

at all. I managed to stay on my butt and slide feet first down the pitch, but I wasn't able to miss one little feature that caught my left foot and gave me my only serious injury—an ankle fracture. Not bad for falling 90 feet. I hit the ground. Luckily, my chunk of Half Dome hit a few feet to my left, also avoiding Maeve and a couple of other climbing parties.

I immediately knew I was hurt and everyone at the base started helping me. The rangers decided to fly me out because carrying me in a litter back to the trail was almost as difficult and risky as me exiting on my own. They advised me to keep my climbing shoe on the injured foot, which worried me, because if they later decided to cut it off, I would be very sad. While waiting for the helicopter I kept my foot elevated and packed in snow to help with the swelling. I surprised myself by staying in high spirits and making jokes to manage the pain.

The helicopter came back, I was hooked in, and we took off for the Valley. When we landed I made my shoe-cutting policy clear to the ambulance crew. Luckily they were also climbers and managed to save my TC Pros. At the hospital I learned that my fibula was broken in two places near the ankle.

### **Analysis**

First, I should have doubled up my protection. I'd fallen on lots of trad gear with no failures before this one, but you can't fully judge the rock with only a whimpy tap or tug test. My piece looked so good that I didn't even consider a backup, though other placements were available. The easy climbing up to the roof and the fact that I can lead up to low 5.11 trad may have added to my complacency.

Second, I tried the "5.7" traverse 15-20 feet too high. My friends had climbed it and simply told me, "Go to the roof and go left," and I didn't notice on the topo that after placing protection under the roof, you drop down for the traverse. I looked over, saw holds, and nothing stood out as being an easier way. That's just the nature of climbing, and it's partly why I fell, but inadequate protection is why I broke my leg and hit the ground. (Sources: John-Mark Toth and John Dill, NPS Ranger)

## **FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION CAME OFF**

### **California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan Muir Wall**

Although I had climbed several walls in Zion, I had never climbed El Capitan; in fact, I had never even been to the Valley. Yosemite, and El Capitan in particular, had been built up in my mind, the ultimate destination and the ultimate goal.

Finally, on June 3, I arrived in Yosemite Valley with five weeks to climb. I carefully packed eight days worth of supplies, gear, ropes, and hardware into my haul bags, and within an hour of entering the Valley, I was humping loads to the base of The Captain.

After a day and a half climbing to the top of pitch eight, a gathering storm threatened several days of rain. I storm-proofed my gear and

swung over to the fixed Heart Ledge rappels to head down to the valley floor. Three days of rest gave me time to decide if I was going to commit to the route. On June 8 I decided to head back up on the wall with two additional days of supplies.

After a couple more days of progress, I decided to take a rest day on a small sloping ledge below Pitch 24: the first crux. Now I was on to the upper pitches of the Muir and was starting to feel truly alone. There was a decent stance on a slab I used to set up and eat. I had enough supplies and the weather looked great for several more days. The past several days had been great, falling into the rhythm of solo climbing, sleeping well, and finding a peace I had been missing for quite a while.

On June 12 I went through the morning routine and got ready to lead Pitch 24, a classic thin nutting dihedral. I began the pitch with a #00 Black Diamond C3 and then placed two small DMM nuts. I then made a cam hook placement up to a yellow HB brass nut. Bouncing the nut resulted in some shift but I had confidence in the nuts body weight ability. Then I placed a green HB brass, more shifting, but it seemed fairly solid. I was getting close to a fixed Alien and I decided to place a cam hook to gain the fixed piece. As I tested the hook, several things went wrong in quick succession. The hook popped and I shifted onto the green HB with my fifi hook, shock loading the nut and pulling it out of the crack. As I fell, the next HB nut popped as well. My left foot hit the slab after I had fallen about 20 feet and I continued to fall about a body length as I crumpled onto the slab.

My left ankle hurt but nothing else. My head and spine seemed all right and I was able to move my neck with no pain. I stood up on the slab with my right foot and gingerly weighted my left foot. Instant blinding pain shot up my leg. I had fallen near the belay so I went to it and took off the gear rack. I dug out my day supplies bag and reached for the Ibuprofen and my cell phone. It was now 8:45 a.m.

I tried to call my oldest friend, climbing partner, and emergency contact, Jesse but the phone wouldn't dial out. I tried five, ten, a dozen times. I screamed at it, I pleaded with it, I begged it, and finally it dialed out. I had to hold the phone in a specific position for it to work.

I said that I was in trouble and told him that I thought I'd broken my ankle.

How quickly I had given up on the self-reliance of a solo ascent once a real problem reared its head. I could try and rappel the Muir. With the last few pitches being overhanging, and then several traversing pitches to regain Grey Ledges, I would have had to down-aid quite a bit. I also wondered if I could rappel over to The Nose. Making the rappels happen with the use of only one leg would be difficult and painful. The last option was to call YOSAR for a rescue. At the time, I did not want to consider this option. I was in the mentality of being a self-reliant climber. Jesse suggested we at least call YOSAR and make them aware of the situation. To save my phone we decided that Jesse would call them.

