

Analysis

In retrospect, we made a number of decisions that contributed to this fall and I was incredibly lucky that the rope caught a knob on my way down.

This incident could have easily been prevented by a few factors. Had we listened to our gut feelings and turned around, this would not have happened. The conditions were less than ideal, but wet rock, ice, and snow are frequently encountered in the mountains and part of climbing, in my opinion, is being able to travel safely in these situations.

We were not exceeding our climbing abilities; however, our decision to leave the rack in the car created a hazard that resulted in a long, potentially injurious fall. Considering the new snow and ice present up high and the change this presented, taking gear would have been a prudent decision. Also, I am very thankful that our rope held. In an effort to cut weight, we took a single twin rope. I had researched the holding power of a single twin rope and had read that they would hold one fall, rated appropriately by the UIAA, as long as the rope was not loaded over an edge. Obviously, it did hold.

Also, I put my helmet on almost as an afterthought. This is rare for me, especially in the mountains, as I usually wear it constantly. It undoubtedly saved my life. (Source: Van Roberts)

FALLING ROCK — FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE PROTECTION, FAILURE TO TURN BACK

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Death Canyon, Caveat Emptor

On August 29, Brian Huff (23) was leading the second pitch of Caveat Emptor and established an anchor at the top in what is considered the normal belay location. (A small ledge and alcove approximately 170 feet up and left from the first belay.) It is believed that Huff used a long yellow sling (1-inch webbing) to wrap a large block setting on the climber's left side of the belay ledge. It was also stated by Jonathon L, his partner, that Huff also placed a tri-cam as part of the anchor. Jonathon stated that Huff pushed and shoved on the block and it was solid. It is likely that Huff clipped into this same sling with his harness daisy chains as his personal attachment point.

Jonathon followed the second pitch up to the large roof, cleaning the protection as he went. He fell trying to pull up over the lip of the roof and reported "tweaking his wrist" slightly during the fall. He decided that he did not want to finish the climb and asked Huff to lower him. Due to communication difficulties, Jonathon got lowered only a few feet. Huff was using a Petzl Reverso as his belay device. It was in the "auto lock" mode. In order to lower Jonathon, he attached a long cordelette to the rope as a prusik and established a small raising system to break the rope free from the device. It is likely that after lowering a short distance the device locked up again.

Jonathon then decided that he could ascend the rope if it were fixed to the anchor and asked his partner to do this. Jonathon reported that they had very clear communication on this point and Huff said that the rope was fixed to the anchor. Jonathon began to ascend the rope using a Cinch device. He went up about ten feet. He said the rope started to slide slowly down, so he decided that he would try to climb the route instead. Huff then used the prusik cord to transfer the weight off of the fixed knot and onto his belay device, now rigged on his harness. He did not complete the load transfer.

At this point it is believed that the block that was serving as the main anchor became dislodged and was pulled from the ledge. Due to the position of the block on the ledge, it is likely that the block fell from the ledge and then pulled Huff off as well. The last piece of protection that he had placed while leading was a BD .5 cam-a-lot approximately 25-30 feet below the belay anchor. He likely took a tumbling "head first" fall down and to climber's right. He fell approximately 40-50 feet, being stopped by the rope through the .5 cam-a-lot and the counter balance weight of Jonathon on the other end of the rope.

At the same time, Jonathon was trying to determine what was going on when he free fell 30-40 feet, being stopped by the rope approximately 20 feet above the first belay ledge. He said rocks of various sizes falling past him, but luckily did not hit him. (Witnesses at the base of the climb reported the largest of these rocks being "microwave-sized." It is believed that this rock was the block that Huff had slung as the anchor.) To clarify, both climbers were now hanging on their respective ends of the rope, anchored only by the .5 cam-a-lot. Huff is still above the roof out of sight of his partner.

Huff suffered several injuries including a concussion, laceration above his left eye, and a severely dislocated left shoulder. It is unknown if he lost complete consciousness, but it is believed he did for a short time at least.

After recovering from the fall, Huff rigged his end of the rope and began rappelling down towards Jonathon. It is believed that he had to re-arrange various items contained in the anchor rigging, which was now tangled at his location. He did not place another anchor and began rappelling on the counter balance weight of Jonathon on the other end of the rope. Huff had just enough rope on his end to barely reach the first belay anchor, passing his partner en route.

Two Exum guides had heard the accident and climbed up to the first belay. They assisted in clipping Huff into the anchor and reported the accident via cellphone. Luckily the knot that Huff had used to fix the rope to the anchor ended up on the opposite side of Jonathon and jammed into the carabiner at the .5 cam-a-lot. Huff came off of the rope and his partner remained hanging on the other end of the rope. Luckily, due to the knot jammed into the carabiner, he did not fall any further.

Jonathon was trailing a second rope, which the Exum guides were able to reach. They then had Jonathan tie into this rope and they belayed him while he down-climbed to the first belay anchor. The Exum guides then lowered him down to the first large ledge on the climb and assisted his partner in rappelling to the same ledge. They bandaged Huff's head laceration and made him as comfortable as possible.

I arrived on scene approximately an hour later (on foot) and performed a full assessment, applied oxygen, established an IV, and splinted his arm/shoulder. The decision was made to short-haul Huff from this ledge. A litter was inserted first, followed by Ranger Guenther. Huff was placed in full c-spine precautions in the litter and short-hauled from the ledge, attended by Ranger Guenther.

Huff spent the rest of the evening in the hospital undergoing tests and evaluations. His shoulder was reduced without surgery and no fractures were found. He was released that night.

Analysis

Notable details:

The tri-cam was never located. It is possible it fell into the crack and may be jammed there.

The rope (9.4mm) had several abrasions to the sheath, but remained intact.

Based on the debris left on the belay ledge and the scrape marks, it is believed that the block used for the anchor was just sitting on the slightly down sloping ledge and was not attached to the main cliff. There was no evidence of any recent fracturing.

There are cracks of various sizes at the belay ledge that appeared would have accepted a variety of protection in different size ranges.

The .5 cam-a-lot was intact with only a small gouge in one cam lobe and an elongation of the cable loop.

The figure-8 knot was deformed, but intact, and it was possible to untie it with some effort.

Huff does not remember the accident or rappelling to the first belay ledge. When he arrived at the ledge, he was oriented only to his person and he did not know where he was, what had happened, or what day it was. Slowly he recovered these memories and an hour later he was fully aware and oriented, with the exception of the accident itself. (Source: E. Visnovske, Ranger, GTNP)

FALL ON ROCK, FAILURE TO FOLLOW ROUTE, NO EQUIPMENT, INADEQUATE CLOTHING, INEXPERIENCE

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Mount Teewinot

On September 22, about 1300, Jon Winiasz (23) and Eliot Kalmbach (24)