

dated its usefulness. (Source: Reed Thorne, Captain—Technical Rescue, Sedona Fire Department)

(Editor's Note: As the friction decreases on the rappel, especially if only a single line is in use, the rappeller can pass the rope around the small of the back, switching brake hands. More friction, as in a hip belay, is thus created.)

FALL ON ROCK, BELAY DEVICE DIFFICULTIES

Arizona, Sedona

On December 3, 1986, Pete Sinfield (28) was leading the second pitch of “Chapel Ruin” (5.9), a left-facing dihedral protected by a thin crack to its right. The climb is in coarse-grained red sandstone which predominates the Sedona area. Greg Townsend (26) was belaying Pete with a Munter hitch (Saxon cross) attached to the front of his seat harness. Both wore helmets due to the sandstone and because this was a new route. Pete told me he had placed four good solid Friends leading into the crux of the climb. He was attempting to clip the fifth piece when, due to difficulty with the rope, he fell at the crux. As a result of the fall, and because of the position of the rope, Pete sustained second degree rope burns under his left arm. All protection remained intact. Pete completed the climb in much discomfort. (Source: Reed Thorne, Captain—Technical Rescue, Sedona Fire Department)

Analysis

While it is certain that the Munter hitch itself performed the function of stopping this fall, its limitations posed by inherent difficulties in using it for lead climbing are not to be overlooked. My observations concerning the hitch while climbing in Eldorado Canyon in September were similar to Pete's and Greg's complaint. Here are some things to consider: Because of the nature of the hitch, sometimes it is difficult to pull the bite or “knuckle” through the large carabiner (you must use one with this hitch) when the belayer changes from, say, paying rope out to taking it in. When the leader is passing his protection is one example of where this might occur. With a Sticht plate, for instance, it is very easy for the belayer to monitor the leader's progress and keep falls to a minimum by the constant paying in and out of the rope. Greg remembers struggling with the hitch, even though only briefly, right as Pete was at the crux trying to clip a difficult piece.

I had experienced the same problem in Eldorado causing the man I was climbing with to finally complain bitterly about its use. There is nothing worse than having to struggle at the sharp end of a rope whilst trying to make hard moves.

Another factor worth mentioning about the Munter hitch is its apparent static belay factors. This is partly, if not wholly, due to the nylon-on-nylon nature of the hitch. However, with other mechanical devices such as the Sticht plate or the body belay, for example, fall factors should be minimized anyway. This is because the belayer can closely follow the progress of the climber while not allowing too much slack in the rope—always careful to pay out as he clips a piece out in front, takes in rope as he advances to it, and then pays out once again as he passes it. While the Munter hitch might be a good tool for top rope or rescue situations where a static belay is needed, its usefulness in lead climbing is dubious at best. (Source: Reed Thorne, Captain—Technical Rescue, Sedona Fire Department)