



AAC Publications

Rappel Error – No Backup

Wyoming, Devils Tower

As she prepared to rappel the Durrance Route’s approach pitch, an experienced, 56-year-old climber decided to partially coil the ropes and carry them with her as she descended, so she could avoid knocking rocks on people below. During her rappel, the coils became tangled. She stopped at a small stance to untangle the coils, and when she leaned back to resume rappelling, she “somersaulted” about 20 feet down the face with the ropes moving freely through her rappel device. She came to a stop about 30 feet above the ground when the ropes tangled again and stopped running through her device. The climber’s ankle was fractured in the fall. She was able to resume rappelling and reach the ground with a fireman’s belay from people at the base, and after first aid she was packaged in a litter and carried to the road to meet an ambulance.

ANALYSIS

It appears likely that when the patient stopped to untangle the ropes, she accidentally grabbed either the wrong strands of rope or a single strand with her brake hand. When she weighted the ropes again, she fell. An autoblock or other third-hand backup likely would have prevented this fall.

Carrying coils of rope while rappelling can be a good choice at a place like Devils Tower, where the many cracks can snag ropes, wind may blow the ropes far to one side, or, in a case like this, for the safety of others below. It can also be a useful technique with small-diameter ropes that tangle easily. The techniques for stacking and carrying coils so they feed out slack easily during the rappel must be learned and practiced. Seek good instruction. (Source: Lucas Barth, seasonal climbing ranger, and the Editors.)

Images

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