

assess the situation nor did I consider any other options. I fell because my foot slipped. Don't put saving time or inconvenience ahead of being safe. Another method or assistance from others should have been considered". (Source: From numerous posts on Mountainproject.com)

FALL ON ICE, INADEQUATE PROTECTION – MISSED BACK-UP CHECK AND WARNING, HASTE

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Thatchtop Mountain

On November 20, as my friend Chris Pruchnic (42) and I walked early in the morning to our original destination, the Black Lake Slabs or West Gully ice climbs in RMNP, we talked at length. Chris, about running—a 100 mile race which he had completed about a month before, as Front Range Section Chair of the American Alpine Club—the recent Lumpy Ridge Trail work day which he had helped to organize and both of us had participated in, his upcoming climbing exchange trip to Iran, his guiding services—climbing trips to South America and SCUBA trips. He said he had not climbed as much as he had wanted last year. I talked mostly about work and rock and ice climbing.

Once we arrived at Mills Lake, Chris wanted to aim for a route called All Mixed Up (AMU) on Thatchtop Mountain. AMU and a route on the right looked like it was in good shape but since we had brought no rock gear I said, "It would be nice to have at least a set of stoppers," and pointed out an area called Reflections. He brought our attention back to the AMU wall, which appeared well formed to the right and center. The left side looked very thin and mostly dry. We looked it over more closely and thought that it had enough ice to avoid having to do much climbing on rock if we stayed to the middle standard line of AMU. When I asked him about West Gully, he confirmed that he had led the crux pitch of West Gully a few years before so he was more inclined to do something new. "What do you think?" he said. I had a printed out topo of West Gully but I didn't have one of AMU. I had looked over route topos and descriptions many times over the years. Apparently Chris had been researching the route in the recent days before and had his sights set on it and was convinced that we could do the route with screws only. I thought so as well. We agreed to do the center route on the AMU wall and started up the approach.

It was a windy day, but we were on the lee side so communication was not a problem. We geared up, did a complete safety check, and I led the first pitch up to the left end of the rocky headwall and stopped at a fixed belay station. He seconded up and we quickly exchanged gear. As he was about to start up the second pitch, I offered to take the tagline from him, but because it was so light he kept it on his back. Starting out with a couple of steps on verglas then good ice for a short section, the pitch turned to tricky low angle verglas and frozen sod. Enjoying the challenge, Chris yelled out, "It's

mixed baby!" We were having a good time. He had led about half way up the second pitch when he said he saw a fixed anchor off to the left. I yelled back "The route goes back to the right!" to the standard center route with the fat ice we saw from Mills Lake.

He said, "I'm going to use it." He went left to a fixed anchor station on a ledge.

As I seconded up, again about halfway to where he was belaying, I noticed a fixed pin to the right and pointed out that we were probably off route. He said he'd completely missed that pin. I suggested that I could go right and set a belay so that he could down-climb and traverse over. The ice between his and my positions was good and not steep. There was at least one screw between us. He pointed out that there was another fixed pin further to the left and up from where he was. I couldn't see it, so I agreed to come up to where he was belaying and take a closer look with the condition that we could still go back right if I didn't like how the left side looked.

He had me on belay on an anchor of three pre-existing fixed points and runners, not from his harness. He was on the left side under two fixed pieces of webbing. The rope was flaked, looped from side to side across his three slings, which were clipped with lockers to the fixed gear. I believe one of his lockers connected the left two fixed slings to one on the right. When I came up to the ledge, I clipped in to the right side of the anchor on a fixed runner under a fixed pin with one of my locking 'biners and tied in with a clove hitch on my end of the rope. He pointed out the route to the left.

Chris commented that he was uncomfortable at his sloping stance as he fiddled with his lockers. He wanted to move to where I was standing on flatter ground. He had loosened the rings on his lockers but no red was showing. I was thinking that he wanted to step down next to me, on my left, by extending or moving one runner at a time. He was still anchored on all three points.

I looked over to the left and checked out the route. On an easy looking, mostly snowy traverse below a rock band, there was a fixed pin about 30+ feet out. The band was mostly a slab, running above the traverse. Another 30 feet or so from the pin, there was what appeared from our angle to be a 3-4-foot wide smear of ice on the slab, detached on the edges. It looked only inches thick. Fifteen feet above the start of the smear I couldn't see anything. (A photo showed it to be all rock, topos show no named route)

At this time he said, "So I noticed that you tied the rope directly into the anchor with a clove hitch. I'd like to start using it more quickly and efficiently. It's not that I can't tie one; it's just not a knot that I use very often. So how do you... or before you show me let me just do it. Rather than look through all this rope (in front of him), I'll just use your end." He tried once, didn't look right. Tried again, no good. Tried something different, not as good as the previous time. Once again same result. "Oh that's embarrassing!" he

said, frustrated.

