

FALL ON ROCK – BELAY FAILURE, NO STOPPER KNOT, DISTRACTION

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

On October 8, Nicolas Lebaut (29) and Davina Borrow-Jones (32) were climbing at the base of the Southwest Face of El Capitan. Nicolas decided to lead Little John Left, a short, one-pitch, 5.8 route leading up and right to fixed rappel anchors. Davina did not feel like following, so they agreed he would simply lower Nicolas off and Nicolas would clean the pitch on the way down. They checked the height of the climb in their guidebook. It stated 80 feet and they had a 60m rope, which was plenty long enough for Nicolas's descent.

Nicolas climbed the route, placing protection along the way. Meanwhile, another party, Mike and Rachel, was descending the Heart Ledges rappel route on fixed ropes overhanging Little John Left. The two parties recognized each other and everyone began chatting.

Davina began lowering Nicolas. He had full control of the rope and a good view of Nicolas. Since the climb angles up and right, Nicolas had to pull himself to the left and partially down-climb to stay within reach of his protection as he descended. As he removed the lowest piece, he swung back to the right under the anchor above.

Details are incomplete from this point on, but apparently Davina was caught off guard by the surge of tension from Nicolas's weight. He had been standing at the start of the climb, so he was dragged to the right because of the angle of pull to the belay anchor above. The talus slopes steeply down to the right here, so as he moved right he also descended, significantly lengthening Nicolas's lowering distance. He also may have elected to scramble even further down the slope to move out of the other party's way. As he continued lowering Nicolas, he became distracted by Mike and Rachel's descent and apparently forgot to keep an eye on his end of the rope. The end must not have been anchored or knotted, because it suddenly passed through Davina's hand and through his belay device. Nicolas tumbled 20 feet to the talus and was immediately in agony from a back injury.

Rachel called 911. The first medic reached Nicolas about 20 minutes after his fall, followed by the evacuation team. They immobilized him and carried him down to El Capitan Meadow, where he was transferred to an air ambulance and flown to Modesto. At the trauma center he was diagnosed with compression fractures of L1 and L4. He wore a back brace for three months but has fully recovered.

Analysis

It is almost inevitable that plans will change and distraction will happen, so staying alert is essential. Looking around for common hazards such as sloping ground or a difference between lengths of ascent and descent are part of this.

The belayer should anchor if the stance is unstable. But the most important point is **ALWAYS ANCHOR OR KNOT THE BELAY ROPE!** Do this even on ridiculously short climbs to maintain the habit and to set a good example. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

DARKNESS – STRANDED

California, Pinnacles National Monument, Condor Crag

On the evening of November 15th, park staff assisted two climbers down from a climbing route after they had become stranded due to nightfall. Both climbers were uninjured.

The climbers were able to place a cellphone call to a friend around 6:00 p.m. after they could no longer climb in darkness. They were near the top of a 500-foot route on the Condor Crag formation in the High Peaks area of the park. They were in different locations on the route and could not complete the final 100 feet without additional light. Rangers contacted the party via cellphone and determined their location and condition before the phone battery was exhausted. With an overnight forecast of 25 degrees F and gusting winds, rangers and search and rescue team members were dispatched to climb to their location. The crew of a California Highway Patrol helicopter located the pair using infrared radar and a powerful “Night Sun” floodlight. Assisted by monument staff, the climbers then completed the route and descent. By the time they got down at 1:00 a.m., they’d been on the route for 14 hours. (Source: Brett Hergert, Operations Supervisor) *(Editor’s Note: In the not too distant past, these climbers would have spent a night out—and maybe worse. Cellphones and the technical equipment available to rescue personnel have changed the game of climbing considerably. Maybe we should revive the notion of creating no-rescue zones...)*

FALL ON ROCK, GEAR SLING CAUGHT ON CAM DURING FALL – STRANGULATING CLIMBER

California, Kings Canyon National Park, Obelisk

My name is Patrick Callery. Our friend David Shirley and I were climbing with Ishun Chan on the South Face route of the Obelisk when she was tragically killed on November 8. This report of the accident is provided with the hopeful intent to provide some answers for her many friends and loved ones and with the hope that her tragic passing may in some way better inform the climbing community of potential dangers in our sport.

Sometime in early October I pitched Ishun on a trip to the Obelisk. A classic backcountry rock with an arduous approach, the Obelisk had been on my to-do list for years, and Ishun was enthusiastic about joining me for it. We half expected we’d eventually cancel the trip plan given the lateness of the season, but continued fair and mild mountain weather throughout