



AAC Publications

FATAL FREE SOLO FALL

California, Joshua Tree National Park, Real Hidden Valley

The Riverside County Sheriff's Department reported that on the morning of January 18, Michael Spitz (35) was found dead by two hikers at the base of Illusion Dweller (5.10b) in Joshua Tree National Park. The Riverside County Coroner's Office estimated the unroped Spitz had fallen at least 80 feet the previous day from the 100-foot long route.

"Gabriel B" from Mountainproject.com witnessed the events leading up to Spitz's fatal climb. He wrote to ANAC in an email:

"I met Michael right before the incident. He got to the base of the route a few moments after I did. As I rapped up, I noticed he was alone. I asked if he intended to solo Illusion Dweller. He did. I offered him the chance to solo the route before I rope climbed it, particularly so he would have enough light (nightfall was approaching and he didn't have a headlamp). He said he did not want to be watched. I got a strange sense as though he was unsure of the outcome and wouldn't want anyone to witness it, if things went wrong.

"I led the climb quickly and belayed my partner up. We simul-rapped to get out of Spitz's way as quickly as possible. As I was packing up my gear at the base, I mentioned that Illusion Dweller wasn't the best route to solo as the roof (the crux of the climb and at the very top) is difficult and insecure, and he adamantly agreed. I tried to discourage him from doing it, but it seemed to me his mind was made up and he wouldn't entertain the thought of aborting the mission. As I started to walk away, he started up the route.

"It took us about four minutes to leave the area, and we heard no commotion before we were gone. By this point it wasn't completely dark, but it was very dark. I saw him set up a tripod to film, so the climbing and falling were recorded." (Sources: Gabriel B, Riverside County Sheriff's Department, Riverside County Coroner's Office, and Climbing.com.)

ANALYSIS:

While there's not much to teach from free solo accidents, darkness might have played a role. Given the estimated length of his fall, Spitz most likely fell from the crux overhang. As Gabriel B pointed out, this section is tricky and insecure. The proof was on Spitz's video.

"I was later told that the video had been watched and he (Spitz) did indeed fall from the roof, survived a while, and could be heard calling out for help," Gabriel B wrote.

Gabriel B wrote, "He didn't specify the reason for setting up a camera, but he had started a YouTube channel documenting his soloing. In a previous video he posted, he mentioned wanting to 'share his climbing journey,' so I'm inclined to believe the footage from Illusion Dweller was intended for YouTube content. Michael also told us he had rope climbed Illusion Dweller before but said he hadn't soloed it.

"Coincidentally, I free solo quite a bit myself, and the risk versus reward ratio is something I am constantly pondering and trying to reconcile personally. I've been around many other soloists, and

there have been a few times I've been alarmed at the risks certain people were willing take (i.e., experience level not matching a route's difficulty/insecurity). Obviously, soloing is a personal decision, and you can only speak so much into someone's life, before you just have to hope their decision-making is sound.

"I'd like to point out that my intention is not to be critical of Michael's decisions, but solely an effort to help other newer climbers avoid the potential pitfalls of undue pressure clouding their judgement, especially if garnering 'likes' on social media is the main motivation." (Source: Gabriel B.)

Clarification and Reflection on Michael Spitz's Accident

By Brian Gillette

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Accidents in North American Climbing is a valuable resource for the climbing community and should be as accurate as possible. After reading the report of Mike's death, I feel it necessary to point out some inaccuracies and try to add some information that might be useful in learning from this tragedy. I've spent a lot of time thinking about this over the last two years. I had known Mike for about ten years. He was Uncle Mike to my kids and was my regular climbing partner for the last six years. I've been climbing myself for over 15 years.

While a video of Mike's fall exists, I chose not to watch it. I've spoken with two people who have watched it: Mike's brother and a mutual friend who also climbed with Mike. That mutual friend is familiar with the route and was able to explain what happened in detail. Mike was not at the roof. He was about ten feet below. He had his left hand and foot in a jam and his right foot smeared on the face. He reached down with his right hand to chalk, and his right foot slipped. I was surprised that what sounded like a small slip would be enough to pull him off completely. He survived the fall and moved about ten feet from the wall to where he was found. His family decided against an autopsy, and it's hard to tell from the video how long he survived, but based on some of the visible injuries, he likely had a severe fracture in the upper part of one leg. My guess is that shock and blood loss accelerated hypothermia.

When someone falls free soloing, it's easy to assume they fell at a challenging move and perhaps had chosen a route they weren't prepared for. That analysis doesn't fit with the circumstances of Mike's fall.

Mike and I had climbed Illusion Dweller many times. I remember a few years back when Mike and I spent an afternoon running laps on it to try and improve our fitness. The route was well within his ability. I had climbed with him a week before, and he was leading pitches several grades harder with ease. The fact that the route was well within his ability is the most salient point that should give anyone free soloing a reason to pause and reflect.

In the year before his death, Mike's free soloing had accelerated from an occasional outing to a nearly weekly activity. The more he free soloed, the more I watched his perception of the risks become disconnected from the reality of climbing. Mike had also been surfing a heavy swell in the days leading up to his death. When I spoke with him the night before, I thought he sounded tired and told him to take it easy. He told me he planned to climb for the day and head home. From what I can tell, soloing Illusion Dweller was a last-minute decision. He might have been more tired than he realized. It might explain why a small slip caused him to fall. Mike's last-minute decision also meant that he wasn't prepared in any way for a potential accident, even a minor one. Everything about the timing and location was irresponsible and an example of how casual Mike's attitude toward soloing had become.

Free soloing has always been a part of climbing. I imagine it's the oldest style of climbing. A day of wandering in slip-ons and running up and down your favorite moderates with only a chalk bag and climbing shoes is hard to beat. I don't know if free soloing has become more prevalent in recent years or

if it's just getting more exposure. I can't quite put my finger on it, but something has shifted, and I'm glad to hear more conversations about the risks and rewards of climbing without a rope.

To any young climber eager to climb harder, there's nothing to gain from climbing without a rope that can't be gained from climbing with one. It's not a fast track to becoming a better climber, and it doesn't armor your mind against fear any more than a long runout on bad gear. We don't rope up out of fear; we do it because we know that climbing is unpredictable. Holds break, and things fall from above. Ultimately, we put on a rope to manage the risks because there's more to life than climbing, and we owe it to those who care about us.

Images



A roped climber approaches the tricky crux of Illusion Dweller, where Michael Spitz is believed to have fallen. Gabriel B, who provided information about this accident, said, "Underneath the roof there is a secure stance with jugs (chalked area) where you can get a good rest. Once you step up into the roof, the feet are minuscule and there's not much to grab. Once you're almost done pulling the roof, there is a hidden juggy pocket way in the back."

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