

As his father, I know he would want me to emphasize one thing: the equipment and the system were safe. The error was his alone as he failed to follow his own and the industry's safety procedures by being too close to the edge without being hooked into the system. As instructors, we work hard to conduct safe situations for youth to (engage in) risk and grow emotionally from that risk. We are oftentimes concerned more with our clients' safety than our own. Don't let your familiarity with your job and your acceptance of the risks momentarily blind you to the inherent dangers. They are always there for each of us. An accidental misstep can have devastating consequences. (Source: David Hull)

FALL ON ROCK, NO HARD HAT

California, Yosemite Valley, Sunnyside Bench

On October 8, Joe Presuto (51) was seriously injured in a fall on the jam crack, 5.9, on Sunnyside Bench.

He protected right off the ground, placed four pieces in the first 40 feet, then ran out the last 30 feet where the difficulty eases off. When he got to the ledge and clipped the bolts, he had plenty of cams and nuts left and elected to go on. He put in a piece just above the bolts and two or three more before reaching the bulge. His partner, Kurt Harms, felt Joe should have protected again before that point, but he was already into the crux, 15 feet above his last piece, and Kurt didn't want to excite him. He could see Joe trying to put in another piece; it looked like he was grappling with his hold and all of a sudden a finger popped out and he said, "I'm going down."

Kurt: "I knew there was maybe 15 feet of runout so Joe was looking at a 30 footer plus rope stretch. I figured I had time to pull up a couple of feet of rope. I got up against the rock. I was belaying with a Sticht Spring Belay Plate in a locking biner on my harness. I pulled up slack and felt a light yank and that's apparently when the top piece pulled out. I could feel a little bit of rope stretch beginning so I knew the fall was stopping, but then he hit the ledge with a thud. He bounced and the belay stopped him from rolling off the ledge. There was weight on my rope after he stopped falling.

"I called out to him, 'Joe!, Joe!' for 20-30 seconds and got no answer. Then I stood there holding the rope, yelling for help for two or three minutes until someone responded. [*The route is only 200 feet from a popular tourist trail near Yosemite Village—Ed.*] I knew I needed to tie him off, but my anchor was a single piece placed for an upward pull, so first I put in two pieces to oppose it. Since I didn't have his full weight, I was able to hold on to the rope on his side of the belay with my left hand; I fed some rope through the plate to get slack on his side and tied him off.

"Once I got out of the belay I went up the talus to the right a bit so I could communicate with him better. I told him, 'Joe, wake up, wake up!' Blood was trickling down the rock, all the way to the ground. He sat up and started moving around, and asked me, 'Who are you?' I said, 'It's me, Kurt. Check yourself, run your hands through your hair, see where you're bleeding.' He was doing it. At that point he started to get up and I thought about lowering him, but I didn't trust the pieces still above him. I said, 'Help is coming, so stay where you are.'"

About that time the rescue team began arriving. Two paramedics and other rescuers climbed the first pitch, to find Joe conscious but confused, and bleeding from head wounds. They gave him oxygen, stabilized his spine, packaged him in a litter and low-

ered him to the ground. Two hours after his fall he was flown to Doctor's Medical Center in Modesto.

The diagnosis: A fractured skull on the right side; damage to facial nerves; perforated right eardrum; bone chips in the right elbow; severe bruises on the right hip and ligament damage in the right ankle. He has recovered from most of his injuries, but his short-term memory is worse than before the accident, and he remembers nothing of the climb nor of the following 10 days.

Analysis

Presuto had followed his partner, Kurt Harms, for the first two seasons as he developed protection skills and was now comfortably leading 5.7 and 5.8, with an occasional 5.9 and 5.10. He had been climbing for the past three years, but he'd never taken a leader fall.

This was their first climbing trip since July, so they picked the jam crack as a well-protected warm-up. A 70-foot 5.7 crack ends at a ledge with a bolt anchor, followed by another 70-foot crack with a 5.8-5.9 crux at a bulge. The climb can be done as either one full pitch or two short ones. Kurt had led the route before but Joe was new to it; this was his lead and he had the option to stop halfway or continue.

The leader: It's easy to miscalculate your protection. Joe knew better, yet he found himself at an insecure stance, well above the critical piece protecting him from hitting the ledge, probably wishing he had backed it up when he had had the chance. (The crack allows several options just below the crux.) Here's another way to look at it: If you wouldn't rappel on that single piece, would you lead with it being your only protection against a ground fall? Fairly new leaders, like Joe, should sew up those pitches, for practice if nothing else. Finally, the obvious: wearing a helmet may be a headache, but that's all Joe might have suffered, had he worn one.

The belayer: As Kurt discovered, the belay anchor serves both to keep the belayer in place and to tie off an injured partner; after the fall is not the best time to be beefing it up. He felt his single upward piece was solid but, without an opposing counterpart right from the start, he was risking an encounter with Murphy's Law. Second, if Joe had been hanging in space Kurt would have found it more difficult to tie him off as he did. It's easier and safer to tie a Prusik hitch on the loaded rope after the fall and clip the hitch to the anchor; that way, Joe is held by the belay device until he's clipped in.

Medical care: Really serious external bleeding is rare—scalp wounds look horrible but usually stop bleeding by themselves, while broken necks or other life-threatening unstable injuries are more common. So Joe was better off lying still than moving around. That's also why lowering Joe to the ground before he was stabilized and packaged, would be dangerous, even if Kurt trusted Joe's protection. An exception: The patient is hanging on the rope, getting worse from the harness or the injuries and rescuers won't get there in time. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

BOLT PULLED OUT—BADLY SET, FALL ON ROCK

California, Joshua Tree National Park, Indian Cove

Having led aid climbs (some solo, and all without incident) during the long Thanksgiving weekend, including the A4's Rurp Romp and Lost Lid ("New wave" A2+ or A3) on Beaver Boulder, I (40) turned my attention toward another objective for a short day of fun. While leading a supposed A1 bolt ladder, Unknown Highway, on Willit Slab in