



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock — Loose Rock

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Grand Teton

This photo was taken after a 30-plus-foot leader fall low on the North Face of the Grand Teton. The leader's high point is visible (blue X), as is the failed cam placement (red arrow). The fall ended at the yellow arrow. Photo: Christian Feinauer

On August 21, Jim Dahle and Christian Feinauer embarked on a one-day ascent of the North Face of the Grand Teton (12 pitches, 5.8). The forecast called for fine weather, although winds were likely to pick up in the afternoon. The team rapidly progressed up the glacier and crossed two crevasses before reaching the bergschrund. Jim led across the bergschrund, and Christian led the second pitch, eventually belaying on a one-by-five-foot ledge. Jim arrived and took over the lead. After about 20 feet of 4th class, he reached a steep, shallow dihedral. He placed four pieces as he moved up, the last being a small cam in questionable rock.

About eight feet above the small cam, all of his holds were loose. The climbing looked easier and more solid about six feet up and to the right. Jim reached for a large hold, but it pulled off. As he fell, the small cam pulled, sending him for a 30- to 35-foot fall into broken 4th-class terrain. He struck the right side of his face, his right shoulder, and his left hand. He was left hanging upside down 15 feet above and to the right of his belayer.

Jim was unresponsive and leaking blood and cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) from his face. The team's inReach was in his pack. After several minutes, Christian tied off the fallen climber and soloed over. He secured himself and assessed his partner. Jim regained consciousness after ten minutes but was perseverating—repeatedly asking the same questions. Christian returned to the belay and coached Jim to the anchor. Jim's right eye was swollen shut, he had large forehead lacerations, and CSF dripped from his nose. His mental state was severely altered. Self-rescue was not an option.

Christian layered his partner with all available clothes. He dialed 911 and was eventually transferred to the Jenny Lake Rangers. Coincidentally, the rangers were gathered for helicopter rescue training. They rapidly launched a rescue and flew to the scene to scope out the situation. The stranded team was located at a spot where direct insertion and short-haul were viable.

The pair was extricated and Jim was flown to the regional medical center. His injuries included a severe concussion, multiple facial fractures, a significant CSF leak, a wrist fracture, right AC separation, fractured ribs, and a C7 spine fracture. He's had a near complete functional recovery and was able to resume climbing six months later.

ANALYSIS

Both climbers were very experienced and had partnered on dozens of successful alpine rock routes. Given their experience and preparation, the North Face of the Grand was well within their ability.

The severity of the accident came down to a loose hold, leading to a bad fall in a bad location. In retrospect, Jim might have downclimbed to more stable rock. Climbers should also remember that "psychological protection" in loose rock should not encourage the leader to continue upward. If one is not comfortable with a runout, then retreat and reassessment are in order. Abandoning the route is also an option.

The NPS report summed up that, despite being in a very inaccessible location, the rescue was efficient: “The time from initial 911 notification to patient extraction was two hours and five minutes. Multiple factors—including available rescuers, a helicopter in proximity, and favorable weather—all fell into place. Ultimately, the preparedness of the climbing partners to assess, stabilize, and notify authorities won the day.” (Sources: Dr. Jim Dahle and Grand Teton National Park Search and Rescue.)

Images



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Article Details

Author	Dr. Jim Dahle and Grand Teton National Park Search and Rescue
Publication	ANAM
Volume	13
Issue	78
Page	
Copyright Date	2025
Article Type	Accident reports