I took the bight of rope from him and said, "Ok look. Here's how I tie it. I just..." I showed him how I do it. I handed the rope back to him without the knot. He tied it right. First try that time.

Me: "That's it." Chris: "That's it."

I looked to my right and thought it still wouldn't be that much work to get back on the original route. I heard 'biners clipping so I looked back left to see that Chris was in the process of removing the third of his lockers. When he took his pieces off unannounced to move to a better stance, he left me on only one fixed pin. I knew that I hadn't checked for a fourth backup, so I said emphatically, "Wait what are you doing? Clip back in!" As he stepped behind me, he disregarded my warning saying, "It's easier to move all of it at the same time." It was too late for me to restrain him physically, so I stood still so as not to disrupt his movements. I felt his hand slide down my back as he said, "Oops!" At that point pure wishful thinking overtook my mind and I looked to my right and said: "Chris?" Chris said: "What?"

I thought he had responded to me, but instead I'm now sure he was wondering when his knot was going to catch. Gear rattled. I looked left and right. From then on I couldn't make out anything he said. I said, "Where'd you go?" Oh God, I thought. I finally turned around far enough to catch just a glimpse of where he was and was shocked at how far he had fallen. Me: "CHRIS!!!"

I had to turn back forward, pull on gear and re-adjust my feet to get a better look straight below and behind me. As I was doing so, I heard the loud impact. He must have been in the air a good distance and hit hard.

When I was able to turn far enough around to get a good look, he was sliding fast down a lower angle section and finally came to a sudden stop. The anchor clanged and shook as I turned back up to see that we were both on only that one piton and only two knots between us. His clove hitch had caught, but he had tied it on my end of the rope. He'd forgotten that he hadn't looked for his end of the rope. It seemed to me that he was simply practicing the hitch, not about to rely on it as a backup. I stared at the pin and wondered: Well..., was I supposed to go with him? It would be easier to deal with that, than to have to go through this. I was completely stunned.

I noticed that the rope had stopped his fall above a snow ledge. I tested the tension on the rope and found that it was fully weighted. His weight shifted to one side and then no movement after that. Although there was only a small chance he could have survived the fall and that he was unconscious, I had to at least assume that he was alive. I continually called out to him.

I took a minute to collect myself, assessing what was possible. I backed up my anchor to the other two fixed slings. It was about 12:00 p.m. I had ample gear, but no tagline, and a weighted lead line with a tangled knot

on the lower half of the rope. No one else was on the route. I didn't have a phone on me. The chances of a rescue before nightfall were remote.

My choices were to solo down the route, descend the weighted line with prusiks or utilize the ten feet or so that I could work into the system. I looked carefully at his position above the ledge. It was a sloping ledge and he could have continued to slide if I were able to work in the additional slack to lower him. He seemed to be close enough above it for me to invest the time to find out. I rigged a very basic hauling system and was able to lift his weight off the hitch. I untied from my end of the rope and tied it to the lowest point, freed the hitches and lowered him to the ledge where he settled into the snow.

As long as he didn't slide, I could rap down to him. I cleaned the belay device and locker that he'd left and the rest of my gear and carefully started rappelling down, trying not to dislodge him. As I was working on passing the knot, I sensed that he was gone and prepared myself for the worst. He had never responded to my calls. Shortly before I reached him, I saw that he was caught in the rope loops. When I got to the ledge I found he had no signs of life and knew he had departed long before I could reach him. It was about 12:40 p.m. I stayed with him for a while. Then keeping the scene as intact as possible, I retrieved the tag line and continued rappelling to the base.

I was told the coroner's report says he lasted only seconds after the end of the fall. During one of my interviews with the rangers, I asked RMNP SAR Director Ranger Mark Pita, "Why did he do that? Why did he ignore my warning? Who does that?" He responded: "He had his mind set."

Analysis

Check and double-check your anchors. Announce your intention and don't make a move until all questions are resolved with your partner. Focus on one thing at a time. You could also say don't take your eyes off your partner, but then you wouldn't be watching what you yourself are doing, much less scoping the route, keeping an eye on the weather or hazards, etc. (Source: Jean Wilks)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE BELAY – ROPE PULLS THROUGH BELAY DEVICE **Colorado, Eldorado Canyon State Park**

On December 14, a female climber (27) was lowered off the end of her rope after leading the first pitch of Over the Hill (5.10). Drew Wojcik was in the climbing party directly above her and recounts what he saw: "As we began the second pitch of Over the Hill we heard the fall. Initially it sounded like a scary leader fall, but soon found out that was not the case. I instantly lowered my leader who asked if help was needed. He observed the rope running through the new bolted anchors that have replaced using the tree. We estimate she fell around 20 feet to the ground. Initial assessment seemed to indicate a hip