

FALLING ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED, INADEQUATE BELAY, OFF ROUTE

Oregon, Mount Washington

Mei Ding Stamplis (24) and husband Mathew Stamplis posted the following on a popular climber's Bulletin Board:

"We were on the North Ridge (July 2). Hadn't climbed it before and we got off route up at the summit pinnacle. Instead of directly climbing North Ridge, we traversed around it (climbers left) onto the east face. I could see a gully on the east face that looked climbable so we headed for that.

"The gully looked to be 4th class with some nasty exposure, so my wife belayed from below and off to the side. I went up about 20 feet and commented that there was no decent rock for placing pro. I finally settled on a large boulder (about the size of a person) that looked somewhat stable relative to everything else. I threw a sling around it and gave just a little tug on it and the whole thing just took off down the slope. It took a bad bounce and my wife couldn't get out of the way. She was struck on the shoulder and side of the head (helmet saved her life!). She fell off the ledge she was on and landed about 15 feet below on another ledge.

"If she hadn't landed on the ledge that she did (about three feet wide), there is no doubt we both would have been dragged right off the mountain (below us was 45 degree snow). She had set up a belay anchor but the anchor wasn't meant to take a load from that direction and didn't help at all to stop the fall.

"I was leading, she was belaying from below—there was nothing special about our setup. I did give the boulder a wiggle before I slung it and it seemed OK—it wasn't until it was slung and I gave it a slightly more firm pull that it gave loose."

Analysis

"In retrospect, the best thing we could have done was turn back and try another route after noticing the poor quality of the rock on the east face.

"But, assuming we were determined to climb where we did, the second thing we should have done is found a better spot for her to belay from. She was off to the side from where we expected any rockfall but, obviously, not far enough.

"Finally, given the big exposure on the east face, we definitely should have set up a bomber anchor for the belayer, something that would have kept her from falling after getting hit. The only anchor we had on belay was a sling around a horn, which was far from bomber.

"In short, our biggest mistake was simply not being able to properly evaluate the rockfall hazard. In our traverse around the pinnacle, we both noted that the rock was awfully crumbly. But we kept pushing on, hoping the rocks up the gully might be a little better."