

ROCKFALL, UNFORTUNATE POSITION

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, The Snaz

On July 24, after a successful climb, our party of three was on the last (sizeable but sloping) ledge and final rappel of the route. I (Scott McGee, 39) was struck on the front half of my helmet by a bread-loaf-sized rock traveling at high velocity. I lost sensation and movement in my hands and feet, fell to my knees, and began to tumble backwards. (I experienced no loss of consciousness.) The first partner, who had just clipped in to rappel, arrested me by the harness and leg.

The second partner, a ski patroller, and I assessed potential injuries, ruling out destabilizing neck fracture and head injury. Normal sensation returned to feet and legs, but burning sensation persisted in hands. We elected to self-evacuate, stabilizing my neck, rappelling two short sections, and short roping to trail. Three miles travel on foot returned us to the trailhead.

Analysis

Although I was on a large ledge, I was not anchored. Anchoring until on rappel could have prevented the fall that my partner saved me from. The rockfall came with no warning or sound of tumbling from above. There was a party one pitch above, who reported neither hearing rockfall, nor knocking rocks off. The route is fairly steep (5.7-5.9 pitches), and the rock probably came from very high up.

CT and MRI revealed one bone spur chipped off of the front of C3 and no other damage to bone or soft tissue. Burning and tingling in arms diminished over two to three weeks and were caused in part by a pre-existing condition known as cervical stenosis, or bone spurring on the vertebrae, which narrows foramen, openings in the spinal column where nerve roots leave the spinal cord. These openings were likely pinched momentarily when the rock struck.

This rock could have easily missed me, hit elsewhere with a worse outcome, or struck me fatally had I been in a slightly different position. Wearing a helmet doubtless saved my life. Anchoring, even on large ledges, is something I'll consider more carefully in the future. In the meantime, I pursued surgery (fusion of C4-C7) as a preventative measure to keep major trauma to the neck from resulting in major disability. (Source: Scott McGee)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION—ANCHORING ERROR, INEXPERIENCE

Wyoming, Hoback Junction, Rodeo Wall

On August 1, Sandy Edmiston (22) fell 60 feet to her death from the anchors of a bolted sport climb at the popular Rodeo Wall, south of Jackson. A novice climber, Sandy had learned to clean bolted anchors earlier that afternoon. On two climbs prior to the accident, she had safely cleaned and lowered

off with step-by-step instruction. On the day's final climb, she struggled to negotiate the crux and reached the top of the climb after sunset, though still before dark. Believing that Sandy had demonstrated an understanding of how to clean an anchor safely, her partner did not talk her through the process a third time. This time, Sandy neglected to pass the rope back through the rappel rings after cleaning the draws from the anchor. Believing that she was on belay, she asked for slack so as to be able to unclip from the anchors, and when she did so, fell to the ground. She suffered severe head trauma and died on the scene.

Analysis

This accident once again stresses the importance of exercising constant vigilance when cleaning anchors. Furthermore, the training of novices in such seemingly simple but high-consequence techniques should be undertaken only under ideal conditions and should be closely monitored until mastery is certain. Any variation from the system, such as Sandy's request for slack after being put back on belay, should be examined very seriously. In this accident, inexperience, fatigue, and impending darkness were all contributing factors. Eliminating any of these might have averted a tragic loss. (Source: The climber's partner)

(Editor's Note: The victim's partner remains anonymous here out of respect for the difficulty one has in processing such events. It should be understood by the reader that he also recognizes his part in this event.)

FALLING ROCK—DISLODGED BY CLIMBERS ABOVE

Wyoming, Mount Moran, CMC

August 6, Jerry Painter (49), of Idaho Falls, Idaho, and three other climbers were ascending the CMC Route—a popular climbing route on the east face of Mount Moran, rated 5.5—when Painter was struck on the head by a sizable rock that was dislodged by climbers above. The rock broke Painter's helmet and he sustained injuries to his head and neck. The party was on the first pitch of the climb and had reached an elevation of about 11,500 feet when the accident occurred. Steve Bohrer, also from Idaho Falls and one of Painter's climbing partners, called for help via cell phone at 9:15 a.m. Rangers immediately began to coordinate a rescue, while the group of climbers moved Painter to a more secure area, out of the way of further rockfall, until rangers could reach them. Due to the nature of Painter's injuries, his disoriented state of consciousness, and the group's remote location, rangers asked for an assist from the interagency helicopter. The helicopter flew four rangers to a staging area on the Falling Ice Glacier, then inserted one of these rangers to Painter's location using the short-haul method. This ranger loaded Painter into an evacuation suit and attended him while the