

climbing club, and I always say, “Hands off the rope when you fall!” This is so simple, and I thought I tried to get my hands off. I have a story to tell them now, and a thumb to show off.

My second piece of advice is for foreign climbers coming to the USA: Double-check that your accident insurance is the proper one, with lots of coverage. Very important. Look carefully at the clauses of the insurance contract.

Third, you may think this was a unique accident, but you should read John Robinson’s story in *ANAM 2011*. It involves the same route, the same injury from an aid fall, and the same amazing recovery and reattachment of his thumb. (Source: Michael Schmoelzer and John Dill, NPS ranger)

(NPS Note: Take Michael’s advice. The NPS does not charge for rescue costs, although there are typical charges for medical care in the field and at the park’s clinic. However, a commercial air ambulance fee from the park to Modesto can exceed \$25,000 and at least two climbers seriously injured recently in Yosemite have incurred hospital bills of over \$500,000.)

## **FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION**

### **California, Yosemite Valley, Washington Column**

On September 27, Taylor Sincich (23) and I, Tommy Bairstow (24), set out to climb Mid-East Crisis on the east face of Washington Column. I had fixed four pitches by myself two days earlier, and we hoped to finish it off in a day. Working in the Valley had allowed me to crank out 11 big walls in the previous six months, but this would be the last for a while—the start of a relaxing sabbatical.

We juggled the fixed lines, and after I led pitches five through eight as a block, Taylor took the rest. We were using a 60-m lead line and a 60-m x 10-mm static tag line, the latter for lower-outs, shuttling gear, and retreat if necessary. The follower carried our daypack containing water, lights, and cell phones, so we had no haul bag. By 2 p.m. we were in the huge, multi-pitch system of overhangs above the Great Slab. After completing Pitch 10, Taylor pulled up the slack, anchored the lead line to the bolts, and called for me to come up.

Pitch 10 was drastically traversing and overhanging, so cleaning was tricky and exhausting. It took much longer than usual, and Half Dome was glowing gold by the time I neared the belay. This meant we had about one hour of light with 2.5 pitches to go, so I was moving fast, though not carelessly. The last placement to clean was a #4 cam about five feet below the anchor and two or three feet to its left. “Almost there,” I thought. Just a routine move around the piece and then I could relax at the anchor. I could see Taylor watching me as I prepared to clean the cam.

At this point I was hanging completely free of the wall on the lead rope. Both feet were in aiders connected to the lower, left-hand jug (my usual rig) and the upper jug was on the rope just under the cam. Both

jugs were connected to my harness with daisies. The ends of the lead rope were tied to our belay loops, and the tag line was tied between the haul loops on the backs of our harnesses. Per my standard practice, I was not tied in short, so almost the entire lead rope and tag line each hung in a long loop below me.

My plan was to weight the lower jug and then remove the upper one and reattach it above the cam. Then I would shift my weight to the upper jug, remove the cam, and finish climbing a few feet to the anchor. I've re-lived this moment a thousand times in my head: I reached for my top jug, grabbed the trigger, and immediately started falling—and kept falling.

At first I thought the #4 cam had blown but that would only have swung me out a bit. Or maybe the anchor had failed. I started screaming. I've been told I have a high-pitch to my voice when I fall. "I'm gonna die!! I'm gonna die!" must have sounded strangely boyish to Taylor.

I hit something almost immediately—a small slab about 50 feet beneath me that barely jutted out—and it shot me further outward. My feet absorbed most of the impact, and it felt like dynamite going off in my left boot. My new Sportiva high-tops were ejected from my feet. (They were later found at the base with the left shoe still tied.) The impact had no time to register, as I was immediately in free fall again. I had taken my fair share of short falls before, but to fall so far with no warning was utterly terrifying. Why was I falling? The Great Slab was getting closer. I felt a strange acceptance and thought, "I guess this is it."

And then I slowed to a stop, dangling in space just above the slab. The lead rope had held. I had fallen about 170 feet and all those thoughts had occurred in a few seconds. Thanks to the dramatic steepness of the route, the fall had been almost completely clean. That moment I stopped was like a rebirth, with screaming, tears, and a profound sense of joy and luck. I wasn't dead, but I was injured, and my first thought was of rescue. Furthermore, I could see at least two core shots (cuts completely through the sheath) in the lead rope just above me, and I wondered if the line would snap.

After making a panicked 911 call, I managed to gather myself into coherency. I talked to Search and Rescue, talked to several of my climber friends around the Valley, and even talked to myself a bit. Jack, the ranger at SAR, asked me several medical questions to confirm that my worst injury was the left ankle and that it still had circulation, feeling, and movement. It was too close to dark for helicopter support and it would take hours to hike a team to the summit and lower a rescuer to me. Furthermore, the team was dealing with a climbing accident at Higher Cathedral Spire that might be more serious than mine, so he asked if I could jug to the anchor and even follow Taylor to the top if I felt up to it. I was hanging in my harness, not a good place for the night, so I was willing to give it a try. We arranged to stay in touch and hung up.

