



AAC Publications

Lowering Error — Ground Fall, No Stopper Knot

Colorado, New Castle, Main Elk Canyon

On April 6, first responders from the Garfield County Sheriff's Office, Colorado River Fire Rescue, Garfield County Search and Rescue, and CareFlight were dispatched to Main Elk Canyon on County Road 243 near New Castle for a report of a fallen climber. Upon arrival, they located a male in his late 20s on the ground complaining of severe abdominal pain and minor additional injuries.

First responders interviewed the injured climber's partner, also a male in his late 20s, who had been belaying with a Grigri; the two had been top-roping the same route. During the ascent that precipitated the incident, the climber chose to continue to a higher anchor than previously used. While lowering, the belayer felt the end of the rope pass through the device when the climber was about 15 to 20 feet from the ground. The climber fell to the ground.

The climber was packaged in a litter, lowered down a steep embankment to a hiking trail, and transported by wheeled litter approximately half a mile to a waiting helicopter. Given the mechanism of injury and the possibility of internal injuries, the climber was encouraged to accept air transport. The crag was well populated, and other climbers assisted in contacting 911 and providing care until responders arrived.

ANALYSIS

The rope end passed through the belay device because neither climber had tied a stopper knot. This exact accident is all too prevalent. The Grigri is an assisted-braking device, not a closed system—but a stopper knot would have closed the system regardless of anchor height or rope length. Stopper knots take seconds to tie and should be in place any time a party is lowering.

The party was climbing from a low anchor, and then shifted to a higher anchor without recalibrating for the newly required rope length. Remember that despite being labeled as a certain length, there is still alarming variety in actual rope lengths. It is unknown if the distance of the higher anchor was recorded in a guidebook or website, but being vigilant is important. (Sources: Rob Glassmire, Garfield County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue.)

Images

Article Details

Author	Rob Glassmire, Garfield County Sheriff's Office Search and Rescue
Publication	ANAM
Volume	14
Issue	1
Page	
Copyright Date	2026
Article Type	Accident reports