



AAC Publications

Leader Fall — Inadequate Protection, Inexperience

Washington, Columbia Gorge, Ozone, Mordor

I went to the Ozone area in the Columbia Gorge in April 2025 with four friends. I was 18 and was consistently leading 5.9s outdoors. At the end of the day, I tried Step Child (5.10a), an overhanging route with a runout between the third and fourth bolts, above a ledge. I wanted to push my grade. Two of my friends had climbed it before. They told me that at the runout section, I should place a No. 1 Camalot in the crack. They said it was “a money placement” and “obvious.” I explained that I had no knowledge of how to place gear and wasn’t comfortable with it. They assured me it would be fine. I was skeptical but wanted to prove myself, so I agreed.

I had a friend I really trusted to belay me. Above the third bolt was an okay resting spot before the runout section, so I stayed here a bit to recover. I climbed into the runout; about halfway to the fourth bolt, I called down for advice on where and how to place the cam. My belayer and another friend asked the two experienced climbers—they were distracted on their phones, though they eventually hollered up that I should just “place it in the obvious No. 1 spot.”

Getting pumped and frustrated and worried about the ledge below, I shoved the cam in, shook it (I’d seen people do that), and called, “Take” as I ran out of steam. My belayer took in the slack, and I hung there for a split second—then the piece pulled and I was falling, upside down. I slammed into the protruding ledge and immediately called to be lowered. That was my first outdoor lead fall.

Back on the ground, I had to take a moment to avoid a panic attack; I am prone to them. Everyone was silent, staring at me while I sat there shaking. My belayer checked on me, noting scrapes on my hands and a deep cut on my leg. I was wearing a helmet, so there was no head injury. One friend thought I had broken my leg; my belayer was convinced I had broken my hip from the impact. I caught my breath and one of the experienced climbers led the route and placed the cam correctly. I wanted to try again—if I didn’t, I’d be scared off the wall. I topped out on my second attempt.

The next day I sought medical help, and urgent care diagnosed contusions on my lower left calf. Nine months later, there’s still an indentation scar. I am lucky I did not break anything—and am honestly a little surprised it wasn’t worse. For four months afterward, I struggled to lead confidently, even indoors. I’d bail on routes because I was terrified my gear would fail. The incident also traumatized a friend who witnessed the accident. That was her first day outside climbing.

ANALYSIS

Three things led to this accident.

First, I pushed my grade on a runout route. For my first 5.10a outdoors, I should have picked something well protected, with safe falls. Second, I placed a cam with zero trad knowledge. My friends were right that it was a good placement—a deep parallel crack—but I placed it in the flared section where the lobes didn’t fully engage. Third, my experienced friends should have given me a proper rundown, on the ground, on how a cam works, or better yet, simply told me not to attempt the route without practicing protection placement first. And they for sure shouldn’t have brushed off my questions when I needed help the most up on the wall.

On my end, I should have gone with my gut and stood up for myself. I should have said that I didn't know how to place protection and wasn't comfortable doing so. Instead, I wanted to prove myself. This was a hard lesson in communication and self-advocacy. (Source: Climber.)

Images

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