



AAC Publications

Ground Fall – Rappel Failure

Canada, British Columbia, Squamish, The Apron

On the afternoon of September 3, Danny Dalpe (29) suffered a 200-foot ground fall from several pitches up on The Apron. At the time, Dalpe was a climber with five years of experience. Though he consistently climbed 5.13 sport routes, his multi-pitch experience was limited to two years, mainly on bolted routes around Squamish. His partner (female, 29) was a beginner climber using borrowed gear. This was her first multi-pitch outing.

Around 12:30 p.m., the pair started up Born Again, a link-up combining sections of established routes with new pitches to create “the best protected 5.10 on the Apron.” Its copious protection, bolted belays, and generally forgiving angle made it a fine choice given the team’s limited experience.

To avoid a party climbing above, Dalpe decided to traverse left after the second pitch. Joining Dream On (5.10b), he found the climbing changed character: The terrain was less forgiving and had only one protection bolt on the pitch. At the top of his third lead, he recalls thinking, “This was not the day I had in mind.” The climbing above appeared even more demanding. “I looked up the next pitch and decided it was not worth it.”

At 1:30 p.m., his climbing partner arrived at the belay, and Dalpe told her they would be descending from there. The partner carried a traditional belay/rappel device, though she was not experienced enough to rappel. Dalpe planned to use his Grigri to lower her and then make a single-line rappel, using her weight at the opposite end of the rope as a counterweight anchor. He untied his partner, threaded the rope end through the rappel rings, retied her, and then used his Grigri to lower her to a prominent ledge. Once there, she traversed to a tree anchor and connected to it with a personal anchor system (PAS). Before lowering her, Dalpe had said to his partner, “Go to the tree anchor, clip in, and do nothing.”

Dalpe set up his Grigri to rappel and started down the single strand. Halfway to the tree anchor, the rope became suddenly unweighted and Dalpe tumbled down the rock. While he was falling, the rope through Dalpe’s Grigri went slack and, “I saw the rope swirling orange and I kept asking, ‘When am I gonna stop?’ ”

Dalpe hit the ground, rolled a distance, and came to rest at a tree. Climbers approaching the cliff rushed up to help. One called for an ambulance at 1:45 p.m. Another team that was on Born Again rappelled to Dalpe’s partner and lowered her to the ground. At 3:45 p.m., Dalpe was transported by ambulance to the hospital.

He escaped with relatively minor injuries considering his 200-foot tumble. (He was not wearing a helmet.) He suffered a broken sternum, two broken bones in the right foot, plus multiple abrasions to his scapula and back of his head. He spent one month on a couch, and four months later he was climbing 5.13 again. (Sources: Interview with Danny Dalpe and report from British Columbia Emergency Health Services.)

ANALYSIS

It appears the rappel failed when Dalpe’s partner somehow managed to untie her knot as he rappelled the single strand. Her half-tied figure 8 was discovered to be cinched tight. It had pulled through the

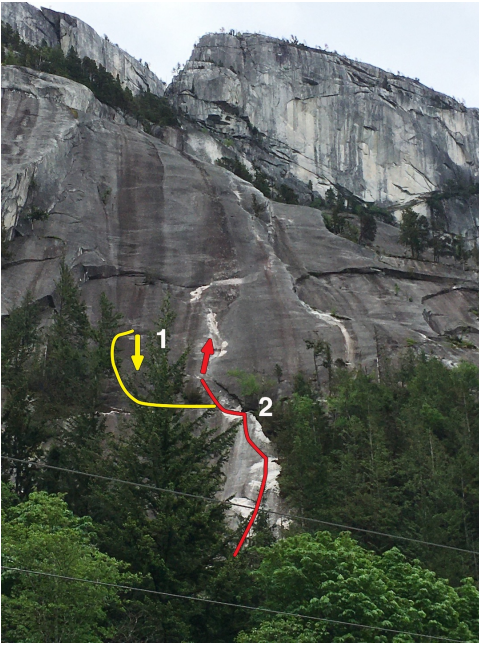
rappel rings—no doubt slowing Dalpe as he tumbled toward the ground. It seems likely she began to untie as soon as she clipped into the anchor, and that some element of the system temporarily held Dalpe's weight until he had already committed to the rappel.

Counterweight systems—simul-rappelling, counter-ascending, or the descent method chosen by Dalpe in this incident—are for experts only. In fact, accidents involving such systems have claimed even very experienced climbers. The entire team needs to understand the necessity and process of maintaining a closed system until both parties are on the ground or securely anchored. Given his partner's limited experience, Dalpe could have made better choices involving the route, equipment, and rappel method.

The transition from single-pitch sport to multi-pitch routes—even on a mostly bolted climb with solid chain anchors—presents many challenges. First was equipment. This pair was equipped with a single rope and only one traditional rappel device, which necessitated a complex counterweighted rappel when they decided to bail. Another issue was experience. Dalpe's partner, through no fault of her own, was clearly in over her head.

Dalpe's physical climbing ability might have contributed indirectly to the accident. Climbing 5.13 after only a few years is an empowering—and often misleading—experience. In a multi-pitch or trad environment, a metric like a sport climbing grade is an inadequate substitute for proper tools, training, and experience. To his credit, Dalpe chose to descend when he recognized they were over their head on this long route. It takes years of practice to develop the skills and judgment to safely lead an inexperienced partner up a multi-pitch climb. (Source: The Editors.)

Images



Red line shows the first two pitches of Born Again on Squamish's Apron. Instead of continuing up this route (red arrow), the climbers traversed left and climbed the second pitch of Dream On (yellow line). When their attempt to rappel (yellow arrow) failed, the leader tumbled to the ground.

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