



AAC Publications

Ground Fall – Loose Rock Severs Rope

Utah, Wasatch Range, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Whipple Fork

On April 8, Wade Joseph Meade, 29, an experienced climber, and his partner, Tyler Grundstrom, who has been climbing about 10 years and is also an EMT, had decided to explore the Whipple Fork area, high in Big Cottonwood Canyon, for first-ascent potential. Just reaching the base requires an hour-plus scramble up “the nastiest talus and bushwhacking you can imagine,” Grundstrom said. One reason they had sought a remote area was to avoid COVID exposure.

Once in the area, the pair assessed two potential climbs. At the base of one of these, Meade tied in and started leading up a hand and fist crack. When Meade was about 50 feet up, he pulled off a quartzite flake about 3 feet by 1.5 feet by 1 foot. As he was falling, the flake cut the rope. He landed on the belay ledge and then tumbled 25 more feet, bouncing over rocks and coming to rest at the bottom of the approach couloir on a patch of snow.

Grundstrom immediately climbed down to his friend and completed a full assessment, and within a couple of minutes called the police to initiate a rescue. Meade, who was wearing a helmet, had several apparent injuries: an open fracture of his right elbow, to which Grundstrom later applied a tourniquet to control the bleeding; a chest injury that led Grundstrom to believe Meade had a collapsed lung; a possible right orbital fracture around the eye; deformation of his lower lumbar spine, with no sensation or motor movement in his legs; and a pelvic fracture. He was conscious but disoriented, and Grundstrom believed he might have a traumatic brain injury.

Grundstrom built a platform of backpacks to allow Meade to lie on top of the snow, piled layers on him for warmth, and got him into a better position for breathing. Rescuers from various agencies arrived at the scene approximately 1.5 to 2 hours after Grundstrom called 911, and they prepared for a difficult helicopter hoist to extract the patient. As he was being transported off the mountain, about 5:35 p.m., Meade succumbed to his injuries.

ANALYSIS

The subject was an experienced climber who suffered a tragic accident. According to Grundstrom, this was Meade’s first attempt at establishing a new route, and the two had agreed on a strict ground-up ethic. As a result, they chose not to rappel the line and remove loose rocks before climbing.

(Sources: Tyler Grundstrom, Rock and Ice, Salt Lake County Search and Rescue.)

Images



The crack in the Whipple Fork area of Big Cottonwood Canyon from which a climber pulled off a loose flake that cut his rope.

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