

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE EQUIPMENT—ROPE DIAMETER TOO SMALL FOR BELAY DEVICE

North Carolina, Crowders Mountain, David's Castle

On September 25, 1994, Dante Taylor (26) was solo climbing about 1800 on the cliffs near David's Castle. He could not find a good hand hold, so he began down climbing. He was about 35 feet off the ground when he began to fall. He attempted to cinch off his climbing rope in his belay device (The Soloist). He was unable to do so and free fell to the base. He suffered lacerations and contusions and some internal injury, but was released from the medical facility that evening.

Analysis

A witness stated that Taylor's belay device did not work because the diameter of his climbing rope was too small for it. (Source: Deidri Sarver, Ranger)

FALL/SLIP ON ICE, UNABLE TO SELF-ARREST, NO HARD HAT

Oregon, Mount Hood, Southside Route

On January 17, 1994, Kurt Pothast (20), Mike Bell (19), David Pardue (30), Tim Park (17), and Ron Hatfield (17) were climbing Southside Route on Mount Hood. It was a very icy day. Warm days and cold nights caused water ice to form. Half of the group had reached Carter Rock when Tim Park tried to get cover from the wind behind a rock and lost footing and started sliding toward the WY East headwall. David Pardue tried to grab him and was thrown down and tried to self-arrest, but because of the hard ice the pick only went in 1/4 inch and moderately slowed him down.

Both Park and Pardue slid over 1,000 vertical feet to a runout area above White River headwall. Kurt Pothast and Ron Hatfield then left down the ridgeline to below where Park and Pardue were where it was safe to travel onto the runout area above the White River headwall. On the way down Mike Bell joined the party. Pothast was the first to reach the critically injured Park, who had multiple facial and scalp lacerations and unknown internal injuries. Pardue was only suffering from a cut head and was very sore. Bell was second on scene because of a fall on the "safe" slope which resulted in his having to be extricated by helicopter because of a severely sprained ankle.

Through hand signals from ridge to ridge, Pothast communicated to other members of the party that there were two injured and they needed medical attention. When Bell arrived he said he fell, but was all right. Both Bell and Pothast, who is an Oregon EMT, got Park into a bivvy sack, and with the help of Ron Hatfield, held Park down, for he was trying to thrash about and get up. This lasted until Park, Pardue, and Bell were evacuated by the 304th Air Rescue Division.

Analysis

The total size of this group was 15 people. It should definitely have been smaller, and helmets should have been put on at a lower elevation.

The possibility of roping up was discussed and thrown out because of the fact that there was no way to stop on the ice, so instead of two injuries, there could have been three or four. The only other comment I have is that when a terrible accident happens, especially to a large group of people, it is important to be debriefed by trained personnel. We all did and it helped the recovery process incredibly. (Source: Kurt Pothast)

(Editor's Note: This was one of several "unable to self-arrest" situations on Mount Hood. In this case, it was because of icy conditions. In other cases, it was because of inexperience. One of the falls was caused by soft snow balling up in crampons. For other examples, read on.)

FALL ON ICE, UNABLE TO SELF-ARREST, PLACED NO PROTECTION, EXCEEDING ABILITIES, FATIGUE

Oregon, Mount Hood, Leutholds Couloir

On June 3, 1994, a party of five was climbing Leutholds Couloir on the west side of Mount Hood. The group reached the "hourglass" (9,200 feet) around 0815 and rested for about 20 minutes. Continuing, the lead team of three led by Rocky Henderson had made it through the steepest section and beyond where the angle eases to about 35 degrees. At 0915, as the second rope team of two was just coming out of the "hourglass," the lower climber stumbled and yelled, "Falling." He attempted to shove his ice ax into the snow, but it would not penetrate. The lead man was pulled off after attempting the same technique. They slid down the snow field, across a snow bridge and ended up about 1,000 feet below on the Reid Glacier. Henderson, using a cellular phone, called the Clackamas County Sheriff's Office and notified them of the accident, location, and the need for assistance. He then belayed his team back down, reaching the injured parties at 1015. Both parties were conscious and first stage hypothermic. One had head and shoulder injuries, the other a compound finger fracture, broken ribs, and badly bruised hip and elbow. Using packs and all available clothing, they were able to stabilize both patients and wait for more help. At 1100 radio contact was made with CCSO and patient assessment was given. At 1220 the 304th Air Force Reserve Rescue Squadron arrived on scene with two H-60 helicopters. Both patients (ages 46 and 47) were evacuated to Portland area hospitals and eventually made complete recoveries.

Analysis

Several factors contributed to this accident: lack of experience, fatigue, and over climbing their ability. I had climbed with the four other climbers on several occasions and as their climb leader felt that they were ready for something more challenging. They were all excited about doing a new route on Mount Hood. Before we left Illumination Saddle that morning, I had done a quick refresher on self-belay and general rope management. I have always been a very strong believer in the self-belay concept to the point of down playing self-arrest. I tell students that self-arrest should be thought of as a last ditch effort. I had that morning demonstrated jumping on the head of your ice axe, but barely mentioned self-arrest. I believe this was a factor, because when the fall occurred, the reflex response was an attempt to drive the shaft in. When that failed, they did not reflexively go to a self-arrest position. I believe a more experienced, better trained mountaineer could have arrested the fall. Both climbers were extremely physically fit, which no doubt helped in their recovery. The climber who triggered the fall was not performing at his optimum due to the fact that he was working late the night before.

Another interesting fact regards the use of helmets. Largely from reading *Accidents in North America*, I have become a proselytizer for helmet use. We were all wearing helmets, but the two victims lost theirs in the fall. They had rented Elderid helmets from REI. Pictures showed later that they were wearing them over ski hats and probably too loosely.