



AAC Publications

FATAL FREE SOLO FALL

California, El Cajon Mountain, The Wedge

On December 4, Nathaniel Masahi Takatsuno (22) fell to his death while free soloing Leonids, a three-pitch 5.9 on the Wedge at El Cajon Mountain.

Climber Michael Sandler witnessed the accident. In his report to [Accidents](#), he wrote, “As we were waiting (at the base), a single man walked by. I asked what his name was, and we made some small talk. His name was Nate, and he was a lab tech at UCSD (University of California San Diego). He was alone but had a rope, so I asked him what route he was planning to do. He told me he wanted to solo Meteor [and] he was planning to carry up the rope in a pack and use it to rappel. I asked if he just didn’t have any friends who wanted to climb, and he said that he did, but that he liked soloing. He would not be wearing a helmet.

“At this point he started up the crag. He seemed gripped even by the third bolt—he was on the nearby Leonids (5.9) and not his intended route, Meteor (5.8). However, he made it up past the tricky start and kept heading up. As he did so, he would occasionally grab bolts, and had some small amount of gear with him to assist in this. He passed another party, which was already rappelling down the formation at this point. They exchanged some words and asked if he was doing well. They reported that he was continuing to occasionally grab bolts.

“At this point, we started climbing as well. I was leading the first pitch when I felt a soft thud and gust of wind. I looked around and saw him (Takatsuno) hit a slab below me, bounce off, hit another slab, and fall to the ground.

“The other party had just finished rappelling to the ground. I asked my partner Andrew to tie me off and I went direct into the closest bolt to me. A member of the other party said he was Wilderness First Responder certified, so he went down the hillside to help. We immediately called 911 and were on the phone with the operator for the next 40 minutes.

“Helicopters arrived in 45 minutes and dropped a paramedic. He took our info, looked at Nate, and then was picked up by the helicopter.” According to [Climbing.com](#), Takatsuno’s body could not be recovered until the following day due to conditions and lateness of the accident.

ANALYSIS

While we cannot ascertain what caused the fall, the route was in the sun, which may have been a factor. At [Climbing.com](#), leading Southern California climber Randy Leavitt said that in the sun, Leonids can feel greasy. “It’s 5.9, but there’s parts where friction matters, and there’s not a lot of positive holds.” Sandler concurs: “It’s south-facing and pretty inland, so it gets pretty hot (and it was definitely pretty warm that day). The easier climbing is usually techy face climbing, it never quite feels ‘comfortable.’”

Rock quality may have played a factor. The Wedge was described on a 2010 [Mountainproject.com](#) post as having “plenty of ready-to-snap micro flakes and a few larger hollow bits.” [ANAC Southern](#)

California correspondent Christy Rosa, who has climbed Leonids, said, “The route he was on is 350–400 feet, mostly solid granite, but a bit crumbly and flakey at a few points.”

While there’s not much educational nor technical analysis to be made in free solo accidents, Rosa noted that this incident was the third free solo death in the region in 2022. Her objective assessment is: “The increased number of free solo accidents is simple math—more people are free soloing. This is likely a combination of seeing others successfully do it, and perhaps an increase in risk tolerance, as the pandemic has changed most of us.”

After witnessing this tragedy, Sandler had several things to say. He pointed out that, “If, for whatever reason, you must free solo, do so on climbs well below your ability, ideally ones you have done before. From our discussion with Nate and his apparent discomfort on the climb, this was not an appropriate climb to be ropeless on.” Perhaps Sandler’s most important observation was to encourage free soloists to think of others. “As a free soloist, you put the lives of those below you at risk. He flew by less than five feet from me; a collision could have led to serious trauma for myself.” Witnessing such an event can itself be traumatic. (Sources: Michael Sandler, Climbing.com, and the Editors.)

Editor's Note: See more photos and analysis from this incident in the December 2022 edition of the Prescription.

Images



El Cajon Mountain was the scene of a free solo death in 2022. The rigorous nature of the approach is apparent. The route in question, Leonids, climbs to the left of the prominent black-shaded roof and dihedral, which are in turn to the left of the sun/shade line.

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