



AAC Publications

Long Fall on Ice — Ice Stance Collapsed

Washington, North Cascades, Sloan Peak

On January 25, two friends and I, Tyler Christensen (33), set out to climb the Merrill-Minton (1,600', 10 pitches, IV WI4+) on Sloan Peak (7,835'). The weather had been cold, and we'd heard the route had been done by another party a week prior. This gave us confidence in the conditions.

We climbed the opening snow gully then roped up. A member of our group led the first pitch. We gauged the conditions and discussed bailing off toward another line. It is a good idea to take the time to discuss options. I decided to lead the next pitch and continue up.

The second pitch started on poorly protected vertical ice, and then eased up before entering a WI4 chimney. I put in a belay and brought my partners up. Above this, the route continued on low-angle WI2 terrain. I placed one screw after about 10 to 15 feet. In one spot, I kicked the ice and felt the thud of thin, poorly bonded ice. At another point, I was joking with myself that I could hammer a picket into the ice since it was so thin and soft. I looked at my rack and thought I'd better save some screws for a good anchor. I ran it out another 20-plus feet, confident I wouldn't fall.

At what felt like a solid stance, I paused to scan for a belay and considered placing a screw. Then I kicked my right crampon into the ice. Then I fell. It was unexpected and instantaneous—there was no time to process what had just happened.

I yelled, "Falling!" and did my best to keep my crampons from sticking in the snow or ice. I remained conscious for the first half of the fall, tumbling down what I'd just climbed. I have no memory of the remainder of the fall, during which it seems like I bounced off a rock outcrop and launched horizontally into the air. The rope caught me in midair and then swung me back in, stopping me just below and almost beside my belayer. I regained consciousness within a minute of landing. The total fall was at least 100 feet.

At least one ice screw blew out of the wall and unclipped as I fell. It had a bent hanger when we found it below the climb, still clipped to the draw. I was climbing on 7.3mm half ropes, and one rope was core-shot after the fall. We activated our inReach, and a helicopter on a nearby training mission was able to extract me off the route within 30 minutes. My climbing partners rappelled the route, collected the fallen gear, and hiked out. I suffered tibial-plateau and humerus fractures as well as a fractured tailbone, blunt-force leg-nerve damage, and several fractures in my eye sockets and head (my helmet was mildly cracked).

ANALYSIS

The exact cause of the fall is not known. Based on the appearance of the ice as well as feeling thin ice in one location near the fall, I assume that when I kicked my right foot, a fracture propagated through the ice, collapsing the ice under both of my feet. Both ice tools fell (one remained tethered to me; the other was recovered from below the climb). I was also likely overconfident after completing the crux moves below and should have been more cognizant of my foot placements. The danger of low-angle ice should not be underestimated, especially in questionable conditions.

I should have been placing more screws or pickets after directly observing the poor ice quality, or

potentially even bailed off the route. Given that I was worried about running out of screws, I should have prioritized setting an anchor, not continuing to run the rope out on the lower-angle terrain.
(Source: Tyler Christensen.)

Images

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