

## **FALL ON ROCK—RAPPEL ERROR, NO BELAY OR BACK-UP, INEXPERIENCE**

### **North Carolina, Pilot Mountain State Park**

On March 15, Russell Page (22) was participating in a rappel training exercise near one of the access gullies, west of the Amphitheater. He was with a group of EMS/Firefighters from Forsyth Community College (NC) when he fell to the ground below.

The instructor, Mike Maher, also a witness to the accident stated that the group of ten students had just completed the instructional section of their training when Russell was beginning to rappel. According to Maher, Russell “panicked” as he went over the cliff edge, lost control, and fell approximately 40 feet to the rocks below, landing head-first.

Two members of the group went to the parking lot, a short distance away to call 911. Since most of the participants in the group were EMTs or Paramedics, first aid was started immediately. Russell was semi-conscious throughout the incident and was described as “combative” by rescue personnel. Even though he was wearing a helmet, the length of the fall combined with his body weight of 240 pounds caused his helmet to collapse, resulting in a severe skull fracture.

He was evacuated by Pilot Knob Rescue through a high angle rescue and transported via helicopter to Wake Forest Medical Center in Winston Salem, NC. He is expected to recover.

### **Analysis**

According to the Park Superintendent who was on the scene, Russell was not belayed. When the instructors were asked about this, their reply was that they didn’t use one because Russell had rappelled before, and that they were not using any back-up systems for any students.

It is standard practice for individuals participating in any organized or sponsored climbing and/or rappelling activity be belayed, either by a separate belay rope (by a prusik loop attached to the climbers leg harness loop), or at the least using a “fireman’s belay.” Being surrounded by a group of EMTs and Paramedics and wearing a helmet may have been the contributing factors that saved Russell’s life. (Source: Andy Whitaker, Pilot Mountain State Park and Aram Attarian)

## **AVALANCHE**

### **New Hampshire, Canon Mountain, Black Dike**

Two climbers were up to attempt the Black Dike in the beginning of April. They weren’t really thinking about the possibility of an avalanche. It’s not clear how often anyone thinks of that small gully sliding. In retrospect all the ingredients were there. Perfect slope angle, heavily wind loaded lee slope, and lots of fresh faceted powder. TP always tried to hug the wall a little bit near the Whitney-Gilman (left), just in case, and he was a bit near it this day, just not enough evidently. For some reason when they cleared the trees and got about fifty feet from the rescue cache, TP took off his pack and put on his helmet. There was a lot of unfamiliar ice up on the cliffs from the recent

freezing rain and it made him a little uncomfortable, so he put the helmet on early, an action he gave true thanks for after he cracked it on the slide.

They started post-holing up that gully. About ten feet into it, TP hit the “sweet spot” and set off the whole thing. He estimated the crown was about 12-18 inches deep and approximately 50 feet wide. As soon as it fractured, they were gone. TP tried to run towards the cliff but was immediately overrun and sent head-first down into the talus. By the time he stopped he had slid somewhere between 50-100 feet. His partner slid approximately 200 feet. He quickly realized that he was OK, experiencing just some serious bruising. He found his partner after he was able to clear his throat and mouth of snow and was able to access his situation, he claimed to be OK, but really “beat up.”

As TP put it “we just both put our heads down and marched, slid, crawled and groaned our way back to the truck, an event which you can probably recreate in your imagination.” They went to the hospital where DR was diagnosed with three fractured vertebrae and a bruised kidney, among other assorted ailments not as serious. TP didn’t go to the hospital. It took him about a week to recover to 100 percent.

### **Analysis**

Awareness is everything. Many people don’t perceive this area as a possible avalanche slope, but it has done so in the past. It almost got alpinist John Bouchard, and several years previously Jared Ogden was caught in one in the same area and injured his back. On this day the conditions were right for the slope to let go, and it did.

If the climbers had been pinned or buried, it might have been a day or two before anyone realized what had taken place, due to the time of year and lack of climbing traffic. Canon is a true alpine environment and should be treated with respect. (Source: Al Hospers)

## **FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION**

### **New Hampshire, Saco Crag, Roadside Attraction**

On Saturday, May 31, a first-season leader and his partner were starting up Roadside Attraction, 5.9+ on Saco Crag, north of Cathedral Ledge. The leader used a nut as his first piece to protect the opening crux moves and had fallen onto the gear several times. The belayer was securely anchored to a large tree at the base of the route, situated over a steep and exposed slab that drops off to the base of the cliff. A nearby climber saw the falls and advised the leader that his nut placement had shifted and he should put in a multi-directional cam to protect the crux. The leader was satisfied with the gear he had and made another attempt to climb, but this time his fall pulled the nut out. Apparently he fell onto his back and slid approximately 15 feet down the slab, where his belayer caught him. His belayer or a bystander tied off the lead rope to the tree using an overhand (non-releasable) knot.

A local guide and friend arrived at the cliff to find one EMT and one climber on the slab holding a backboard under the victim. The assisting