

of depth perception associated with poor light, in near whiteout conditions, can make skiing hazardous. An internal frame pack could have provided better balance and control. The use of caches placed before hand along the traverse route could have lightened the load. Having an alternate plan in place for aborting a long trip is a definite asset. (Source: Tom McNicholas, AAC; Mike Udkow, MD, and Bert Rogers, BD)

FALLING ROCK, NO HARD HAT

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

On April 11, 1993, around 1100, Mike Fischesser (40ish) and Joe Lackey were ascending fixed ropes to reach their gear on Sickle Ledge (top of pitch #4) on the Nose route of El Cap. When Mike reached the top of the first rope anchors, he was struck in the top of the head and forehead with rocks from above. Climbers on Sickle Ledge, approximately 450 feet above, probably knocked the rocks off accidentally. Instantly blood was everywhere. Mike yelled that he had been struck in the head by rocks and for Joe to ascend up as fast as possible. Joe arrived to find Mike maintaining pressure with his left hand on top of the head wound. Mike had looped his upper body through a sling to maintain an upright position in case of a loss of consciousness. Joe lowered Mike to the ground and escorted him to the medical clinic where his lacerations received sutures.

Analysis

Mike and Joe knew the routes in the valley with rockfall reputations, but had not considered the Nose as one of them. Wrong. With the frequency of parties on a route like the Nose, it would be very wise to wear helmets (and a shower curtain for the poop bags). (Source: Mike Fischesser)

FALL ON ROCK, CLIMBING ALONE AND UNROPED, WEATHER—PROBABLY

California, Yosemite Valley, Sentinel Rock

On May 29, 1993, the body of Derek Hersey (36) was found on the second class ledges at the start of the Chouinard/Herbert route, at the bottom of the fall line of the upper half of the Stech/ Salathe route.

Here is a summary of an interview with Craig Leubben and Steve Haston, friends of Derek Hersey, conducted on May 29 at 1920 at the SAR Cache.

Leubben said that he picked up Hersey in Boulder, Colorado, on May 13, about 1500 and they drove straight through to Yosemite National Park, arriving in the valley about 1330 on May 24. They stayed with SAR site member Melissa Swan on the night of May 24, before obtaining a campsite at Sunnyside Campground (#34) the next morning.

Leubben said he and Hersey hung out the next day because it was raining, spending time in the Yosemite Lodge cafeteria and getting ready to climb the Nose route on El Capitan the next day.

Leubben said he and Hersey got up at 0300 on May 26, started climbing the Nose (using ropes and a small rack) about 0515, topped out on the climb at 2100, and descended to the Valley, arriving about 0500 on May 27. They slept on and off all day at Sunnyside and relaxed in the evening. Leubben said they did not do any partying on the evening of the 27th.

Leubben mentioned that Hersey's legs were cramping during the descent of El Capitan, probably because Hersey only drank one can of Pepsi and ate nothing during

the climb. Leubben speculated that Hersey's legs may have been tired when he went to climb the Steck-Salathe route on May 28 and maybe he was not entirely focused on the climb consequently. However, both Leubben and Haston stressed that climbing the Steck-Salathe route was considered an easy day by Hersey.

Leubben said he spoke with Hersey about 1000 on May 28 when Hersey told him he was going to free solo the Steck-Salathe route that day. Leubben went to climb The Nutcracker on Manure Pile Buttress with some friends and later heard that Hersey had left Sunnyside about 1100.

Haston said that he spent the day climbing Freeblast on El Capitan. Haston noted that it had rained for about 15-20 minutes in the early afternoon—around 1300-1400—hard enough that several parties below him on Freeblast rappelled off because the rock became wet and slick. Haston said he knew that Hersey was climbing the Steck-Salathe route and noted that there were darker clouds on the south side of the Valley and that it might have been raining harder on the south side as well. Leubben agreed with this weather assessment and said it rained on him at Manure Pile Buttress as well.

Leubben and Haston both said they figured that Hersey probably took about an hour to reach the base of the Steck-Salathe route (he was in excellent shape and moved fast), which means he would have begun climbing about noon. Hersey quite possibly was well into the climb when the rain showers hit, which might have been a contributing factor in his fall. Leubben and Haston both said that they figured it would have taken Hersey three to four hours to climb the route and a little over an hour for him to descend and return to Sunnyside. They said that Hersey normally could have done the climb and returned by 1800 without much problem.

Because Hersey was a very fast and efficient climber and not the type of person who liked getting caught by darkness and forced to bivouac, both Leubben and Haston said that they became concerned when Hersey did not return by near darkness on the 28th. They discussed going up to look for him that night but decided to wait, partially because they knew that Hersey might have gone on to do another route if he finished the Steck-Salathe route quickly enough (this was not unusual for Hersey), causing him to bivouac due to darkness.

Leubben said that he checked Hersey's tent about 0530 on May 29, and when he found that Hersey had not yet returned, he went to the first dwelling in the SAR site to report Hersey as overdue. Leubben said that he contacted Walt Shipley, who suggested after hearing that it was Hersey who was overdue (unusual behavior for Hersey), told Leubben to call 911 from the gas station pay phones. Leubben did so, contacting NPS dispatcher Nancy Savage at 0603. Rangers were then dispatched to contact Leubben.

Leubben said that he and Hersey were both independent guides in Colorado and had driven out to Yosemite on vacation, planning on spending about 12 days there. Both Leubben and Haston said that Hersey had not been drinking (beyond an occasional beer, nothing to excess) during the time he was in Yosemite, and not depressed and did not have anything weighing heavily on his mind, and was generally in good spirits. They both stressed that the Steck-Salathe route was well within Hersey's abilities to free solo, that he was one of the best free soloists in the world.

They said that Hersey believed in maintaining as large a margin of safety as possible. Reflection centered on the weather as a possible factor in the fall, although that was entirely speculation. (Source: Robert Bowen and John Dill, NPS Rangers, Yosemite National Park)