

emergencies and know who to call and what to do. (Source: Eric White, Climbing Ranger/Avalanche Specialist)

*(Editor's Note: There were very few climbing related incidents on Mount Shasta this year. As usual, however, there were several "lost/missing" cases and a few "party separated" cases. One curious piece of information is that there were 6,200 summit passes sold. This is not uncommon, but the important point is that of this total, not many would be considered climbers.)*

## **FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, OFF ROUTE—LOST TIME, HASTE, DARKNESS**

### **California, Yosemite National Park, Half Dome**

On August 19, Robert Kuntz (31) and Ryan Worsham (age unknown) hiked up the slabs approach to the Northwest Face of Half Dome. Their plan was to climb the Regular Route of the Northwest Face (VI 5.9 C1) in a one-day push. After talking to other climbers and reading about the route, they thought this goal was within their ability. They brought limited supplies for the climb, hoping to go light and fast. For their bivy at the base of the route they brought light sleeping bags, fleece jackets, and extra food.

They started climbing at 0630 on Monday, August 20, equipped with a light rack, seven liters of water, and energy food totaling about 700 calories per person. Kuntz wore a long-sleeve wicking top, long pants, wool socks, and shoes. Worsham wore a T-shirt, long pants, shoes, and no socks. They had one beanie, one helmet, and a pair of leather gloves between them. They also brought Kuntz's cellphone, as well as two headlamps for the descent from the summit to their bivy at the base of the route, but left their sleeping bags and jackets at the base.

After the first 11 pitches, they felt they were moving fast enough to finish in daylight. Pitch 12 was Kuntz's lead. He somehow missed the recommended crack and was heading for a 5.9 squeeze variation when he saw what appeared to be an easier passage through the chimney to gain the next belay. This proved to be the wrong way to go and they lost up to an hour and a half reversing the error. Kuntz led the next three pitches of chimneys. After following Pitch 15 on ascenders, Worsham forgot to coil the trailing rope, so it caught in a crack. He had to rappel, free the rope, and re-ascend, thus losing further time. After re-gaining the belay, he led pitch 16.

By the time they reached the start of pitch 17, they realized that they would not complete the route before dark. They decided to sleep on Big Sandy Ledge at the top of 17 and to finish the climb in the morning. While Worsham belayed at a double piton anchor, Kuntz started leading the pitch, anxious to make up for the lost time he felt he had cost them. Kuntz got off route by following a vertical double-crack system before he had traversed far enough to reach Big Sandy. The left-hand crack was wide, requiring a #4

Camalot, which he lacked. The right-hand crack was narrower and shallow in places, but he was forced to use it for protection.

By this time he was improvising direct aid techniques, high-stepping into the protection slings to place the next piece of protection. While standing in the sling attached to the red C3, he placed a gold (#4) Wild Country Zero cam (7) five or six feet higher. He was not confident of the Zero due to the shallowness of the crack and a heavy growth of lichen, which prevented the lobes of the cam from gaining a direct purchase on the rock. However, since the C3 seemed “bomb proof”, he thought it was safe enough to try weighting the Zero for aid. He started to pull himself up using the sling attached to the Zero. Suddenly he heard a “ping” and saw the Zero come out of the crack. Since his foot was still in the sling of the C3 cam below, he was pitched off balance and fell upside down and backwards.

At the end of his fall, Kuntz struck hard against a bulge in the wall, first with his lower back and then with his chest and helmet. He never lost consciousness and did not sustain a concussion. Although he had fallen about 50 feet lower than the belay ledge, he was able to climb back up and get into a secure position next to Worsham. Kuntz knew he was probably injured, but he didn't feel any pain immediately.

After a brief discussion about whether or not to continue, they decided that they were done for the day. Once Kuntz stopped moving he started to feel more and more pain radiating around his lower back. He thought he may have broken some ribs and even his spine, but he and Worsham could find no signs of nerve damage, internal bleeding, or other serious injury. When they examined Kuntz's helmet, they found a crack in the back running clear through the foam, but no indentations.

Kuntz's cellphone battery had died during the climb, so there was no way to immediately call for help. They decided they would wait for a party they'd seen at the base to come up the route on Tuesday, or Worsham would descend to them. A third option was to try to climb out. However, as time passed, the pain in Kuntz's back became debilitating and any movement made it worse.

A little after 0300 Tuesday morning, they heard two people chatting on the summit. By shouting and using their headlamps, Kuntz and Worsham were able to communicate their location, the nature of Kuntz's injuries, and their need for a rescue. The party on top contacted the park dispatcher by cellphone.

At 0645, a member of the park's search and rescue (SAR) team contacted them by loudspeaker from the Valley floor. Using arm signals in response to his questions, Kuntz and Worsham were able to describe their situation. By 0945, the SAR team had been placed on the summit by helicopter. They lowered two rescuers and at 1145, they raised Kuntz 600 feet to the top in

a litter. He was flown to the Valley, transferred to an air ambulance, and flown to Doctors Medical Center in Modesto. He was diagnosed with torn back muscles and fractures of six spinous and transverse processes of his vertebrae. Luckily there were no life or limb-threatening injuries. He was released within 24 hours, wearing a back brace.

### **Analysis**

Kuntz had seven years of overall climbing experience, including five years of traditional climbing. He had climbed several long alpine free-climbing routes. However, he had not climbed any Yosemite big walls or overnight walls elsewhere. He comfortably led 5.10b traditional and 5.10c sport climbs, and had led aid climbs up to C-2. Worsham had ten years of climbing experience. He also had limited aid-climbing experience and had not completed any Yosemite-style big walls.

The immediate cause of Kuntz's long fall and the resulting injury is the fact that the rope was not clipped through the Camalot C3. Otherwise, the fall probably would have been short and of little consequence. Kuntz feels that a significant contributing cause was haste. After the team fell behind on pitch 12, he felt rushed to make up the lost time or to at least reach Big Sandy Ledge for the night. He fell victim to "tunnel vision," i.e., he became less aware of his options. In Kuntz's opinion, several other factors affected their situation.

- Seven liters of water was one or two liters too much. It added unnecessary weight, slowing them down.
- A #4 Camalot would have been useful, especially in chimneys.
- Leaving their warm fleece jackets and emergency food at the base led to a very cold night.
- Kuntz's foam helmet provided significant insulation against the cold that night.
- They should have brought *two* helmets. In addition to the usual reasons, rocks launched from the summit by tourists and a haul bag dropped by climbers above narrowly missed them.

(Source: Contributions by Jesse McGahey and John Dill, Ranger)

## **FALL ON ROCK—BELAY FAILURE, NO STOPPER KNOT, MISSED CLUES, INATTENTION, NO HARD HAT**

### **California, Yosemite Valley National Park, Church Bowl**

On October 12, Adam (31), Jason (57) and his son Colby (20) were climbing one-pitch routes at the Church Bowl climbing area using a 70m (230-foot) rope. Adam consulted the SuperTopo guide for route data and they picked out climbs as they went along.

Adam belayed from the ground as Colby led Church Bowl Lieback (5.8). Colby built the top anchor, then Adam lowered him. As Colby reached the