

- We had started climbing early enough in the day so that the accident occurred with enough time to get an airlift before darkness.

After an accident, there are always the “what ifs” and “should haves.” I do not feel we made any poor decisions the day of the accident, but if I could do it all over again there are a couple of things I would do differently:

- I would have climbed only the upper section of the route. The lower half—where the accident occurred—turned out to be loose, poorly protected, and not very aesthetic. We had decided to climb the lower section since we wanted to climb the whole route rather than cutting in midway.
- I would have had a SPOT or PLD with me. Although the cell phone allowed us to verbally communicate with the rescue team to let them know the details of the accident and location, we were lucky that Jenny found a cell signal.

FALL ON ICE, INADEQUATE PROTECTION – TOOL PLACEMENT

Washington, Banks Lake, Brush Bash

On 30 December, RM (23), while leading Brush Bash, WI 4, (one pitch) at Banks Lake, Washington, sustained a leader fall resulting in a badly sprained left ankle. The overnight temperature was close to 0 F, and the daytime temperature reached about 25 F. The day was clear and sunny, and the ice was well formed.

Earlier in the day three others and I drove to Banks Lake and were in the same area. I led Brush Bash that morning, and with two ropes set up a top rope for my companions to practice their skills. Later than morning RM and BC (23) arrived and hiked up to meet us. BC, an experienced and technically solid ice climber, first led a nearby WI 5+ route, which I followed. RM was still relatively new to technical ice climbing. RM and BC then moved over to Brush Bash so RM could get more time on ice and practice leading.

Brush Bash has a solidly vertical section about half way up. RM placed a screw at the base of that section. About two thirds of the way up that section, RM experienced difficulty. He placed a high tool and then placed his other tool very close to the first. The ice around both tools then “dinner plated”. As a result, RM sustained a fall of approximately 20–25 feet. His screw at the base of the vertical section held his fall, but he caught his left ankle and bounced coming to a rest head down, shaken, and in pain. At first he thought, as did the rest of us, that his ankle was broken.

BC lowered RM to the ground, where I splinted his lower leg and ankle using one of his tools and perlon (the rough “L” shape of an ice tool approximates the lower leg/ankle/foot alignment). One of the people with me was a retired nurse who treated RM for shock. My three companions further stabilized RM and began slowly assisting him down the talus slope to the car (about 150 meter/450 foot descent). BC belayed me while I climbed

Brush Bash to clean R's screws and draws, and retrieve the rope. All of RM's screws (five up to the point of the fall) were acceptable placements, though several could have been better placed, and the draw on the screw below the one that held RM was twisted and "back clipped" to the rope.

BC transported RM to the hospital where the diagnosis was a badly sprained ankle.

Analysis

Two factors contributed to RM's fall. One factor was technical, the other psychological. The technical factor was placing his tools too close together. The psychological factor was RM was clearly not comfortable leading. Up to the point of his fall, he verbalized to BC his lack of confidence and uncertainty.

RM demonstrated stoicism and maturity throughout. Though obviously in great pain, he did not lose consciousness and contributed to his own self-extraction. All of the rescuers used clear thinking, good first aid skills, and cooperative teamwork. The result is that within a fairly short time an injured climber was safely evacuated to medical care by a team of self-reliant climbers. (Source: Bob Loomis, 56, Spokane, Washington)

FALL ON ROCK, EQUIPMENT FAILURE DUE TO MIS-USE

West Virginia, New River Gorge, Kaymoor

On June 12 Karen Feher (33) and her partner were climbing Rico Suave (5.10a). Upon reaching the anchor, she clipped in. Her setup: She had two thin dyneema slings girth hitched to her harness. At the end of each sling was a locking carabiner held in place with a rubber Petzl keeper (called 'Petzl Strings'). The "string" is designed to fit on the end of a Petzl runner in order to keep the lower carabiner on a quickdraw in place for easy clipping and to protect the webbing from abrasion.

She clipped a locking carabiner to each bolt and probably called, "Off belay." It is unclear if she was going to rappel or be lowered. It doesn't matter. She took a fatal fall about 50 feet to the ground.

The day after the accident, a local climber climbed to the anchor and found a locking carabiner on each bolt with a Petzl String still affixed to each. Both Petzl Strings were torn on the side. It is unclear if the two slings were still attached to her harness, as her harness went with her and EMS, but I am assuming this to be true.

Analysis

How could this happen? This is one of the safest setups for cleaning an anchor. At the top of Rico Suave is a small ledge to stand on and clean. If you're not fully weighting the system, these rubber strings will hold about 15 pounds before breaking. I'm guessing they were able to hold just enough weight to feign security while she untied to feed, until just enough weight was added to cause the break.