

After a few minutes, I was able to put some pressure on the knee. We decided that we should abandon our attempt at Dunderberg and get back to camp as quickly as possible in the event of knee damage. Over the course of the descent, I was able to put some pressure on it, which told me that I was very fortunate to come away with a slight sprain. We made it back to the trailhead and parted our separate ways. The seven-hour drive back to the Los Angeles area, unfortunately, caused the knee to stiffen in place and I was unable to walk without a limp or significant pain for two weeks. I have made a full recovery.

Analysis

As I analyze the course of events that occurred during the climb, I come up with one solution and one lesson learned: First, the accident was merely that... an accident. Even though we took all precautions for this climb, both prior to and during, no one could have foreseen the rock being dislodged. Per the lesson learned: the lack of snow certainly aided in the loosening of the talus, which caused the rock to be dislocated (sic). Even though we were going up a narrow chute and we were spaced out between 75 to 100 feet between each of us, we should have ascended in a horizontal line rather than a vertical line, and if our proximity was still too close, then we should have ascended the chute one-at-a-time. (Source: Edited from a report submitted by Peter Francev.)

(Editor's Note: We respectfully disagree with the notion that "no one could have foreseen the rock being dislodged." This inherent danger requires climbers' constant vigilance, especially under the conditions described. The unfortunate—but never unforeseen—part here is that the falling rock split in half and took a new trajectory.)

PROTECTION PULLED OUT—FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION

California, Yosemite National Park, El Capitan

On May 17, Alexander Scola (28) and his partner (23) were on their first climbing trip to the U.S. from their homes in Germany. Scola had been climbing alpine and rock routes for over eleven years and climbed at a high level of difficulty. Most of his experience was in sport and traditional free climbing. He had about one year's experience with aid, however he was competent at placing protection. His partner had been climbing only two years. He had less leading skill and very little aid experience, so Scola was leading most of the pitches. Although they had climbed long alpine routes in Europe, this was their first big wall. This was their second day on the route. They were on schedule and the climb was going well.

Scola had led the King Swing from Boot Flake (pitch 17) and was leading pitch 18, aid-climbing a crack behind a long flake. Like many pitches on El Cap, the crack was of fairly uniform width. Although he carried three

of each size of camming device (as recommended in SuperTopo), A.S. felt he should “back-clean” or “leap-frog” his protection, i.e., he would place a cam attached to an etrier/daisy combination, place another while standing in the first etrier, then remove the first cam and place it higher. He planned to occasionally leave a piece in place for protection in case of a fall. This practice left few pieces of protection below him, but he could reuse the same size cams later on the pitch. He had led several pitches on the route this way with no problems but he was left exposed to long falls if a piece failed.

As he started pitch 18, he clipped the rope through a quick-draw on a bolt immediately above the anchor. After climbing about 35 feet using mostly small cams, he left his first piece, a medium-sized, rigid-stem Friend, where the crack began to widen. He clipped a 12-inch sling to the Friend to keep the rope’s movement from dislodging the piece. He moved higher on medium Camalots until the Friend was a few feet beneath his feet. At this point, he was an estimated 40-45 feet above the belay.

Just as he removed one Camalot to place it higher, the piece he was weighting with his left foot pulled out and he fell. He had judged the Friend below to be good fall protection when he placed it, but as he fell past it and the rope came tight, he heard a “Pop!” He saw the Friend pull out, and knew he was in for a long fall. The next thing he remembers is waking up dangling ten feet below Eagle Ledge, after a fall of over 100 feet. He was in pain and bleeding from his leg and his face. (It is difficult to know exactly how he was injured. He most likely struck Eagle Ledge before his partner was able to stop the fall with his GriGri, but at the speed he reached, a glancing blow on the wall could have been enough.)

While nearby climbers called for help, his partner rappelled to Eagle Ledge and fashioned a 2:1 mechanical advantage raising system using the haul line. With him pulling from above, Scola was able to use his one good leg to get himself up to Eagle Ledge, where he awaited rescue.

Scola was flown to Memorial Medical Center in Modesto, arriving at the emergency room about four hours after his fall. In addition to a femur fracture, he was diagnosed with compression fractures of three thoracic vertebrae, a minor fracture of the jaw, broken teeth, many bruises, and the loss of about one liter of blood. He is expected to make a full recovery.

Analysis

In retrospect, it was obvious to Scola that he under-protected the pitch. He would normally have left more pieces, especially if free climbing, but it had seemed to him that just standing on aid pieces required fewer protection points. He also may have been overly concerned about running out of specific sizes. He had little experience climbing granite. Other climbers had told him that back-cleaning and leap-frogging were common practices

on big wall routes. He had also observed the practice himself many times among other parties climbing near him on the Nose.

Scola's prior experience plus his faith in both of the failed placements underscores the importance of backing yourself up. This isn't a case of a beginner misjudging his protection, nor is this strictly a big wall mistake. It can, and does, happen anywhere. YOSAR has seen several cases of "solid" cam placements failing, even under body weight, with serious injuries and deaths resulting.

Clipping the rope through the directional at the belay was a very smart move. It didn't shorten the fall by much, but it allowed Scola's partner to deal with the force of the catch as an upward pull with his bodyweight helping him instead of yanking him downward and possibly off his stance.

Both climbers get gold stars for wearing their helmets. Scola's helmet was six months old and undamaged prior to the fall. Afterward, the energy-absorbing liner was ruptured in the back and crushed in front. That helmet almost certainly saved his life. (Source: John Dill and Keith Lober, Rangers)

OVERDUE, VARIOUS FALLS ON ROCK, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT, PARTY SEPARATED, INEXPERIENCE

California, Mount Shasta, Mud Creek Canyon

On June 24 at 1800, the Siskiyou County SAR was notified of a missing 25-year-old female. She had left her partner at 13,600 feet and continued to the summit alone. He waited for her to return but she did not. He became cold enough that he decided to descend and wait for her at Lake Helen. When she still didn't return, he called 911. A California Highway Patrol (CHP) helicopter was used at last light to search for her and was unsuccessful. Due to low light they terminated the air search. USFS Climbing Rangers hiked up from the trailhead in the dark to search for her and other Climbing Rangers searched other likely trailheads on the southeast and east side of the mountain where missing Avalanche Gulch climbers often end up. All Climbing Rangers finished their searches at 0130 on June 25. At 0630, the search continued with the CHP helicopter, USFS Climbing Rangers and Siskiyou County SAR. At 0830 a call was received from a logging camp on the southeast side of the mountain where the missing climber had arrived.

She was interviewed in the hospital. She said that she had reached the summit, made contact with one of the USFS Climbing Rangers and then descended off-route onto the Konwakiton Glacier and below into the steep cliff section in Mud Creek Canyon. She fell several times while descending, receiving multiple bruises and a fractured left arm. She continued down to the lower falls and then climbed out of Mud Creek Canyon and huddled next to a log for the night. The next morning she continued descending until she hit a logging road and later found the logging camp.