

lead up to a 5.8 traditional and has completed ten multi-pitch climbs such as the “Crack” and the “Nutcracker.” Partner Dan Pier (25) was on his first multi-pitch climb and had completed just a few short practice climbs up to a 5.8 difficulty. Mathew and Pier had started the climb around 0800 and one other team had passed them during the day. Mathew had read “Staying Alive in Yosemite” by John Dill. As a note, Mathew was carrying enough equipment to have completed a self-rescue by a variety of methods. (Source: J. Pederson and K. Lober, Rangers, Yosemite National Park)

RAPPELLED OFF END OF ROPE—FALL ON ROCK, MISCALCULATED RAPPEL STATION

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

On July 13, as we were preparing to start the Shield route in Yosemite, California, I (Matthew Luck) was ascending the fifth fixed (static) line from the ground up to Heart Ledge on El Capitan, while my partner, Steve Canavero, waited at the anchor below. He was standing on a fairly substantial ledge (one meter wide) which angled off on the side for about ten meters before dropping vertically.

As I was jugging, Eric Renger, was rappelling down from Heart Ledge on the dynamic lead line he and his partner, David Hill, had just fixed. They had just climbed the Free Blast up to Mammoth Terraces and rappelled to Heart Ledge, intending to fix those pitches and begin the Salathé Wall the next day.

When I was about two-thirds of the way to the anchor above, there was this commotion, and I looked down to see Eric fall and hit the top of the sloping part of the ledge. There was a loud crashing as he landed on his garbage bag full of empty water bottles. He then began to slide down the ledge to the edge where it drops off (which would have resulted in a four-pitch fall to the ground). Clawing at the crack where the ledge meets the wall, he slid about three meters, gaining no purchase in the crack.

All of a sudden, the sliding climber came to a stop. Simultaneously, my rope dropped about two meters. I had no idea what was going on at the moment, and yelled, “Hey, what are you doing up there?” thinking that his partner (still at the anchor above) was somehow undoing the anchor of the fixed line I was ascending.

Eric yelled, “I’m OK, but I don’t know what’s holding me!” Steve then yelled for no one to move, thinking that a stuck rope had somehow stopped his fall and a move by anyone could have dislodged it and he would have continued falling off of the large flake.

A few moments later, everything was still, and we began to figure out what had happened. Steve then pulled slack up from the other static rope Eric was trailing (he had two) and threw the end to him. Eric was positioned precariously in the crack and was obviously worried about the mystery that held him. He questioned the integrity of the rope anchor at least twice, and Steve assured him it was solid and backed it up with a figure-8 on a bight.

As things calmed down, I finished jugging up to Heart Ledge, and told his partner what had happened. There are two fixed anchors at the Heart Ledges

area, one at Heart Ledge and one below Heart Ledge, and these are about six meters apart vertically. The other party had fixed their rope and rappelled from the higher anchor, and their rope ended up about five meters short of the next rappel station. He rappelled to the station six meters below, fixed his line there, and then rappelled to his partner, who had sustained no major injuries. (Source: Matthew Luck)

Analysis

I rappelled first, as Dave waited, clipped into the anchors on Heart Ledge. As I started the rappel, I couldn't see to the next anchor, and I didn't know if the 50 m rope would reach all the way. About 30 feet down from the Heart Ledge rappel anchor, I saw another bolted rappel anchor.

Seeing another anchor partway down the rappel made me think we might need to set up another rappel to reach the next rappel station below. I didn't have any solid information on exactly which rappel anchors to use, and I have been on more than a few rappel routes that had extra rappel anchors. I mentioned the extra rappel anchor to Dave, and continued to rappel.

As I often do on walls, I had a prusik knot on the rappel rope above my HB Sheriff belay device. There were not any knots in the end of the rappel rope, which is also how I normally choose to rappel. I had my ascenders set up and clipped to my harness, so I could easily and safely ascend the rope if I needed to return to the lower rappel anchor.

