

(Editor's Note: This is what we call a "near miss." If the climbers had become stranded or had needed to be rescued, we would have included the data in the Tables.)

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT and INADEQUATE PROTECTION, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

California, Tahquitz Rock

On October 19, Sean was leading the first pitch of "The Blank" route on Tahquitz when he fell. The route began at a large ledge and access to the ledge was via easy 3rd-class on the right side of the ledge. The back of the ledge dropped off 20 feet or more to a relatively flat area on the talus field below the rock. The ledge was large enough that the climbers felt comfortable relaxing, walking around and having a snack while waiting for the party ahead of them on the route to get underway on the second pitch before starting to climb.

The climbers did not anchor before Sean began to lead. Sean started up the pitch a couple of feet and placed a nut in the crack (finger sized and thin) and clipped to it using a quick draw. The nut was well slotted in the crack. Sean was having difficulty with the pitch and fell twice with no failure of the nut. Then Sean managed to get high enough that his waist was approximately level with the nut. He had his right foot smeared to the right and his left foot suddenly lost friction. He noticed the nut come out of the crack as he fell toward his left. Sean hit the ledge and either bounced or rolled off of the back side, falling to the flat area about 20 feet below. Rick, the belayer, reported that Sean seemed to have been "catapulted" off of the rock rather than falling more or less straight down, as he would have expected. Rick was pulled off of the ledge and landed about five feet from Sean.

Sean had severe pain in his right ribcage and difficulty breathing. Rick had a large laceration above his right eye. Both climbers had multiple cuts and scrapes.

The climbers above heard the commotion and rappelled down to help. One of those climbers, Evan, stated that he was an emergency medical technician and began to help. Soon other climbers were on the scene and plans were being made to get Sean and Rick off of the mountain. Sean was able to walk around, with much pain, and the plan was to secure Rick to one of the Stokes litters that had fortunately been stashed in the area and carry him down. Someone made a 911 call on his or her cell phone. Idyllwild Fire Dept arrived on the scene some time later and examined both injured climbers. Their team recommended both climbers be extracted by helicopter due to the unknown extent of Rick's injuries and because Sean was showing symptoms of a collapsed lung.

Both climbers were evacuated to the hospital. Rick was released that night, and Sean was released two days later. Fortunately, Rick had not suffered a concussion but did have two apparently non-serious fractures in his skull and a possible sprained wrist as well as a deep cut at one knee. Sean had four fractured ribs and a collapsed lung. As of four weeks since the incident both climbers are recovering well and will probably not have any serious long-term consequences from their injuries.

Analysis

Sean is an experienced climber with over 22 years of traditional rock climbing experience. Rick had been climbing for seven months. Both climbers were wearing helmets.

The climbers should have anchored the belayer. Sean believed that as long as a good piece of protection could be placed before proceeding too far, an anchor would not be necessary; in fact he never gave much if any thought to anchoring due to the seemingly large area of the ledge. Even if there had been no effective way to anchor, the protection placed should have been as bombproof as possible. One way to do this would have been to back up the first piece and to use a camming device instead of a nut.

It is possible that the nut would not have popped out if a runner had been used to extend it out instead of a standard quickdraw. Quickdraws are remarkably easy to lift with very little side movement of the rope.

Sean should also have checked the security of the nut after having fallen on it twice. It is possible that the nut became partially dislodged while holding the previous two falls.

And finally, a climber having enough difficulty so that he or she falls twice, and is still very close to the base of the route, should seriously consider backing off and climbing something else.

Experienced climbers sometimes become complacent about some of the basic safety procedures used in climbing, such as anchoring the belayer at the base of the route. It is actually not very often that the actual technical climbing starts on absolutely level ground, and it is not unheard of for belayers to be lifted off their feet while arresting a leader fall.

In this case both climbers were fortunate. If the area below the ledge had been covered with sharp rocks instead of being relatively flat, unlike most of the surrounding terrain, which is very rough, it is likely that their injuries would have been much more serious if not fatal. (Source: Shawn Lonergan)

(Editor's Note: We received two reports from Mount Shasta, one of which was a fatality that occurred when a woman (35) was unable to self-arrest. She and her two climbing companions were not wearing helmets. A brief report found on mountainproject.com stated that two teenagers were climbing at Foothill Crag—

near Ojai—when one of them fell 45 feet to the ground because the climbing rope burned through a webbing anchor as he was being lowered. He had not threaded the rope through carabiners, apparently. While his injuries were serious,—including fractured pelvis and ribs and a punctured lung.)

AVALANCHE

Colorado, Little Bear Peak, Standard Hourglass Route

On January 10 around 1100, a male (22) and his sister (20) were climbing Little Bear Peak via the Standard West Ridge Hourglass Route. Weather conditions for several days had been mostly cloudy to partly cloudy, snowing (19-36 inches), and windy (out of the west and southwest, 8-41 mph). As the two climbers were traversing the south side of the West Ridge, just west of the base of the Hourglass Couloir, they triggered a large slab avalanche. The crown was approximately 500 feet across, a foot or more deep and the slide descended approximately 1000 vertical feet, including a drop over a 100-foot cliff. The male reported that his sister was eight feet behind him when he found himself “rag dolling” down the south-facing slope of the West Ridge. Before losing consciousness, he recalled going over the cliff.

The male awoke buried to his waist with a laceration to his forehead, three broken ribs, and a punctured lung. He was on the edge of a debris field in the cirque above Little Bear Lake approximately 1000 feet below where the avalanche began. His titanium ice ax's adze had been snapped off and the pick had been bent 30 degrees from its original position. He called out for his sister, but there was no response. He dug himself out, and began searching for his sister. He probed the debris field with his ice axe for over an hour. With no sign of his sister, he decided to go for help.

He ascended the West Ridge and descended to their last camp at Lake Como. He reached the camp around sunset. On January 11, after regaining strength and sleeping for a short period, he descended the Lake Como trail on skis to the point where he acquired cell phone contact and called 911. At 0830, Alamosa County Sheriff's Office dispatched the Alamosa Volunteer Search and Rescue team to search for a lost hiker. A command post was set-up at the Lake Como access trailhead. Because of deep snow, cold temperatures, and the potential for a short window of response time to the patient, SAR personnel requested Flight For Life helicopter support. Lifeguard Four was dispatched from Pueblo, Colorado.

At 1100, a two-man hasty team was flown to Lake Como from the Lake Como trailhead, and a three man hasty team was dispatched from the command post to ascend the access road on ATV's until the snow depth stopped their progress. At Lake Como, the helicopter delivered hasty team observed