

As a neuroscientist, I feel particularly qualified to respond to ‘I just don’t see how this happens’. The answer is very simple, though it is also hard to confront and accept: Humans are fallible and our attention is imperfect. Human fallibility is why we tie knots in the ends of ropes, though that isn’t always the answer. It’s why auto-locking devices exist, though those sometimes cause new problems.

There are thousands of experiments and papers and such, accidents on all kinds of scales that demonstrate the imperfection of human attention. No one is exempt as appealing as it is to think that experts or experienced people might or should be. As ‘R.G.’ said, “Like many things in climbing, you can do it right thousands of times, screw it up once, and you’re hosed.” As for me, I get to live, walk, and climb again - and try harder to pay better attention. (Source: Edited from a report sent in by Julie Haas – 40)

FALLS ON ROCK (7), PROTECTION PULLED OUT (2), INADEQUATE PROTECTION, RAPPEL ERRORS (2), BELAY ERROR

New York, Mohonk Preserve, Shawangunks

Seven reports were submitted for 2011 (including the narrative above).

There was only one long fall. This male climber, who had over 20 years of experience, was rappelling after roped soloing when the rappel “system failed”.

The average age of the climbers was 41 and the level of route difficulty was 5.8. The injuries included one sprains/strain, two lacerations, one dislocation, and two “unknowns” because the climbers refused care.

Four of the climbers were experienced, one had none of little experience and the others were unknown. (Source: From reports submitted by Mohonk Preserve)

FALL ON ROCK – FALL ON ROCK

North Carolina, Pilot Mountain State Park

On February 13, several others and I witnessed a long fall that resulted in a climber hitting the ground. I was climbing Foreign Trade Zone while a party of two was top-roping some variation of Bat Out of Hell (5.11). The climber reached the top of the route while I was about halfway up Foreign Trade Zone. I heard a “whoosh” and a loud thump and looked down to see the climber yell and bounce off the ground.

My belayer lowered me and we sent a couple people up the trail to call 911 and notify Park personnel. Meanwhile, the climber’s partner, a couple others, and I tried to keep him still and attend to a small cut on the back of his head. He was alert, not injured, and otherwise seemed okay. Rangers and EMS arrived fairly quickly and checked him out. He was up and walking around and refused treatment. Both actually kept climbing.

His apparent lack of injury was pretty amazing to me. He had fallen from the top of the route, which I’d estimate at ~40 feet, and landed

on his back/butt. His belayer had taken him off belay, assuming he was going to rappel, when he was, in fact, expecting to be lowered.

Analysis

This was a case of miscommunication between poorly trained, novice climbers. The climber never requested to be taken off belay. The belayer took him off and called, "Belay is off!" The climber never heard this and expected to be lowered. Anytime there is a belay change, especially at busy crags where it may also be hard to hear, always yell the person's name in the command. The anchor was inspected and found to have been constructed with the rope passing over a large ledge at the top of the route, thus creating a lot of rope drag. This configuration may have saved the climber from serious injury due to the friction in the system. It actually slowed down at least half of his fall. (Source: Edited from a post by C. Sproul on carolinaclimbers.org)

FALL ON ROCK, INADEQUATE BELAY, ROPE PULLS THROUGH BELAY DEVICE, NO HELMET

North Carolina, Looking Glass Rock

On March 23 around 1:50 p.m., a male climber (26) fell approximately 45 feet on the South Face of Looking Glass Rock. He had led Good Intentions (5.6) and traversed right to a set of rappel bolts over the climb Left Up, where he anchored to the bolts with the intent of being lowered. On his descent he was swinging over to remove gear.

At some point, the belayer stated that the rope end passed through the belay device and the climber fell to the ground. The climber suffered head and other injuries to the chest. EMS services were contacted and the patient was airlifted to Mission Hospital in Asheville, NC.

Analysis

The rope was tied to the climber and there was no apparent failure at the anchor point. There were still four pieces of gear in the rock that the rope was going through. The end of the rope on the belay side was approximately 25 feet in the air. The climber was wearing a helmet. The length of rope was unknown. The belay end of the rope did not have a back up knot. Typically a 60-meter rope will not be long enough to complete this maneuver.

Please remember to close the system while climbing. Either tie a back up knot on the end of the rope or tie in the belayer. This is measure can help prevent incidents. Also, please wear helmets while climbing. (Source: Patrick Weaver – Appalachian Mountain Institute)

FALL ON ROCK, PROTECTION PULLED OUT, CLIMBING ALONE

North Carolina, Looking Glass Rock, Invisible Airways

On the morning of April 12, Parker Kempf (21) was attempting an all-clean aid (solo) ascent of Invisible Airways (A2) on the north side of