

## **An Ordinary Fall**

The Prow. A 5.11- thin hands/fingers crack. One of the Forks classics that my partner had top-roped twice and led once. He was going for the red-point on his second attempt of the day, just after we had finished a bit of eating and a little Arizona siesta. I was still a bit groggy after lying in the warm mountain air for an hour so I didn't notice just how nervous he appeared, how tight. Only on reflection did these details emerge. Hindsight is a deadly 20/20.

Instead, I watched as he placed a nut at mid-chest level. He was starting the route from a five-meter high pillar and the nut was meant to keep him from slipping off of the pillar should he fall early. He gingerly moved his hands up the crack as his feet felt for the top of a six-foot tall flake of rock that obstructed the crack. Once he stood atop this nice foothold, he stopped and placed a beautiful .5 Camalot as high as he could reach. This crack was made for stuffing gear.

I would have sewn it up. But I would probably have flagged myself out as well, so who am I to critique a successful climber. My partner, Brad, was just back from Yosemite where he spent a month throwing himself at the Valley classics and developing his crack technique. Now he was back home and trying to cruise all of the local classics.

The crack was thin. He moved both hands high and punched his feet into the crack.

Only a wisp of rubber cammed its way into the crack, but at 130 lbs., Brad is only a wisp himself and so up he cruised.

He moved until the piece was at mid-waist but his motions seemed tight and he was flailing at the crack a bit. I was relieved when he moved back down onto the flake to re-examine the crack. He needed to rethink his strategy I thought and get himself pumped to fire this thing. He had that lack of passion that can occasionally bog-down a climber who is thinking more of conquering a 'classic' route with a flashy rating than of enjoying the sensation of defying gravity. The purity of the movement become lost in the desperate need to add to one's achievements, to carve another notch in the bedpost.

When climbing is not fun, its time to take off the shoes, grab the camera, and take a walk. With a deep breath, he began to move again. Punch, punch, punch. He slowly convinced the thin crack to accept part of his climbing shoe. Both feet just below the Camalot, one foot above, now one foot on top of the Camalot, no, Brad, that's no good, now two feet above, a step higher...then his whole body got the shakes. And he slouched down onto his feet with his arms extended above him as if in supplication to the rock; 'please don't spit me out of your tenuous embrace'.

"Damn, he's gonna blow off" I thought to myself.

He held on, sucked up a breath and began to move off of his feet. "Nice," I thought. The words "Way to hold it together, Brad" was just forming in my mind when he began to fall. In a split second he was below the Camalot, and it never even slowed him down.

Time was suddenly broken into micro-seconds as the piece hit him in the chest and a deep howlish moan emanated from deep within his soul as it realized he was going for a BIG ride. It was like a sob but magnified to the power of a scream; yet far more hideous a sound than any scream could achieve.

I was locked and braced for the impact because I knew the nut was still good. One of his feet hit the top of the flake and began the cartwheel of his limp body. A rude parody of a dummy thrown over a cliff. He landed flat on the small of his back on the edge of the

pillar. His lower body on the pillar, his shoulders and head in space and his lumbar spine smacking with a sickening thud on the edge. But gravity was not done with this upstart who dared challenge its supremacy. Brad's body continued its downward motion and the back of his head smashed into the side of the pillar.

Again he turned over in mid-air and then crashed through some tall bushes towards me. I could see the blood gushing behind his ear and covering his face as he came closer.

Then the nut caught and he was jerked to a halt two feet above the ground. He was held face-down somehow by the bushes, so that his hands could just touch the bare dirt and the blood could continue fountaining around his ear and dripping to the ground.

Finally the hideous shouted moan ceased as he drunkenly turned his head to me and mumbled "John...what...what did I do wrong?"

I was standing there, holding him off the ground, wondering how long I could keep him alive, and this question and implicit demand for help penetrated my heart like a cold dagger. My own joy at not having taken that fall stabbed me with guilt; blaming me for something I was in no position to avoid. My own near falls, free-soloes, and long run-outs came crashing into my mind, paralyzing me momentarily. All of my former fears and nightmares had come to life in front of my eyes. But it wasn't I who had to pay this bill to the fates. Seeing the fall and the blood, I thought he only would live 15 or 20 minutes and there wouldn't be a damn thing I could do about it as he began coughing up blood and lost consciousness. But I was going to do everything in my power and let the dice fall where they would.

Slowly, I lowered him to the ground to stop his struggles as he fought to clear himself from the bushes and to turn himself over. He resumed moaning but only for a moment or two. A quiet moan of desperation that was only an echo of its predecessor.

I quickly moved to help turn him over as our friend Robin ran into the scene. She had had some medical training and we both knew we had to stabilize his head and neck to limit any further injury to his spine. She quickly moved to sit behind him and placed her hands on each side of his neck and jaw to immobilize the cervical section of the spine.

I removed his helmet. Yes, he was wearing a helmet. The only one of our group to do so. And it unquestionably saved his life. Instead of a skull fracture, he had a scalp laceration and a busted Petzl helmet.

But there were chunks of skin and hair balled up and blood pouring forth even with this protection. I quickly used Robin's shirt to stop the bleeding from the scalp wound by tying the shirt into place with a couple of long slings.

Just then, our friend Sam called down from the top of the cliff – "Is everyone OK?"

I yelled up to him "No, Brad fell real damn bad. There is a cell phone in the truck. Call 911 and tell them we need a backboard and a helicopter." Sam's head disappeared as he moved to comply with my request. Fortunately, no one lost their shit during this whole experience.

