

ACCIDENTS IN NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINEERING

Forty-Second Annual Report of the Safety Committee of The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada

This is the forty-second issue of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* and the eleventh that has been edited and published jointly by The American Alpine Club and The Alpine Club of Canada.

Canada: It seems to have been a bad year for loose blocks of rock coming off while being climbed on. In at least two incidents, the falling rock took away the protection that the climber had just placed, both resulting in long falls.

There were two incidents in which ice climbers were hit by avalanches—the only ones reported this year. It's a symptom, I suppose, of the growing popularity of ice climbing, and a tendency of waterfalls and avalanche chutes to coincide.

There are three reports of rock climbing accidents in which the climbers themselves were able to rescue the injured members. These climbing parties had two things in common: They were made up of several climbers (not just two), and at least some of them were experienced.

Ted Whalley, former Canadian editor of these pages, offers some comments on a lightning strike reported last year: The climbers may have had their legs extended while sitting on their packs, and may have been close enough to a pinnacle to allow current to jump from it to them. Climbers in lightning storms should crouch, be on an ensolite pad or their pack (if it has no metal frame), with arms around legs, and far enough away from pinnacles so that ground currents are the primary concern.

We are grateful to the following persons for collecting reports: Tom Elliot, Lloyd Freese, Peter Fuhrman, Denis Gravel, Ian Kay, Ron Quilter, and Lahav Wolach.

United States: The number of accidents reported is lower this year, the lowest in ten years for Canada. The total number of fatalities is significantly lower. But the injury rate in the U.S. increased. Usually if the number of accidents reported is much higher than the number of injuries reported, the difference can be found in the number of fatalities and illnesses. This year, the total of the injuries, fatalities, and illnesses is greater than last year, in spite of the twenty percent decrease in accidents.

This was another year when the "cause" categories "Falling Rocks" and "Placed No/Inadequate Protection" had to be ticked frequently. Inadequate belays seemed to

be on the rise as well. Our committee thinks this is due in great part to the use of new and unfamiliar belay gadgets. Too much reliance seems to be put on the equipment, and not enough attention is being focused on belay technique and adequate anchoring. Another observation is that many climbers whose protection pulls out or who do not get stopped before "hitting the deck" have gone at least three or four meters beyond their protection.

The number of shoulder dislocations may be an indication of the two kinds of climber very prevalent in places like Joshua Tree National Monument and other climbing areas which, like it, are just beyond the parking lot: the gymnast/athlete (not interested in mountaineering) for whom such injuries are chronic and common, and the imitator—the person who a) sees climbers and gets the notion that it's fun and easy and b) is not in very good physical condition.

The dozen HAPE cases on Mount McKinley caused by ascending too fast are also tied directly to the Contributory Cause category "Failed to Follow Directions," because all climbers are reminded of this at the Ranger Station in Talkeetna. Dr. Peter Hackett reported that the serious HAPE cases either walked in or were brought in to the medical tent at the 4500 meter camp, and had the facility not been there, the results would have been very different. These cases are reported in the data, but not in the narratives.

The final comment for this year is that there are a number of pending law suits against equipment manufacturers, guides, custodians of public lands, and schools. The courts seem to be taking a turn towards finding in favor of institutions and against individuals who are claiming that they do not have any responsibility for taking care of themselves in the environment or under the conditions presented. Waivers are also beginning to wield more clout in the courtrooms in cases involving sports injury suits. By the time this publication appears next year, some landmark cases will have been settled, and some interesting precedents will likely be set for everyone—including the "customers."

In addition to the Safety Committee, we are grateful to the following individuals for collecting data and helping with the report: Peter Armington, Micki Canfield, Dr. Peter Hackett, Ruth Mendenhall, Bob Seibert, Thom Scheuer, Reed Thorne, and Jim Yester. As usual, special thanks to committee members George Sainsbury for outstanding reporting from the Northwest, and to John Dill, who is now a member of our Safety Committee, replacing Dennis Burge. We also welcome Bill Kane, who replaces Rick Wilcox.

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