

HANDHOLD CAME OFF—FAILURE TO TEST HOLD, FALL ON ROCK**Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Longs Peak**

On August 19, prior to 0900, Steve Mestdagh (39) was leading the North Chimney (II, 5.6) on the East Face of Longs Peak when he dislodged a large rock which he was using for a handhold. The rock gave way as he pulled it. It fell on his foot. Mestdagh sustained severe crushing injuries, including numerous fractures, to his foot. He was able to belay himself off the route to the Mills Glacier, where other climbers assisted him until rescue personnel arrived.

Analysis

The North Chimney is notorious for loose rock problems. When climbing loose rock, one should tap holds to listen for sounds of less-than-solid connections to the rock face, and then gradually weight holds. Another technique useful for survival on rotten rock is to consciously spread out weight over multiple points of contact, pushing in instead of pulling, as is efficiently demonstrated by stemming maneuvers. Also, it's a good idea to budget more time for climbing rotten rock carefully. (Source: Jim Detterline, Longs Peak Supervisory Climbing Ranger)

FALL ON SNOW—UNABLE TO SELF-ARREST, CLIMBING UNROPE, EXCEEDING ABILITIES**Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Longs Peak**

On October 11, Madrone Coopwood (24) slid 200 feet on Lamb's Slide at Longs Peak. Coopwood struck the rocks at the base of the snow, sustaining a right iliac fracture, slight rib fractures, and a pneumothorax of the right lung.

Analysis

Studying the past history of a route may allow one to prepare against recurrent problems. Since the epic first slide of Rev. Elkanah Lamb in 1871, Lamb's Slide has been the scene of numerous similar accidents, some even resulting in death. (Source: Jim Detterline, Longs Peak Supervisory Climbing Ranger)

FALL ON ROCK, FAILURE TO FOLLOW ROUTE, WEATHER, PROTECTION PULLED OUT**Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Longs Peak**

On October 11, Chris Sproul (26) and David Sweedler (37) began the Notch Couloir (III, AI 3, 5.5) on the East Face of Longs Peak. Sproul and Sweedler gained the top of the Notch feature at 13,900 feet, but then encountered extreme winds and blizzard-like conditions coming out of the West. They decided to traverse along the base of the palisades at the top of the East Face to stay out of the wind, and then top out on Kiener's Route. Once atop Kiener's Route, they intended to traverse below the summit to the descent route for the North Face, which would enable them to stay clear of the main force of the wind and storm. However, when they got to the base of the "Open Book" feature on Kiener's Route, they were unable to figure out the route (go right, up, and over the infamous "Diamond Step") and became stranded in the storm without overnight supplies. At one point, Sproul attempted to climb up the "Open Book," but fell, pulling all anchors but one. Both he and Sweedler damaged their helmets and sustained

minor head injuries. Late on October 13, Sproul figured out the “Diamond Step” and climbed out to get help for his partner. Early on October 14, Sweedler was rescued by the RMNP rescue team. Both Sproul and Sweedler sustained serious frostbite to hands, feet, and face, and may lose some fingers and toes.

Analysis

The nasty first-storm-of-winter that hit Sproul and Sweedler was exactly on time as predicted. Less ambitious plans would have prevented this epic. This misadventure seems to repeat itself every Autumn. The ability to route-find as a mountaineer (the “Diamond Step” is only third class) is more critical to success on the big mountain than is the ability to force a straight line, a strong trait among many pure rock climbers. Despite any judgment errors on the part of Sproul and Sweedler, they should certainly be commended for their will and strength to survive. (Source: Jim Detterline, Longs Peak Supervisory Climbing Ranger)

FALL ON ICE, INADEQUATE BELAY, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Thatchtop

On November 6, at 1300, Chris Chierello (29) was leading the Snake Route (I, WI 4) on Thatchtop North Face, and was belayed by Mark Keating (21). Chierello was leading the final headwall section about 100 feet above the ground, when his tool and crampon placements failed in thin ice, causing him to fall onto a regular (29 cm) Black Diamond tubular screw. Keating was not watching the leader and was not tied into any ground anchors. Keating was yanked upward, wrenching his shoulder at such an angle as to cause a dislocation. Due to the extra rope lost from the inattentive belayer, Chierello fell approximately 30 feet fracturing his right ankle. Chierello was then lowered by his belayer to the ground. Nearby ice climbers assisted Chierello and Keating with their injuries, and ran out to Bear Lake to alert the Park Service. Both climbers were evacuated on plastic snow litters by park rescue.

Analysis

The Snake Route is typical of many winter water ice climbs in that the more dramatic-looking sections, in this case near the base of the route, are often less dangerous than transition areas near the tops of the climbs. Paying attention to changes in ice quality indicates that it may be appropriate to place one last solid screw before venturing into unstable territory. When climbing thin ice, the climber's weight should be evenly distributed among all four points of contact. All new placements should be gradually weighted before being trusted. The belayer, as well as the climber, needs to be tuned in to these changes as well. Thin ice climbs should be practiced under the controlled conditions of top-rope ascents before a leader attempts to lead routes of this nature. Chris Chierello had been climbing ice for two years and only recently began to lead ice. Mark Keating was a newcomer to ice climbing but had experience rock climbing. Both climbers were wearing helmets and plastic boots, which may have prevented additional injuries.

The local emergency room physician reported that he had been seeing numerous injuries to Thatchtop North Face (a.k.a. “The Loch”) ice climbers, mostly beginners, of several per week during this winter season. These accidents were not reported to the National Park Service, although required, and so additional helpful tips which may have been gained by investigators are not available. Thatchtop North Face ice has become