

FALL ON ROCK, NO HARD HAT

New Hampshire, Cathedral Ledge, Turner's Flake

This afternoon (August 6) while I was belaying my girlfriend on the first pitch of Thin Air, I witnessed Doug M. (50+) take a leader fall on Turners Flake. It is estimated he fell 30–40 feet. He immediately stated he had broken his wrist (later confirmed it was broken in three places) and was lowered to the ground by his belayer. A friend of mine took over the belay of my girlfriend while a nearby climber and I headed down to offer assistance. Doug M. was completely alert, but had some bruising and blood on his head (no helmet). Because of this, I offered to call for an ambulance, which he accepted. His belayer slung his arm and we walked him out to the road. After meeting the ambulance, I headed back up to retrieve his gear. His last piece was a small cam placed in a pocket to the right of the flake. This piece failed and hit him in the forehead causing it to bleed. (No stitches were needed.) The next piece, about ten feet down, was a #3 Camalot, placed before the flake widens and becomes a little run out. His was climbing on double 8.6-mm Beal ropes that had been used for two ice seasons and two rock seasons and had not taken any leader falls. The belayer was anchored and stated he was lifted off the ground and had loaded the anchor.

Analysis

Of note is an accident that occurred last year under almost the exact same circumstances on this route, on which it is difficult to reduce rope drag with or without using doubles. The victim last year was on doubles, fighting with drag. He fell, flipped upside down, and suffered injuries to his head and face. He was not wearing a helmet. I assume that the additional stretch of skinnier ropes in this situation (especially if they were twins used improperly) may have led to a longer fall. It appeared that as the fall was being arrested, Doug hit a small ledge/flake about 30 feet up the climb, one of the only protrusions it is possible to hit.

It is hard to understand why people would climb this route without a helmet, as falling upside down is a very real possibility. Ironically, while hiking back up to retrieve the gear, a party on Standard Route dislodged significant rock-fall that impacted the descent trails from Turners Flake. (Source: Dave Lottmann, EMS Climbing Guide)

(Editor's Note: In late November, Doug M. was involved in another serious accident, this time in Tuckerman Ravine. He was solo climbing near the center of the bowl, and on descent, he lost control of a glissade on ice. He was wearing crampons, so it became a tumbling fall that resulted in serious fractures. The weather turned extremely cold. Had he not been rescued, it is likely he would have perished.)