After fifteen minutes I got a call from Jack at YOSAR. After a quick assessment with an EMT, we started discussing the situation. Down-aiding was definitely going to be necessary to bail.

I set up my portaledge and took a closer look at my foot and ankle by removing my shoes and socks and placing my feet next to each other. It was obvious that my left ankle had a significant deformity. However, I could move my toes and circulation looked good. I began to think more seriously about a YOSAR rescue. I was still feeling like I should attempt to self-rescue. But doubts started to seriously enter my mind for the first time.

I called Jack back and he told me if I felt confident that I could self-rescue, I should. If not, YOSAR would begin mounting a rescue from the summit of El Cap. He also pointed out to me that if I got in trouble lower down on the wall, a rescue would only become more complicated for them. "I'll wait here for a rescue." I had three days of food and water left, which was good, because a more effective rescue effort could be mounted the next day. It was 11:30 a.m.

As soon as I got off the phone my mind started swirling. I was going to have to wait at least another 24 hours for rescue. I looked at the pitch above me. I felt failure and embarrassment. I knew that if I stopped moving, I would have to confront the reality of everything that had happened that morning. I cursed myself, I cursed El Cap, and I cursed Yvon Chouinard, TM Herbert, and Royal Robbins. I cursed climbing, cam hooks, and small nuts. I cursed myself again. I ate and drank. I got out my bivy gear and set up for the long wait. I wrapped my power-stretch around my foot and ankle for compression and splinted it using my wall hammer and athletic tape. I did everything I could think of.

I woke to a woman's voice saying "Matt....911." I realized with a jolt that she was talking to me from the valley with a loudspeaker. "Matt Seymour, if you can hear me raise one hand to acknowledge." The hand goes up. "If your phone still works dial 9-1-1." Soon I was on the phone with Jack again. The rescue was mobilizing.

At some point, I was looking out at the valley and casually looked up to see someone about 50 feet above me being lowered to my position. I got up and broke down my ledge. Jesse got to my ledge. He took my hand and shook it.

### **Analysis**

A few things came out of the initial analyses that are worth noting. First, a cell phone turned out to be the most important piece of gear I had. Without it I would have been down to S.O.S. with a headlamp until someone saw me, but YOSAR would have had difficulty determining exactly what my problem was.

Another point on this is that I have a SPOT, but it was safely in my car. When the time came, to make the cell call, I had fairly poor service. The SPOT would have provided the backup.

Second, my level of medical training was not up to snuff. My front country First Responder certification was four years expired. If I had current training, I

probably would not have missed the minor trauma to my head. After the rescue I was told they probably would have extracted me sooner had they known about the head injury. I ended with a fractured calcaneus and talus (which was also dislocated) and severely sprained ankle.

We want to see ourselves—and others—in our best moments. However, it is our failures that often truly shape us. Warren Harding climbed The Nose in part because he missed out on the first ascent of Half Dome. I failed to climb El Capitan this time. But I have learned more about my goals and what motivates me than I have in a long time. (Source: Edited from a report written by Jason Seymour – 26)

## **STRANDED, FATIGUE, INADEQUATE WATER, INEXPERIENCE** **California, Yosemite Valley, Royal Arches**

On July 3, Cindy Lu (32) and I, Leo Wu (35), climbed Royal Arches. Despite it being our first really long climb, it had gone well. After starting at 5:30 a.m. we reached the first rappel at 4:30 p.m. Sunset was at 8:30 p.m., and we expected to be down in an hour or two, so we had plenty of daylight. We were happy and confident and looking forward to dinner, but by this time we were also exhausted and dehydrated. We had spent a long and very hot day in the sun with two liters of water each (plus keeping a third liter each in reserve for the descent), and we were climbing on three hours of sleep for each of the last three days, due mostly to travel from the East Coast.

We had no problems until we got to our seventh rappel, where there is only a tree with a bunch of slings and rap rings. Since all of the previous stations had been two or three-bolt anchors, I was expecting the same thing every time, so when I saw the tree anchor but no bolts, I thought I was off route. We were using double 60-m ropes so we had skipped a few anchors on the descent and no longer knew which rappel we were on. I figured we were OK because one station must lead to another, and since all the previous rappels had been straight down, I assumed this one would be too. (As we learned much later, we were at station No. 9 [SuperTopo] and should have rappelled down a ramp to the right, as shown on the topo.)

If I read the topo at all while I was at the tree I didn't figure it out. All I had in my mind was that I was off route but had a rappel station and two 60-m ropes, so I should be okay. I was so sure of myself that I never considered exploring the ramp. I told Cindy it might take a while to find the next station, and then I started rappelling. I didn't see anything for quite a distance, but that had been the case with earlier rappels, so I wasn't concerned. Finally, I saw two bolts with several slings directly below me, with an easy rappel from there to the huge ledge that is one rappel from the ground. So that had to be the right anchor, but when I got there, the ropes were two feet short, even with rope stretch. I had tied them together with two flat