

Analysis

Dupuis has been rock climbing for over 17 years. This was the first time he has fallen this far and this hard. “It’s all part of the hazards (of rock climbing),” Dupuis said. “The system was supposed to take the weight of the fall and I guess it’s an unlucky catastrophic failure. The rope was under two years old and in mint condition. It was babied.” Amazingly enough Steve only had relatively minor injuries and has completely recovered. He has returned to climbing and guiding.

So these were two strong climbers with many years of experience between them, but despite the fact that they had already had one rope badly cut, neither climber noticed that the belay ledge on the second pitch had extremely sharp edges. When Steve fell, his rope remained taut as he pendulumed, and that rope, under tension, scraped along the edge of the belay ledge and was cut as if by a serrated knife.

Forgetting to untie from the 9mm rope may have saved Steve’s life, though his helmet and clothing played a role too. However, we can’t say for sure that using double ropes would have prevented the accident. It’s possible that two ropes under tension from the fall could have cut as easily the one, with disastrous results.

If climbers know of or discover en route sharp edges that could slice a rope, they should pad the edge, or place protection that will direct the rope away from the edge. Trying to free an aid climb requires a bit of thought about protection and the line of the original route—especially if there are sharp edges to consider.

Finally, if you are freeing an aid route, tying into your haul line, and clipping the other end and middle of the rope to the belay (an old aid climber’s trick) as a worst-case backup, never hurts. (Sources: Al Hoppers, Jed Eliades, and Alexander MacInnes, in *The Caledonian Record*, October 16, 2002)

AVALANCHE, POOR POSITION, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT

New Hampshire, Mount Washington, Tuckerman Ravine

Tom Striker and Tony Tulip, hiked up in to Tuckerman Ravine on November 29. The first in the ravine, they hiked to the base of an open book on the right of center and decided to climb it straight up. Tom belayed at an exposed bulge and put in three screws equalized with a cordelette. He observed what looked like a lot of snow-loading on the slope in front of him, before the next steep section. At that time three other climbers (Tom Burke, Rick Doucette, and Matt Coutre) showed up at base of their climb, geared up and started soloing. One climber was on the right and two on the left side of the book. Tony, the second, climbed up to the belay and around the same time the three soloists joined up on a slope above them. At this time Striker and Tony didn’t like what was happening and decided to bail. Tony continued up a little and traversed right to a position near the Tuckerman Ravine Trail.

The soloists continued up in the direction of the Lip, following paths of least resistance. Two went left and one right. Around this time they touched off several surface slides. All three climbers at this time were still within sight of Striker, who was still at the three-screw belay. All of a sudden one of the soloists, Tom Burke, fell from the Lip area, tumbling approximately 100 feet and coming to rest about 40 feet above Striker at the belay. For unknown reasons, the other two soloists continued to climb. After lying there for a minute, Tom Burke shook himself, stood up and yelled, "I'm OK!" to his companions. He appeared dazed and started to down climb and move toward Tony, near the trail. Tom Striker, at the belay, said to wait for him and they would move together. Around this time he also noticed that two more climbers (Scott Sandburg and Richard Doucette) were below him at the base of the climb next to their packs, getting gear together and roping up. They did not seem to have any awareness of what was going on above them. The two soloists were on or above the Lip when someone yelled, "Avalanche!" Tom Striker at his belay ducked down, grabbed the cordelette and amazingly the avalanche passed over him.

Once things cleared, Striker could see a debris field extending 100-plus yards down the slope. He lowered off a screw and the search began for survivors. The two upper soloists had ridden the avalanche all the way down from the Lip. Matt was unscathed, Richard was partially buried and suffered a broken shoulder. Tom Burke, who had just survived a 100-foot fall, was swept away and buried, suffering fatal trauma. Neither Scott nor Richard, at the base of the book, had any indication that an avalanche was coming. They were standing three to four feet apart and Richard was closer to the wall. Scott was swept away and buried while Richard was untouched.

Richard was able to uncover Matt, Rick, and Scott very quickly. Unfortunately Scott suffered fatal injuries and was never conscious after the slide. Tom Burke took longer to find, but also suffered the same fate. Even though all of those buried were found fairly quickly, the deaths were not caused by suffocation but by trauma.

Analysis

Tuckerman Ravine is notorious for avalanches and yet is very popular for early season ice climbing. At the time of this accident the posted avalanche danger was MODERATE. As many climbers have said, if they didn't climb in those conditions, they probably wouldn't climb at all.

None of the climbers had beacons, probes, or shovels. (Source: Al Hoppers and Roger Damon)

(Editor's Note: Even with "moderate" avalanche conditions, where you are positioned in relationship to other climbers is an important consideration. These climbers were in each other's fall-line.)

The records show that twelve people have died in avalanches on Mount Washington in the last 150 years. Sunday, just two days after the deaths of Burke and Sandberg, four more climbers in Tuckerman, two of whom had participated in the rescue, were swept down the mountain in another avalanche. Three escaped unhurt, but one woman's head was buried, causing neck injuries.)