Initially, I thought the rappel anchor had failed, or the rappel rope had broken. However, as I looked up, I could see the end of my rappel rope dangling 20 feet above the lower rappel anchors. I had simply rappelled off the end of my rope, which was too short to reach from Heart Ledge to the next rappel station. Steve was still waiting at the lower rappel anchors, which were now above me and to the right. I asked him to set up a fixed rope so that I could safely anchor to something and then ascend back to the ledge. I knew that the ropes I had been trailing had somehow caught me, but I didn't know how they held me. After Steve fixed my trailing rope for me, I checked several times to make sure I was on the correct rope, and that it was securely anchored. Once I was sure it was safe, I jumared back up the ramp to the ledge, pulling a mess of ropes with me.

Once I got up onto the ledge, I clipped to the anchors and sat down to rest. Dave soon rappelled down to where I was, and we talked over what had happened. I had clearly rappelled off the end of the rappel line, and the prusik knot did nothing to stop me. It was my trailing ropes, which had become tangled with the fixed rope, that saved my life. One end of the trailing rope was attached to my harness. As I tumbled down the ramp, I grabbed the free end of my trailing rope. The middle of my trailing rope was looped over the fixed rope, and this is what stopped my fall. Because the fixed rope was attached to rappel anchors at both ends, the full length of my trailing rope was being pulled up over the fixed rope as I tumbled down the ramp. As I soon as I grabbed the free end of the trailing rope, I was essentially belaying myself on the trailing rope, with the fixed rope as my top-rope anchor.

My injuries from the fall were pretty minor. I had a bad bruise for several weeks from landing on the ledge, and I got bad rope burns on two fingers from grabbing the ropes.

In the seven years that I've been climbing, I hadn't made any serious mistakes on the rock or had any close calls. As I sat on the ledge, I realized that I couldn't say that anymore. I'd read plenty of accident reports and advice for safe climbing. I knew that many accidents occurred when experienced climbers stopped paying attention and made a mistake. But now, I was one of those climbers, and it made me feel a lot more vulnerable, and a lot less secure on the rock. I don't like thinking about the accident too much, especially when I consider all the "what if" scenarios and resulting consequences.

After letting things settle down for a while on the ledge, Dave and I continued to rappel to the ground, and Steve and Matt continued up to Heart Ledge. Dave and I didn't finish the Salathé route that week, but we did spend the week climbing other free routes in Yosemite, and we plan to return to the Salathé some day. (Source: Eric Renger)

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT—INADEQUATE

California, Yosemite Valley

On September 6, David Craig (32) first met and climbed with a Japanese climber named Tomo (last name unknown). Tomo was experienced and competent. On Sunday they climbed at the base of Sunnyside Bench.

After climbing a few other short routes, Craig decided to lead Lingerin Lie (5.10). The route followed an under-climb that curved up to the right and then curved to the left. Craig placed his first piece of protection, a Camalot, about ten feet off the ground, then climbed another eight feet or so into the crux section and placed a second Camalot. This placement was blind; that is, he was unable to see into the crack to evaluate the reliability of the placement. He attached a two foot sling to the piece, clipped in the rope, and climbed until the piece was a couple of feet below his feet.

The climbing seemed harder than the rating at this point. He knew he was going to fall and called out, "Take," to his belayer to warn Tomo to take in any existing slack rope. But he fell before Tomo could act. He fell about eight feet, saw the Camalot stem shift downward before it failed. He fell about 15 feet to the ground. He landed on his feet on a small patch of dirt, doubled up and rocked forward, striking his face with his knee, then pitched backwards, landing hard on the rock with his butt.

He knew he was hurt, and nearby climbers checked him over while others went for help. At the clinic he was found to have a fractured left calcaneus, a fractured coccyx, and a lacerated knee (from his teeth).

Analysis

David Craig had been climbing actively for six years on traditional rock routes, leads 5.10 comfortably, is competent at placing and judging protection, has taken lots of falls, but has no previous climbing injuries or rescues. He is familiar with Yosemite granite, having climbed approximately 50 routes in the