

When the Rope Becomes a Hazard

DOUBLE FATALITY ON MOUNT WASHINGTON

Needle-like summits have always exuded a particular siren song. The spire of spires is the Matterhorn (14,691 feet), first ascended in 1865 by Edward Whymper et al., as led by the Chamonix guide Michael Croz. While Whymper and two of his teammates survived, Croz and three others didn't: They were dragged to their deaths, roped together but not anchored, high on the peak when one climber slipped while descending. The incident haunted Whymper until his death, in 1911.

A similar tragedy occurred in 2004 on Mount Washington (7,794 feet) in the High Cascades of central Oregon, near Bend. This slender finger of volcanic rock beckons climbers, who normally approach via a casual three-mile hike from the pleasant Big Lake.

Because of its beauty, accessibility and notoriously soft, crumbly rock, Mount Washington has been the scene of many accidents, including deaths. The mountain claimed its latest fatalities in July 2004, when two climbers, ages 46 and 50, fell 400 feet down the west face, home to roughly eight Grade II routes ranging from 5.6 to 5.10. The climbers, neither of whom had previously scaled the mountain, were reported missing when they failed to return on schedule. They were found at the base of the wall roped together but with no gear on the cord between them.

ANALYSIS

According to Robert Speik, a climbing instructor of 30 years from Bend who posted an analysis of the accident on his website traditionalmountaineering.org, one climber was found with an unlocked locker on his harness. A Sticht plate and six-foot sling with two carabiners were found nearby.

"The fellow who fell first was trying to set up a rappel and pulled his partner off," Speik posits. Though the peak has an alternate descent—a walk-off with only one rappel—Speik surmises that the men intended to rappel their line of ascent, likely the Central Pillar (II 5.8). Their gear, which appeared dated (e.g. the Sticht plate) but not well used, points to the fact that the pair, both

experienced climbers, may have climbed rock some, but not often.

For most climbers, says Speik,

"The main lesson here is that climbing at [for instance] a world-class crag like Smith

Rock doesn't translate well into climbing on friable mountain rock."

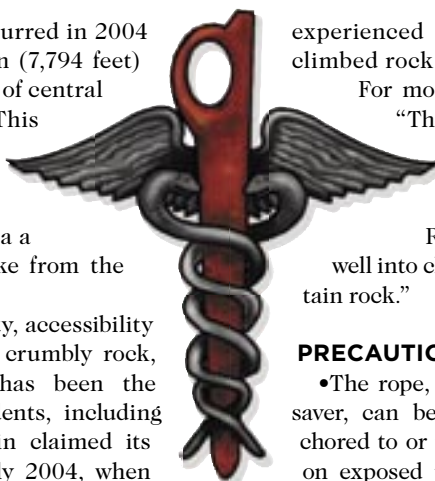
PRECAUTIONS

- The rope, rather than being a life saver, can be deadly unless it's anchored to or through solid protection on exposed terrain, be it 45-degree snow, class III rock or a 5.9 jam crack.
- It's easy to get complacent on third- or fourth-class terrain, saying, "We'll just stay tied in and scramble over to those rap slings." However, if one climber falls in such a situation, she'll likely pull her partner with her. Had the two men on Mount Washington not been roped together, one of them might have survived.

•While slow, simul-climbing (placing protection on the fly) and/or leading (placing protection and constructing belays as you go) are much safer on easier ground than unroping and scrambling. This is especially true on unknown territory, where surprise cruxes could force you into making a hasty, potentially fatal decision.

•Alternately, a less recommended but quicker method is to unrope and simul-solo, maintaining a safe distance (at least 100 feet, though it can vary) from your partner in case of a fall or rockfall. If, however, one of you does not feel comfortable soloing, stay roped up and place pro, especially if there is a disparity in climbing experience. *Never* pressure your partner into unroping. If someone pressures you, refuse.

—MATT SAMET



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