

Russ had the next lead, pitch 33; the topo shows it starting as A1, then finishing as 5.8 face climbing.

Comfortable on hard 5.10, he didn't expect any problems, but about 50 feet short of the belay, he found the free moves much harder than the rating. He searched for an easier way, found nothing, and finally fell attempting the moves. His last protection, six or seven feet below, was a marginal placement—all he'd been able to find—and it failed. He was caught by the next piece after falling 25 to 30 feet—a clean fall, until his right foot struck a knob.

His partners got up the pitch, and Russ was able to follow the remaining pitches to the summit by jumaring on his good leg. As they topped out, they met two Yosemite SAR team members on a search assignment; the searchers stayed with them that night and arranged for the NPS helicopter to evacuate Russ in the morning. X-rays confirmed that his right ankle had been fractured.

Analysis

According to local climbers, this pitch is significantly underrated. There have been several other falls on it this year, and rumors of a few injuries, though none requiring a rescue. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

(Editor's Note: It has become more common to rely on ratings from guide books rather than on one's own ability to judge the difficulty of a route. The latter is becoming a lost skill—along with being able to down-climb once the realization that the route won't go has set in.)

FALL ON HARD SNOW – UNABLE TO SELF ARREST, PARTY SEPARATED, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

California, Mount Shasta, Hotlum/Bolum Ridge

On September 12, a team of four climbers was descending the Hotlum/Bolum Ridge. Two of the team went ahead to scout the descent route. One member, Rene "Red" Arnold Cuestas (32), did not return. After waiting an hour, the three remaining team members continued to descend. When they returned to basecamp, Cuestas was not there, so they contacted USFS rangers. During the ensuing search, a California Division of Forestry and Fire helicopter crew spotted Cuestas' body at 12,000 feet. He appeared to have slipped on the ice and fallen two to three hundred feet over ice and rock. He was wearing crampons and had an ice ax girth hitched to his wrist.

Analysis

Cuestas was a novice climber. The route he was on is not technically difficult when snow conditions are good. However, the route generally becomes quite icy in the fall, making it very challenging. The party continued to climb, even though they were frightened by the conditions on the ascent. Separating on the descent may have contributed to the incident. (Source: Dan Towner, Wilderness Ranger, and Bob Musgrove)

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

California, Yosemite Valley, Middle Cathedral Rock

On October 10, Dan Goriesky (43) set out to lead Pee Pee Pillar (a one pitch,

5.10a) with his friends Josh Vendig and Randy Dewees. The rating was just above Dan's comfort level, but the pitch was easily protected, and he had been solid on a couple of 10a's the day before.

Dan climbed 40–50 feet up a series of cracks to the start of the thin layback that leads to the belay. He placed several pieces along the way, the last two being a #7 wired stopper near the base of the layback and a similar sized Walnut a foot or two higher. He was concerned about the top piece but feeling good about the climb, so he continued up.

When his feet were 4–5 feet above the top piece Dan felt them start to slip, and before he could reposition them, he was off. At first he fell upright, but his feet struck something that turned him on his back, horizontal. He felt and heard gear pulling out, and, after falling 20 feet, he struck the top of a pedestal with his lower back and pelvis. He bounced off, fell another 15–20 feet and was finally stopped by the belay, three feet above a ledge and 10–12 feet above the ground. Josh and Randy said he was hanging in a horizontal, slightly head down position, at that point.

Dan was conscious but complained of pain in his back. Josh lowered him to the ground while Randy guided him down, and someone nearby called the NPS by cell phone. The SAR team arrived 20 minutes later, immobilized his spine, and carried him in a litter a short distance down to the road. The clinic staff found he had escaped with nothing more than a lower back contusion, and he has fully recovered.

