

Joe tucked to avoid being struck in the head and rolled left. The crushing force of the stone was surreal as it compressed his body. Striking first his left shoulder blade, the rough limestone dug several lacerations and scrapes. The left quadriceps seemed to take the majority of the force—almost catching the block. He stopped laying face down ten feet from his original belay seat.

Joe was conscious and held onto the belay, expecting Chris to be pulled from her stance by his rolling. In terror, Chris watched an event that she thought would kill her beloved. She was stable on the ledge, but did not secure herself promptly. Joe tried to communicate to Holly to make sure the area was safe, call for help and for someone to take the belay. Joe was using his BD ATC Guide belay/rappel device rather than the Grigri in their pack. After the initial shock, Chris was able to secure herself into the anchor using a PAS.

Moments later other climbers responded to the commotion. The first couple on the scene was a newly certified EMT and his WFR-trained partner. Someone took over the belay while the EMT did a head-to-toe examination of Joe. It was deemed that Joe had not suffered any head or back injuries and was helped to a seated position. Severely shaken, Chris was lowered and cleaned the route.

The amazingly mild injuries sustained during this accident allowed Joe to hike out a quarter mile aided by several other climbers to a vehicle that had been driven into the area. At the hospital it was confirmed that there were no broken bones, head or spinal injuries. Bruised ribs, a contusion of the left quadriceps, a laceration on left shoulder blade and a small puncture wound on the left ankle were the only injuries sustained. The bruised ribs took eight weeks to heal.

### **Analysis**

Test every hold, even in a well-traveled area. Climbing above a standard route will likely be unclean and loose. Do not sit during a belay if at all possible to give greater agility. An auto-locking belay device, if used correctly, can greatly increase the safety if the belayer were to be rendered unconscious. (Source: Edited from a report by J. Black)

## **FALL ON ROCK – POOR COMMUNICATION**

### **Colorado, Clear Creek Canyon**

On Tuesday May 17, American Alpine Club (AAC) Executive Director Phil Powers (50) took four of his employees—Keegan Young, Penn Burris, Sarah Wood, and Deanne Buck—climbing at High Wire Crag in Clear Creek Canyon, a popular and accessible sport climbing area near the AAC headquarters in Golden. The group had varying levels and numbers of years of climbing experience. The goal of the day was team building and preparation for a two-day climbing retreat they had planned for early June.

Upon arrival at the crag, Powers led Cracker Jack (5.8) with Wood belaying him from the ground. He attached two quickdraws to the

anchor chains, ran the rope through quickdraws, and was lowered to the ground. Next, Wood climbed Cracker Jack on top rope with Powers belaying. Wood removed the intermediate quickdraws as she climbed the route. She left the quickdraws in place at the anchor and was lowered to the ground. Powers then climbed Bypass (5.10), the route to the immediate right of Cracker Jack on top rope. Wood again belayed Powers from the ground. Powers and Wood had not discussed whether Powers would rappel or be lowered. In addition, the area where the group was climbing is directly above the highway and river. Verbal communication once Powers was climbing was difficult and, once above an overhang, he was out of the belayer's view.

When Powers reached the anchor, he decided to thread the rope directly through the permanent chains to avoid having a less experienced climber clean the anchor later in the day. He shouted for slack. Wood heard his call and fed him some rope. Wood then thought she heard Powers call, "Off belay." Wood paid out rope but kept Powers on belay to make sure he was intending to rappel.

Once the rope was threaded through the anchor, Powers decided to place an intermediate anchor or directional (quickdraw) high on Cracker Jack to improve the rope placement for the next climber. The rock was low angle, so Powers was able to down-climb about 20 feet. He placed a quick draw on the second-to-last bolt on Cracker Jack. The action of the rope as Powers was down-climbing seemed to Wood as if he was pulling up rope to arrange a rappel. Wood again thought she heard, "Off belay," so she removed the rope from her belay device and called up to Powers that he was off. At the same moment, Powers clipped the rope into the directional quickdraw, called for tension, leaned back on the rope and fell 70 feet to the ground.

Powers' companions administered first aid immediately and runners were sent down to the road to and up to a high point for a cell signal. The Golden Fire Department responded and carried Powers by litter to the highway where he was taken by Flight for Life to St. Anthony's Hospital in Denver. Global Rescue was also contacted. Powers sustained substantial internal injuries, broken C6, C7, T6 and L1 vertebrae, thirteen broken ribs and a broken left humerus as a result of the fall.

### **Analysis**

As the more experienced climber, it was my responsibility to acknowledge my belayer's experience level and give her more information before leaving the ground, especially at such a noisy location. Wood reported that in her past experiences, it was common practice for her climbing partners to rappel from the bolt anchor. "I couldn't see Phil, and the road and river noise made hearing difficult as well. When Phil climbed down to place the directional, it felt to me like he was pulling up the rope he would need to rappel on. The combination of signals I was receiving led me to believe he wanted to be taken off belay so that he could rappel."

Because Wood was not able to see or clearly hear Powers as he was climbing, failure to discuss what Powers planned to do when he reached the anchors contributed to the confusion that caused this accident. Clearer communication and planning can prevent accidents like this from happening to climbers of all skill levels and experience. That said, taking a climber off belay is a serious decision that should only be made when there is complete clarity about the situation. (Source: Phil Powers)

## **FALL ON ROCK, ROCKFALL**

### **Colorado, Poudre Canyon**

Late in the day on May 23 a female climber (31) was injured when she was struck by a rock and fell about 20 feet in Poudre Canyon, which is northwest of Fort Collins. She suffered a broken ankle, a crushing injury to her hand, and head lacerations. She was wearing a helmet.

She was transported to Poudre Valley Hospital after an hours-long rescue hampered by rugged terrain and darkness. (Source: 9news.com)

### **Analysis**

Rockfall is a common objective hazard in many areas. Be prepared by becoming aware of those areas where it is common and develop the appropriate tactics to avoid being struck by rock fall. (Source: Aram Attarian)

## **FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT, NO HARD HAT**

### **Colorado, Boulder Canyon, Practice Rock**

Reid Pletcher (22), and I (Mali Noyes) were climbing together on May 26. This was going to be our last climb of the day. He was leading the climb, placing gear as he ascended. When he was about 20-30 feet up the wall, he unexpectedly fell. At this point, he had four trad pieces in, but the top two pulled out. He landed on the rock ledge next to me. Because the ledge is downward sloping, I had to keep Reid on belay to keep him from sliding off the ledge. So I called for help.

For the minute or two that I waited for help, I could see Reid spitting and slowly moving his arms and legs. The four other climbers that were nearby were very helpful. We tried to calm him down and stabilize his head. He had a laceration on the back of his head and was bleeding a lot from his left ear. He was very confused and uncooperative. He kept on trying to stand up. While it was not ideal, he was most comfortable in the fetal position with his head in my lap. I applied pressure to the laceration on the back of his head and treated him the best I could for shock. While I was not next to him for the first one to two minutes after the fall, he was conscious and knew his name and my name the entire time. The Nederland Fire Department, Pridemark Paramedics, and Rocky Mountain Rescue safely removed Pletcher from the rock ledge and he was taken by helicopter to St. Anthony's Hospital where he was diagnosed with two skull fractures, brain contusions with a subdural hemorrhage and a wrist contusion. He is expected to make a full recovery after rehabilitation.