I surveyed my injuries. My left ankle was the size of a softball, throbbing severely, definitely broken, and utterly useless. My right ankle was sprained but still had movement and flexibility; it would be painful but I could use it, though I had nothing on my feet but socks. My fingertips were burned and blistered from trying to grab the rope when

I started falling, but I was wearing gloves so my hands were spared. I was almost out of water and the light was fading. “Okay.” I said out loud to myself, “This is going to be the hardest thing you’ve ever done.”

I yelled, “Taylor!”

“You okay? What’s up?”

“My ankle is broken, my fingertips are burned. I think I’m gonna jug up to you.”

“Okay man, just be safe.”

After an eternity I made it to the anchor and put Taylor on belay. I felt like I might pass out, and of course that worried Taylor, since he was leading, but I belayed with a Grigri. The bigger issue may have been relying on our core-shot and burnt-sheath lead rope, but the remaining pitches were short enough to keep the core shots out of the system.

Taylor finished the pitch and rappelled the tag line. Then he lowered me out so I could ascend the free-hanging tag line as he cleaned on the lead line. In the distance below I could see headlamps starting up North Dome Gully, which meant that our friends were scrambling up with food, water, and painkillers. Their shouts and light flashes brought a tremendous wave of relief. We just had to get to the top.

After the last technical lead, pitch 12, Taylor was too tired to rappel to me and clean, so we left everything there for him to retrieve someday. Juggling that pitch forced me to drag my broken ankle up a slab for 120 feet. Each time it banged against the rock was like breaking it all over again.

We were exhausted and dehydrated, but our friend Isaac had down-climbed the final 100 feet to bring us some water. He fixed the tag line to the top of the climb, and Taylor and I crawled slowly up, with plenty of cursing and screaming on my part. It was about 1:00 a.m. My friends were Wilderness First Responders, but it didn’t take any medical training to realize that hiking out was impossible for me. They called SAR back, updated them on my condition, and made plans for a rescue.

In the morning I was short-hauled off the top of the Column by the SAR chopper and taken to the Yosemite clinic. I was released later that day with a broken and dislocated left talus bone and some bandaged fingers, but otherwise fine. After surgery and six months of sometimes painful healing, I’m pretty close to full strength, and hopefully I’ll be a safer climber. I was extremely lucky.

### **Analysis**

Tommy said, “I have never used a back-up system in my ascending. I’m mainly a self-taught wall climber, and this made sense to me. Foolish. From now on I will ALWAYS back up my ascending.” He also indicated that none of his partners had ever stressed to him how crucial it was to back up his ascenders. After watching Tommy clean Pitch 9, Taylor did suggest that he clip a ‘biner through the hole in the top of his ascenders and asked, “Do you do any backups?” But Taylor is a polite fellow and didn’t push the issue or suggest tying in short to the rope.

We know that climbers don’t always back themselves up while ascending, both in Yosemite Valley and elsewhere, but this has resulted in several accidents that were otherwise preventable. The discussion following Tommy’s trip report on SuperTopo.com is one place to start. (Search trip reports for Crisis in Yosemite.)

We hope that both of them will be a bit more aggressive when providing advice to their climbing partners after this incident.

A couple of self-rescue suggestions. After a fall like Tommy's, consider providing a belay with the tag line, and even a counter-weight haul, to protect and assist your freaked-out partner as he ascends the potentially damaged lead line. In addition, Tommy was carrying both cell phones and both headlamps in the daypack. Now they each carry their own all the time. (Source: Tommy, Taylor, and John Dill, NPS Ranger)

## **VARIOUS FALLS ON SNOW – CAUSES INCLUDED OFF ROUTE, SEPARATED FROM GROUP, INADEQUATE FOOTWEAR (SNEAKERS), ICE AXES ON PACKS, FALLING ROCK, AND ONE HAPE FATALITY**

### **California, Mount Shasta, Avalanche Gulch**

The five climbing incidents on Mount Shasta were in the usual location: Avalanche Gulch.

The causes generally involved an inability to self-arrest or to continue on. The falling rock case resulted in a 300-foot fall and an open fracture. There was one HAPE fatality that occurred on the Clear Creek Route. Another curious fatality—not climbing-related—happened when an individual who was part of a religious/ceremonial group decided to hike on his own “to place a rock on top of the mountain.” He was eventually found in the upper Old Ski bowl area. He was wearing sweatpants and a light shirt and wore no shoes.

The climbing ranger report indicated the following: Mount Shasta had a similar season to the 2009-10 winter with a strong La Nina pattern influencing weather patterns and brought an above normal precipitation to the region. Snow accumulation was 164% of the historical average for 2011. Similar to last season, our spring was disguised with winter weather, cooler temperatures, and above normal precipitation through June. This caused late winter climbing conditions to extend into the beginning of July, which meant firm, smooth snow, making for good climbing but very dangerous if a fall is taken and self-arrest is not immediately performed successfully. As a result, the conditions were ripe for several searches and rescues. Climbing conditions remained in good shape through September. (Source: Nicklaus Meyers, US Forest Service Lead Climbing Ranger & Avalanche Specialist)

## **DISLODGED ROCK – FALLING ROCK**

### **Colorado, Shelf Road**

I was belaying my partner on January 16. We were climbing a new route not in the guidebook when he kicked off a baseball-sized rock from approximately 60 feet up. It made a direct hit, striking the center of my skull! Luckily I was wearing a helmet. We recognized the potential for loose rock before getting on the climb.