

(Editor's Note: There have been very few reports of indoor—or outdoor—climbing wall incidents. This one poses the interesting problem as to how information is communicated to paying participants.)

FALL ON ICE—ICE BROKE OFF, MISJUDGED CONDITIONS

New Hampshire, Frankenstein Cliffs, Cave Route

I reached the top of the headwall on the Cave Route—approximately 50 feet high. The poor quality of the ice precluded me from placing more than one screw on the climb. At this point the belay anchor was approximately seven feet up on an angled slope. This slope was snow covered with no ice, moss, roots, or anything to be found that one could sink an ax into. The front points of my crampons were in the ice on the top section of the headwall. There was a loud crack and that section of ice broke and peeled away from the rock. I fell approximately 20 feet straight down and hit an ice bulge with my feet. My ice screw was positioned just above the bulge. From the impact on the bulge, I was thrown a bit to the right and further down approximately 20 feet (the point at which the screw held). This prevented a direct ground fall. From there, I skidded approximately ten feet to the base of the climb.

My climbing partner was quickly there, and within ten minutes I was assisted by approximately 15 other climbers. My fractured leg was stabilized; I was kept warm and was carried out on a litter by the other climbers. I suffered a fractured tibia and fibula and some bruised ribs. (Nine weeks later, I am recovering nicely.)

Analysis

[I should exercise] better judgment when examining the quality of the ice. (Source: Rick Gauthier)

FALL ON ICE, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, EXCEEDING ABILITIES

New Hampshire, Frankenstein Cliff, Standard Route Left

On February 17, the strongest leader, Tom, had apparently done the first (crux) pitch just fine. The second leader, Jim, fell while attempting the 20-foot bulge above. He decked on one of the ledges and broke his ankle. Jim immobilized the ankle with ice tools and webbing and lowered him as far as he could. Their ropes would not reach the ground from the belay. They did not know how to do a tandem rappel. Several other climbers nearby talked the second through the lowering process until they could get the second on their rope.

An experienced climber from the Adirondacks was helpful, as was another climber who is a physician's assistant. Two members of the Bartlett Fire Department came with a litter perched atop a fat dune buggy tire to take him out. This litter made the carry-out process much easier in a single track trail.

Analysis

Standard Route Left is a climb that looks easier than it is. Many intermediate leaders are lulled into a false sense of security because of the much easier main Standard Route to the right. The curtains on this route, while short, are quite vertical and can often be brittle. Even on easy ice bulges anything can happen. Place ice screws in places that will prevent ground fall, even if the climbing is

easy. Several accidents have happened here in the past couple years. (Source: Al Hospers)

FALL ON ICE—MEDIocre ICE QUALITY, INADEQUATE PROTECTION

New Hampshire, Frankenstein Cliff, Pegasus

On March 14 the climber started up the lower right side of Pegasus. This was the most interesting side of the climb at this time and it had been done many times. The ice was chandeliered and somewhat “funky.” He was approximately seven feet up, in the standard “monkey hang” position with picks of both ice axes buried. They both ripped from the ice simultaneously. The leader fell and hit his left crampon on a ledge and stopped short, right at the bottom. He was immediately aware there was a problem and advised his partner to pack up the gear. After taking a number of Ibuprophen, he self-evacuated by sliding down the hill to the railroad tracks and hopping back to his car. He drove himself to Memorial Hospital in North Conway where his injury was diagnosed as a fractured heel bone.

Analysis

The leader was not high enough where he would normally have placed protection. In fact, the accident occurred so low that protection would likely have been of no benefit, and a fall from this height would most often cause no problem. Catching the crampon was pure bad luck. Sometimes accidents just happen, even to experts. (Source: Al Hospers)

PROTECTION PULLED OUT—FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE BELAY—ROPE DIAMETER TOO SMALL

New Hampshire, Cathedral Ledge, Retaliation

The leader, Al (30s), was climbing and was below the crux at the niche. He had just placed a cam and was yanking on it to test the placement when it pulled out. He lost his balance and fell striking the wall. He and his partner Tammy did not fall to the ground but were hanging just above a belay ledge of a climb to the right called Youth Challenge. A nearby climber rappelled to him and gave assistance and comfort until MRS members arrived on the scene. Three local guides lowered the leader to the ledge and splinted his leg. They fixed ropes across the tree ledge running across the middle of the cliff, and he was littered out with the assistance of local fire department personnel.

Analysis

Retaliation is a climb that is deceptively difficult. It is a right-leaning dihedral that is rated 5.9 but is really a climb for 5.10 leaders. One must be comfortable lay-backing the dihedral and placing your gear down by your knees where you can't see it well at all. The leader fell just below the crux and swung into the wall. The belayer's hands were burned, which may indicate that she was not keeping the belay properly. They were also using a lead rope that was less than 10 mm diameter. This size rope requires significantly more attention from the belayer as it can run much faster.

We have seen or heard of several accidents over the past year where the belayer let the leader fall further than desired because of the use of a “skinny”