



AAC Publications

Tumbling Boulder Injures Belayer

Utah, Moab Area, Day Canyon

On October 11, four climbers and I were cragging in Day Canyon. After warming up on a nearby climb, my partner and I threw our rope down in front of Boognish Tower, a 100-foot chimney climb (5.10-). I tied in on the follower's end and started to belay my partner. I was standing next to a washing machine-size boulder that was slightly up a slope and about five feet to the right of me. I was wearing a helmet and belaying with a Grigri.

My partner was about one-third of the way up the route, halfway between two bolts, when I heard "ROCK! ROCK!!!" yelled from behind me. Startled and confused, I saw from the corner of my eye that the large boulder had started to shift down the sandy slope toward me. I moved backward, trying to avoid the boulder, but could not get away in time. The rock hit my right arm, knocked me backward onto the ground, and then rolled over my right leg. The lead rope then snagged on the boulder and I was pulled down the hill for about eight feet before the rock rolled free and continued downhill.

The rope on my end was nearly severed, but not completely. Another climber put the leader on belay so he could continue up to the next bolt and bail. Despite holding my weight as I tumbled, the leader had not gotten pulled off the route and did not get hurt.

I ended up with a dislocated and broken scaphoid (wrist bone) and lacerations on my forearm and between my thumb and pointer finger (where the rope had been). A divot in the boulder or the unevenness or sandiness of the ground where I landed must have saved me from a broken leg as the boulder rolled over me.

ANALYSIS

Most rockfall accidents involve rocks falling from above, and the best protection usually is to move toward the wall for shelter. In this case, I probably should have done the same, but due to proximity of the boulder and the momentary confusion when I heard "ROCK!" yet didn't see anything falling, I made a bad call and moved the wrong way to get out of the boulder's path.

The boulder had appeared to be sturdy, but certain warning signs were present. There was heavy rain three days before the accident (probably the main reason the boulder dislodged), and a climber's dog had just dug a shallow hole for himself around the base of the boulder. The boulder sat on a sloped, sandy ledge with lots of broken rock scattered around. No matter how solid they look and how unlikely it seems, it's important to be aware that boulders on the ground can suddenly dislodge and cause an accident. (Source: Anonymous report from the belayer.)

Images



Climbers on Boognish Tower in Day Canyon, Utah. The boulder that rolled over the belayer in this incident is visible just to the right.



The boulder that rolled over a climber in Day Canyon came to a stop in sandy soil well below the climb.

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