



AAC Publications

Two Ground Falls – Inadequate Protection, Rope Severed

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

Around 6 a.m. on the morning of June 2, Tim Klein, Kevin Prince, and Jason Wells started up El Capitan with the objective of climbing the Salathé Wall (VI 5.9 C2) in a day. All three were very familiar with the terrain. Klein had climbed El Capitan 108 times, Wells over 90 times, and Prince roughly 20 times. The full team had climbed together previously, including a one-day ascent of the Salathé four years prior. Additionally, Klein and Wells had an estimated 40 one-day ascents of the Salathé, including a sub-eight-hour ascent.

On the day of the accident, the trio's goal was not a speed record but simply to enjoy an in-a-day ascent, with Wells and Prince attempting to free climb the route. To be efficient, the team was short-fixing, an advanced climbing technique popular among speed climbers on El Capitan. This consists of the leader climbing a pitch, pulling up the slack, fixing the lead line for the follower, and then continuing either on self-belay or without a belay with the remainder of the available rope. The follower ascends the fixed lead line and upon arriving at the anchor places the leader back on a standard belay.

Because they were climbing as a team of three, the second climber was tagging (trailing) an additional rope behind him and fixing it at each belay anchor. The third climber then would self-belay on this rope using progress-capture devices (e.g., Micro Traxion).

Early that morning, around Triangle Ledge, the trio caught and passed a party attempting a multi-day ascent of Golden Gate. Wells was leading, Klein was second and ascending the lead line, and Prince was rope-soloing behind the other two using the second rope. Not far above Triangle Ledge is the Half Dollar chimney, followed by roughly 250 feet of 5.7 and easier terrain leading to the top of Mammoth Terraces.

Wells and Klein climbed through the Half Dollar and went out of sight of the others below. Klein yelled down to Prince that his rope was fixed, and Prince began climbing the Half Dollar. At approximately 8:05 a.m., while Prince was behind the Half Dollar and unable to view his climbing partners, something happened that caused Wells and Klein to fall. It is unknown which climber fell first.

A climber in the Golden Gate team who was positioned at the pitch seven anchor, in view of the area below Mammoth Terraces, saw Wells in mid-fall. The climber then heard Klein yell and saw him come into view, also falling. The climber said he saw the fall briefly arrested before the rope apparently failed. The two fell approximately 1,000 feet to the base of El Capitan.

Upon reaching the anchor above the Half Dollar, Prince waited for the Golden Gate team to reach him. Once they arrived, Prince tied in with them, and the three retreated to the base of the wall. By the time they got to the ground, YOSAR personnel were on scene and had confirmed Klein and Wells did not survive the fall.

ANALYSIS

There are many unknowns about the accident. No one was able to see the moment the climbers began falling or the specific events leading up to it. What follows explains the findings at the scene as

well as possible.

Upon reaching the anchor atop the Half Dollar, Prince found that his rope (the one Klein had trailed) had been short-fixed to two bolts. The remainder of this rope extended approximately 50 to 60 feet to a point where it ended at a number 2 Camalot clipped with a locking carabiner in the locked position. The Camalot was not placed at a significant ledge and was judged by investigators to be a temporary placement.

According to Prince, this had not been part of the team's plan; at every other belay, Klein had stayed connected to Prince's rope. Leaving Prince's rope at the cam suggests that Klein may have needed to move higher on the wall than Prince's rope would reach (although he would have needed to retreat to Prince's line at some point to retrieve it) or that he had needed to move back down the wall and had decided to leave Prince's line at his high point. It is also possible that Wells and Klein met at the top of pitch eight (atop the Half Dollar) and then Wells may have carried Prince's rope to fix at the location of the number 2 Camalot.

Wells was likely combining pitches nine and ten into a single pitch, thus avoiding the need to build a gear anchor at the top of pitch nine. Doing this would have meant that Klein would not have had enough rope to stay at the two-bolt anchor and belay at the top of the Half Dollar. However, it was determined by investigators that a 60-meter rope would reach the bolted anchor atop Mammoth Terraces from the location of the number 2 Camalot.

The rope was cleanly severed within a foot of Klein's harness. The investigation found boulders about 40 feet directly below the number 2 Camalot that showed evidence of sheath and core rope material. Approximately 40 feet above the Camalot, a block was found with rope fibers on two sides, indicating the fall may have been momentarily arrested at this location.

No protection was found placed in the rock leading to Mammoth. Because the rope cut during the fall, there is a chance that gear had been placed, failed, and was lost off the end of the rope when it cut. However, the evidence suggests this was not the case.

Three unattached cams were found at the base of El Capitan near Wells. Multiple cams were attached to Wells' right gear loops. Both gear loops on the left side of Wells' harness were broken, and investigators determined that the cams found at the base likely detached from Wells' harness during the fall. (No gear was found on the route during a follow-up patrol.) The total number of cams accounted for was consistent with the total that Prince believed the team brought for the climb. If so, the two climbers would not have had either a belay or any protection between them when they fell.

A few reporting parties stated they had seen a haul bag drop off the Shield headwall (above this area of the Salathé) just before the accident. Extensive follow-up found these claims to be untrue. (Source: Yosemite National Park Climbing Rangers.)

Editor's note: The mysterious and unplanned number 2 cam placement suggests that one of the climbers may have tied off the trail rope while dealing with a contingency above or below that point. Perhaps the rope between Wells and Klein got stuck or a piece of gear was dropped. It's possible that one climber fell while attempting to solve this unknown problem and then his fall pulled off the other. The full story will never be known.

Images



Investigators' diagram of the area on the Salathé Wall route where two men who were believed to be simul-climbing the ninth and tenth pitches fell to the ground when their rope severed.



Investigators' photo of the ninth pitch of the Salathé Wall, showing the location of the mysterious number 2 cam placement described in this report.

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