

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT, OVERCONFIDENT Washington, Peshastin Pinnacles, Orchard Rock

On May 15, 1992, I was teaching an inexperienced climber the proper use of protection. I was on sandstone with few places for placing protection. I had climbed 25 feet, then put in two pieces, then told my belayer that I was falling. I then jumped off the rock face. A moment later, I heard a noise, looked behind me, and saw my protection had failed. I hit the ground, resulting in abrasions, lacerations, and a fractured leg. I was wearing a helmet, and I believe it saved my life.

Analysis

My analysis of this accident is overconfidence. I have been climbing for over 20 years, taught as a paid instructor, put up many new routes, climbed many of the hard routes in the States. It is embarrassing to think that I could become so careless. (Source: Steve Baker—35)

FALL ON ROCK, PLACED INADEQUATE PROTECTION, OUT OF PRACTICE

Washington, Snoqualmie Pass, Chair Peak

My son Erik Podenski (14) and I (42) were climbing the Northeast Buttress route on Chair Peak on May 16, 1992. This route is rated Class 4. I led all the rock pitches. We had completed the crooked chimney pitch and proceeded up the ridge to a shallow rock basin. There we ascended leftward toward a small patch of trees. The basin is generally Class 2 or 3 until the final 30+ feet below the tree pitch.

I placed a runner on the only available rock horn before starting up the last section. However, this left me approximately 60+ feet above the horn at the point where I fell. I was trying to traverse left to a point where I could get above the basin near the tree patch. I attempted to traverse to a hold to my left, keeping my right hand and foot stationary, while moving my left foot and left hand toward the hold. My right foot slipped and I took a tumbling/sliding fall down to where the basin was less steep. The total distance traveled was about 120 feet on a grade which was possibly 65 degrees at the top and around 25 degrees at the bottom.

My injuries consisted of three broken ribs, numerous abrasions, a cut on the left hand requiring five stitches, a cut on the back of the head requiring several stitches, and an extensive bruise on the left thigh and buttock. In addition, I was quite chilled even though it was a moderately nice day. At the time we reached the top of the crooked chimney, we met two climbers who were descending the Northeast Buttress route. At the time of the fall I yelled quite loudly. By this time the other two climbers were at the summit base slopes. These climbers heard me yell and yelled back, asking if we needed a rescue. My son answered yes and the two climbers proceeded back to the Alpentel parking lot which is at the head of the trail. I haven't seen these two climbers since, but would like to thank them for their help.

We were airlifted off Chair Peak by an Army helicopter rescue team one at a time. I was then flown to Harborview Trauma Center in Seattle. The air rescue took place approximately 2 1/2 hours after the accident. This timely response was due to the two climbers who were on Chair Peak. I feel very grateful to the Army crewman who performed the rescue as well as the two climbers.

Analysis

I had climbed this same route twice previously without any difficulty. However, those two occasions were in 1980-1981. During the early 80s I was quite active in rock climbing, including many Class 5 climbs. At the time of the accident, I had not done any serious rock climbing in several years.

It was customary for me in the past to do an annual re-familiarization with rock climbing, starting on practice areas such as Mount Erie and only then climbing in the mountains. However, prior to the accident, I did not do this in 1992. Because my wife and I have twin baby girls at home, I had very little time to get out climbing and this absence of re-familiarization and practice undoubtedly contributed to my accident.

Because my son was getting very interested in climbing and had shown a good deal of natural talent as a climber, I was somewhat swayed to go out with him. I felt that because the route was one that I had done twice previously (and I didn't recall any difficulties) that I would be up to the challenge. This seemed to be the case for me when I was able to easily do the main Class 4 pitch up the chimney.

By the time that I got to the basin where I fell, I was somewhat tired, but not exhausted. However, being somewhat tired may have affected my judgment. In retrospect I felt that I should not have been making a traversing move with only one hand and one foot fixed. A three point stance would have provided better stability.

One other contributing factor was the shoes that I was wearing. I had on a pair of low cut Vasque hiking shoes which have a Vibram look-alike compound rubber sole. However, the instep area of the shoe is not very good and I have previously slipped on trails and other places when side-stepping with these shoes.

In summary, I believe that this accident was preventable. The most important factor would have been to go out and do the standard re-familiarization/practice sessions prior to going in the mountains. From a mental standpoint, I was overconfident because of my previous experiences climbing Chair Peak, although these did not reconcile with my lack of recency in rock climbing experience. (Source: Patrick Podenski)

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT, PLACED INADEQUATE PROTECTION, NO HARD HAT

Washington, Peshastin Pinnacles, Lightning Crack

On May 31, 1992, Bob Renz (40) was climbing Lightning Crack. He placed protection at the beginning of the climb and then didn't place protection when the crack was not as steep and difficult to climb. When he reached the crux of the climb, approximately 70 feet off the ground, he placed a cam and stopper, and then fell just above these two pieces of protection. Neither piece held his fall and were ripped right out of the sandstone. He fell all the way to the ground, smashing into the rock several times as he fell, and then sliding the remaining distance to the ground. He sustained severe head injuries, broken leg and smashed knee cap—all as he bounced against rock as he fell.

Analysis

Wear a helmet at all times—top rope climbing, belaying, leading or just hanging out at base of rock when there is potential of rock fall. Even at “sport climbing” area such as Peshastin Pinnacles.

Be aware of the type of rock you are placing protection in. Sometimes even the best