Analysis

The top piece had pulled out. The next one, a foot or so lower, was still in place, but the rope had unclipped from the carabiner, leaving a piece ten feet lower to stop Dan's fall. He is pretty sure he didn't grab the protection as he fell, so the most likely explanation for the rope unclipping is that it flipped over the carabiner's gate as he went by; the rope can then press down on the gate, opening it and allowing the rope to slip out. This is easy to demonstrate if you hold a carabiner in your hand, although it implies that Dan's carabiner may have been held in position against the rock somehow, despite being on a flexible quickdraw. Some leaders carry a couple of locking carabiners for such critical placements, although you can also use two regular carabiners—with gates properly reversed.

More surprising was the appearance of the carabiner after the fall: Instead of the gate swinging shut against the nose in the normal fashion, the tip of the gate had somehow swung past the nose and was now "outside" the carabiner. One possibility is that the force of the fall stretched the carabiner lengthwise; however, the body of the 'biner did not seem to be distorted. More likely, according to Chris Harmston, Black Diamond's quality assurance engineer, is that the rope forced the gate sideways as it pulled out of the 'biner. This can slightly distort the hinge fork on the gate, allowing the gate to pass to one side of the nose as it swings shut. No stretching of the body of the carabiner is necessary, and the gate can appear almost normal afterward, but with a slightly looser hinge. (Dan's carabiner was a Kong Bonaiti, bentgate with keylock, 22kN gate closed strength,

7 kN gate open strength.) Note that the “sprung” gate, while interesting, is more likely a *result* of the rope unclipping rather than the cause.

Dan was not wearing a helmet. He covered his head with his hands as he fell, and they took a pretty good blow. Helmets are more commonly worn on long climbs, but falls like this can happen anywhere. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION – KNOT PULLED THROUGH BOLT HANGER

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

On October 27, Jim Fisher (30) and I, Scott Earnest (27), set out to climb Lurking Fear (20 pitches, VI 5.10 A3), our first El Cap route. We reached Thanksgiving Ledge in the afternoon of the 27th, and I began leading pitch 18.

The pitch was 5.10a, near my free climbing limit, but it went smoothly; after 100 feet or so I got to a single hangerless bolt where I thought the end of the pitch should be. But then I looked around and saw obvious belay bolts 15–20 feet to my left and 5–10 feet lower, and I realized that I was off route. I should have angled left during the pitch instead of climbing straight up.

I could have set up a good anchor and belayed right where I was, but I thought the hauling would be a pain because of the angle between Jim and me, so I decided to move over to those belay bolts. Free climbing across looked a little sketchy; instead, I opted to drop down and pendulum over to a crack where I could get in a piece and make a couple of easy moves up to the belay.

I yelled down to Jim to clip a bolt hanger on the haul line, and I pulled it up. It was a keyhole type that I could just slip over the nut and pull down to secure it for a downward pull. Instead of clipping a ’biner directly into the hanger, I rigged the hanger like a sky hook: I tied the tails of a piece of 5 mm cord together with an overhand knot, and stuffed the loop through the hanger from top to bottom so that the knot would keep the loop from pulling through. Then I clipped the rope to the loop under the hanger with a ’biner.

Jim lowered me. The route up had wandered, so I’d used some long slings to cut the rope drag, but I still had to push myself down the wall as Jim let out the line. I cleaned out a couple of pieces as I went, to reduce the drag. When I was down about 20 feet I made the swing—about 45 degrees; I missed the first try but ran harder the second time, got my fingers in the crack, my feet smeared on the wall, and leaned back against the rope to brace myself. I was pretty solid.

I was looking at the rack to see what cam I could pop in when I heard this “bink!” sound, and I looked up and saw big loops of the rope falling toward me. I’ve heard all kind of things rip out of the rock, but I’d never heard a sound like that, kind of like nylon breaking. In the half second before I started to fall, I thought “Oh my God, the rope broke.” I was sure of it at the time, but the rope was fine and we discovered later that the knot in the 5mm cord had simply pulled through the hole in the hanger.

Because I’d back cleaned some pieces, the next protection was a chockstone