Fall on Rock – Inadequate Belay, No Helmet

Canada, British Columbia, Skaha, Foreplay Wall

On June 7, a 38-year-old climber was leading a well-bolted 5.10a route on Foreplay Wall. It was midafternoon on a hot day, and the 30-meter cliff was just coming into the sun. The belayer (age about 42), with whom the leader had climbed "many times before," had returned to climbing after a two-year absence due to injury. It was reported that the belayer had three years of experience and the leader had 15 years of experience. The climbers had borrowed a brand-new rope from another climber at the crag—a 9.5mm rope with a water-resistant sheath. The rope's owner had said it was slick on rappel, and had recently bought a new device to provide more friction. The belayer was using a standard Black Diamond ATC belay device.

The leader reported that he climbed the route quickly and easily. He arrived at the last bolt and either unexpectedly slipped or a hold broke. The belayer lost control of the rope and was unable to arrest the fall. The leader fell about 20 meters to the base of the climb.

The climber landed on angled ground, which launched him face-first into some rocks farther down the slope. The impacts resulted in a broken right calcaneus—his shoe was split, and so was his heel to the bone—and a deep left-heel laceration. Multiple frontal facial lacerations were sustained, including a torn right nostril, and he had head trauma and a concussion. After two hours the injured climber was evacuated by helicopter. He spent six days in an intensive-care unit. At the time of reporting, about 10 days after the accident, he was still missing about 30 hours of memory, starting from around noon on the day in question.

Analysis

Several factors were identified by the climbers.?The leader was climbing fast because the route was easy for him, and the climbers were in a hurry to leave the crag now that it was coming into the sun. There may have been excess slack in the rope when the leader slipped. The belayer was not located in an ideal position, close to the wall, and when the rope came tight as the leader fell, the belayer tripped, compromising his braking position. Consequently, the belayer was unable to stop the rope running through the device and his hands were burned.

Climbers must be cautious when using thin or new ropes, which tend to be more "slippery" than ropes that have seen some use. The climbers observed that clipping a second carabiner between the belay loop and the ATC would have added more friction. The use of a tube-style or assisted-braking belay device specifically designed for thinner ropes also might have helped. Fundamentally, however, a good belay stance and position, combined with proper braking technique (brake hand held firmly on the rope below the belay device, ready for a fall), are the keys to preventing such accidents.

The leader typically wore a helmet when climbing, but elected to not wear it on that climb because of the heat (about 35°C/95°F). He observed that the helmet "wouldn't have provided much facial protection," but it might have helped with his other head injuries. "I know am very lucky to come out without worse injuries, but I have for sure used up one of the nine lives," he said. (Source: The Editors, with anonymous leader's report, compiled using statements from the belayer and other climbers at the crag.)

Images

An injured foot resulting from a groundfall at Skaha, British Columbia.

Article Details

Author	The Editors
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	69
Page	0
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Accident reports