clipping the second or third (or even fourth) bolt, there's a chance of hitting the ground. After the third or fourth bolt, it's all good.

We stick-clipped the first two bolts. I climbed through the crux, which is just past the second bolt, and then moved to the good hold used to clip the third. I pulled up some rope but fell before getting the rope in the draw. I felt secure and I'm not sure what made me slip. I do not remember falling, but I was told I landed with my body nearly horizontal. The second bolt caught me, but the rope stretched and let me hit the ground. My upper back impacted first, and I was pulled up by the rebounding rope and left hanging a few inches above the ground. Randall lowered me; I was unconscious and had seizure-like convulsions.

After a few minutes, I woke up. I had a significant cut on the back of my head. The EMTs arrived, bandaged my head, and asked if I was able to walk to the parking lot. I decided to try and made it without much trouble. A friend drove me to the ER. I had a CT scan and was stapled, gauzed, and told my injuries required no further attention.

ANALYSIS

While a helmet wouldn't have kept me from hitting the ground, it would have protected my head. I probably would have walked away with bruised shoulders, a bruised back...and a bruised ego. I won't make that mistake again.

I could have avoided the ground fall had I asked for some tension to take a controlled fall rather than attempting the clip. Pre-clipping the third bolt with a stick-clip or while clipped in direct to the second was another option. Pulling up slack to clip the second or third draw is often a "no fall" situation that applies to many routes. Personally, if I'm not sure about a clip, I'll hang or take the whip. In this case, I felt secure. Apparently, I wasn't.

My accident was a convergence of several things going wrong at once. Climbers and belayers should be aware of how much slack is out, especially close to the ground. Climbers should not pull excessive rope to clip. Belayers should limit slack in the system and feed just enough to clip and nothing more.

(Source: Brian West.)

Images



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