

FALL ON ROCK—INADEQUATE BELAY WHILE LOWERING

Utah, American Forks Canyon, Rockapella

On June 1, Aaron Johnson (17) was being lowered from Rockapella, but his partner could not hold him. The rope started pulling her up. Another young woman grabbed on to her, but even the two of them could not hold his weight. They let go. Johnson fell 25 feet straight to the ground, suffering back and neck injuries. (Source: Dennis Chapman - Utah County Sheriff's SAR)

Analysis

Obviously there was a considerable weight discrepancy between climber and belayer. It is common practice to be adequately anchored when belaying, whether one's partner is climbing or being lowered. (Source: Jed Williamson)

FALL ON ROCK—LOWERING ERROR, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, NO HARD HAT, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

Utah, Parley's Canyon, Salt Lake City

On June 17, CH (19), DK (19), and LH (19) were climbing in Parley's Canyon, Salt Lake City. DK was preparing to climb, belayed by CH at the top of the route, but appeared to be having trouble tying into the rope. Another climber, waiting to climb the route, assisted him in tying in. The climbers watched DK successfully climb the route. They then saw CH appear over the top as if he were going to be lowered. Instead, he fell about 80 feet to the base of the crag with the rope attached.

When SAR team members arrived, CH was conscious, but suffering from a femur fracture and two ankle fractures. He was immobilized in a bean-bag vacuum splint and lowered one pitch down a steep scree slope to the road, then flown by Lifeflight helicopter to the hospital.

Analysis

After DK completed the climb, he exchanged positions with CH and prepared to lower him. When he started to lower, the rope ran through his hands, burning them. He was forced to let go in order to avoid being pulled over the edge himself.

The rope ran from CH, through slings attached to a two-bolt anchor, to a tubular belay device attached to DK's harness. He was positioned above the anchor, and was not tied in. When asked to show how he had rigged the belay device, he threaded it correctly, but appeared unsure as to which side of the rope to hold. It appears likely that he had been holding the climber's side of the rope. Even if he held the correct side of the rope, he would likely have been pulled off his stance as he began to lower. This also could have caused him to let go of the rope.

The setup described is commonly used for top roping when the belayer is on the ground. When the belay is done from the top of the climb, the belayer should tie in. Ideally, the belayer should be located at or below the anchor. When this is not possible, belaying should only be done from a solid stance, preferably seated with the feet braced. (Source: Tom Moyer - Salt Lake County Sheriff's SAR)