

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT—OLD PITON

Utah, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Gate Buttress

On November 19, “Mike” (44) fell while leading the second pitch of Perhaps, a two-pitch 5.7 route at the Gate Buttress in Little Cottonwood Canyon. The end of the second pitch is a long horizontal traverse. It’s an under-cling in a wide crack for the hands and low-angled friction for the feet. Mike had placed a #4 Camalot at the beginning of the traverse and had clipped an old fixed piton about 15 feet later. Another 15 feet out from the piton, he stopped and looked for the chains. As he straightened up a bit to look, his feet skated out and he fell. The piton pulled, and Mike pendulumed about 60 feet across the low-angled granite until he hit a small ledge, suffering fractures in five lumbar vertebrae, both feet, and both ankles. His partners, “Jim” and “Colin,” were able to lower him back to the anchors from there, then re-rig and lower him to the ground.

SAR team members met them at the base of the route. Mike was immobilized in a bean-bag vacuum splint, lowered down five or six pitches of steep scree to the road, and then transported by ground ambulance to the hospital.

Analysis

Old fixed pitons should always be viewed with suspicion and tested. Go ahead and clip them but place good protection as soon after as you can. Mike also feels that there was a lot of slack in the rope because of rope-drag. The second pitch of Perhaps is long and twisting, with lots of ledges and flakes to snag the rope. The leader needs to choose protection placements and runner lengths carefully and consider the path of the rope to minimize these problems. Mike was wearing a helmet, and it did receive a few knocks during the fall. (Source: Tom Moyer—Salt Lake County Sheriff’s SAR)

FALL ON SNOW, WEATHER, EXPOSURE, MOVING TOO SLOWLY

Washington, Mount Ranier, Liberty Ridge

On May 29, Mount Rainier National Park communications received a 911 cell phone call from a climbing team at St. Elmo’s Pass. They were requesting a rescue for Andreas Kurth, another climber who reported having an accident near Liberty Cap the night before. Andreas just descended the Winthrop Glacier solo after his team, Cornelius Beilharz, Grit Kleinschmidt, and Keeta Owens, encountered serious trouble during a storm. Kurth reported that Beilharz was already dead from a fall and that the condition of the other two women was unknown. Andreas had last seen them in an exposed snow cave, hypothermic, near Liberty Cap.

The Kurth team had summited Liberty Ridge the night before, close to 6:00 p.m. They became disoriented while trying to descend from Liberty Cap to the Winthrop Glacier in a fierce storm with whiteout conditions. After unsuccessfully locating the Winthrop Glacier, the team then attempted to set up tents. However, the winds were too strong and made the task impossible. Still disoriented, the team then proceeded to dig snow caves.