Simul-Rappel Failure – No Backups

California, Yosemite Valley, Reed's Pinnacle

The names of the climbers in this report have been changed. On July 10, at 2:50 p.m., Yosemite Dispatch received a call regarding a climber fall with injuries at Reed's Pinnacle. The initial reports came in as a male climber with a broken leg. Upon arrival at the parking area, the first responding ranger found an adult male, John, 33, with an angulated lower leg/ankle fracture. John told the ranger that his partner David, age 41, was still at the base of the cliff and had been in and out of consciousness after a long fall.

The park ranger ran up the approach trail to the base of the cliff with a medic bag. Upon reaching the cliff, he found David unresponsive, without a pulse, and not breathing. He immediately called for additional resources and began CPR. After updates and communication with the park's Medical Control, the patient was pronounced dead at approximately 3:55 p.m.

Numerous interviews with the surviving climber and post-accident analysis by the responding ranger revealed some details of what had happened. Before the accident, the two climbers had climbed Lunatic Fringe, a popular 5.10c single-pitch route. After leading, John remained at the anchor at the top of the climb to belay David up. The two climbers then decided to simul-rappel, with each climber rappelling one strand of the rappel rope, so that each climber would counterweight the other. David used a Petzl Grigri, while John used a Black Diamond ATC device. They were using an 80-meter rope, both ends of which reached the ground from this anchor, but without any extra.

During the rappel, John was beneath David and remembers David stopping or slowing down at some point. John reached a small, sloping ledge about 15 feet above the ground and waited for David to catch up with him. According to the post-accident analysis, David was roughly 70 feet off the ground at this point. John felt a sudden change in the pull of the rope and the rope "going," and he started to fall. He briefly lost consciousness, and when he came to he saw David on the ground near him. John asked David if he was OK and remembered David briefly responding. John told David that he would go get help. When he tried to stand, he realized his leg was broken, and so he crawled down the short approach. At the Reed's parking area, he found visitors who were able to call 911, activating Yosemite's emergency response.

ANALYSIS

From a follow-up investigation, it is believed David fell approximately 70 feet after the end of the rope on John's side passed through John's ATC rappel device. This was determined based on the amount of rope left beneath David's Grigri as well as other observations. There were no knots or backup systems on the rope. A fixed nut was observed in the crack near the point where David fell, and one possible explanation is that David paused to attempt to remove this piece of equipment. If David had pulled onto a stance momentarily, unweighting his side of the rope, John would have felt himself suddenly drop (as he stated consistently). It's possible this caused John to lose control of his side of the rappel rope. Without a hands-free backup hitch (e.g., autoblock), he would not have been able to regain control of the rope as it rapidly passed through his belay device, causing both men to fall to the ground. Simul-rappelling is an advanced technique that is rarely required by the average climber. While simul-rappelling, both climber's lives are placed at risk by any mistakes. [Editor's note: Two climbers were seriously injured in another simul-rappelling accident, in the Shawangunks in New York, in 2016.]

John stated that one reason they decided to simul-rappel was that David had a Grigri, which can only be used to rappel a single strand of rope. To avoid the risk incurred by simul-rappelling, John and David could have tied the rope to the anchor, allowing David to rappel the fixed rope on his Grigri. John then could have untied the fixed rope and rappelled with his ATC as usual. (Controlling a rappel with an ATC is patently safer with two strands of rope as opposed to one.) Moreover, David reportedly had climbed the route before and knew the climbers could rappel the route with a single 80-meter rope. Knowing this, David could have lowered John to the ground after he led the pitch, and then John could have belayed David on a top-rope as he seconded the route.

In the special circumstances that simul-rappelling is preferred, good communication is essential. The excessive distance (about 50 feet) between the two climbers perhaps inhibited David from expressing to John that he planned to slow or stop his rappel. If John had been nearer to David, he may have had the opportunity to anticipate the momentary weight shift and not lose control of his device.

One or more backup systems could have prevented this accident. Stopper knots in the ends of the rope would have prevented the rope from passing through John's rappel device. A "hands-free" backup, such as a friction hitch, also might have prevented the catastrophic loss of control. Finally, the two climbers could have linked themselves with a tether, in effect closing the system until they both reached the ground. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Images

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