I turned back to Brad and examined his head further. The bleeding was clotting very nicely in the shirt. I palpated for pain or deformity on the spine starting from the base of the skull and moving downward.

"No pain; No pain; Yes, I can feel that; No pain." All of my queries to him were hopeful. He didn't have any gaps or major lumps on his spine. He had a small lump in the lumbar region where he had hit the edge of the pillar. I pulled up his shirt and he had an awful looking bruise/cut in the muscles of his back, but the spine looked like it was OK. I think

the big back muscles absorbed the blow and protected his spinal cord– I guess climbing does pay off.

The spine looked OK but Brad was beginning to look worse. His eyes were fully blood-shot like a drunk on a bender, but on the good side, the pupils were not dilated and were of equal size. He was breathing quickly and his skin was pale and sallow with profuse sweating. “Oh, oh,” I thought, “internal injuries and bleeding.” I needed to take a pulse badly but none of us had a watch so I added it to the list of things to be done when I had more help.

I tested his feet and hands and made sure he could move them and feel a gentle touch on each extremity. Good, the spine is looking better and better. When he moved his left arm he said it REALLY hurt. Sure enough, the bottom of the elbow was bleeding a thick steady stream and the joint was badly deformed. Probably the tubercle was broken off or at least the tendons are badly mangled. Either way, there was little I could do other than stabilizing it so that it couldn't move and tear other nerves or tendons. And of course stop the bleeding. Someone can bleed to death very quickly even from a small wound and so that was my priority. I had given my shirt to Robin when I realized that she was only in a bra, but I had to reclaim it for Brad's arm. It was a Jonny Quest shirt that I had just received for my thirtieth birthday and I thought it ironic that Jonny Quest's first job was bandaging a compound fracture.

“Quite a little party we are having”, I thought.

The arm was tough because it hurt him if I put too much pressure and it cut off the circulation to the hand, but the damn bleeding wouldn't stop without a great deal of pressure. Bleeding to death is more important than impaired motion to the hand, so I tightened that sucker as tight I could get it to go. But, hey, it's a t-shirt so I knew I needed more bandages and clothing to work with if I was going to control the head and arm bleeding.

Fortunately, Sam picked this moment to return to the cliff top with the cell phone and our other friend Tracy. The 911 operator was playing musical jurisdictions with Sam but quickly he was talking to the correct people and I relayed up to him my request again for a backboard and a helicopter. Once he was off the phone, I told him I needed a watch and a lot more clothing, towels if he could find them. Within a moment, he dropped a woman's watch to me. I fumbled the catch and it hit the ground.

“Takes a lickin' and keeps on tickin'” I yelled up to Sam and quickly checked Brad to see if he smiled. Yes...a very good sign.

Apparently, a small crowd had gathered upon hearing Brad's deathmoansob and had come to offer help. I never even saw the woman, she left after a couple of hours and told Sam to just keep the watch. It is nice to find Samaritans in today's jaded world.

With the new timepiece, I found his pulse was 104 – high but not that bad considering the effort he had just put into climbing. Still, it was high enough that internal bleeding was my number one concern. I palpated each quadrant of his abdomen. “No pain” he repeated on each query, “no more than normal when some guy is pushing your belly.”

Good, he is getting back his sense of humor. The abdomen, the ribcage, the sternum, and the kidneys all checked out negative for pain, swelling, or tenderness.

I checked the extremities again and found perfect sensation, circulation, and movement in the feet and hands. Damn, I can't believe it. The worst fall I ever want to see and this kid is going to be fine.

Then I checked the elbow. We had placed the elbow on Robin's knee to keep it elevated to slow the bleeding. She told me it felt wet and asked to check it again. Sure enough, there was a slow steady bleed.

"Sam, I need some t-shirts and cloth as soon as you can get it to me!"

He poked his head over again and yelled, "just got them, they are coming down."

Two t-shirts and a towel. Finally, I had enough cloth to start plugging the holes a bit better.

"Also, I need a thin board or something to make a splint for his arm" I yelled.

Sam's head disappeared for a moment and then popped back in view. "How about a pack stay?" he asked.

"Perfect" I replied and then was almost harpooned by a speeding blade of aluminum.

With my tools in hand, I returned to Brad's side. First the head because I didn't want to risk an infection and meningitis even if it looked like a surface wound. Off came the slings and on went the towel. I left the t-shirt below it to continue the clotting.

"A new style for you Brad, nice turban" Robin quipped and again Brad managed a smile. Better and Better. His breaths were slowing down and growing deeper. His face was not so flushed any more and the sweat was gone. His pulse was still 103 but that's not too bad I thought considering his adrenaline.

Now for the arm. I slipped the pack stay below the existing bandage and then tied a second bandage further up on the bicep both to hold the stay in place and to place more pressure on the brachial artery and try to halt that bleeding. The jarring had him gritting his teeth but he sucked it up and told me to do what I needed to do.

The bleeding seemed to have stopped and so I did another survey of his internal organs. No pain or tenderness anywhere. Things looked better and better and I began to believe we would get out of this OK.

Another climber from a nearby route came over to offer what help he could.

"An ace bandage and something sterile would be wonderful" I asked hopefully.

Sure enough, he returned a moment later with an ace and some gauze. But by then I had finished my bandaging and I thought it would hold OK.

"Save it for the next time," I told him, "but thank you, seriously."

Another Samaritan who came and went but left a good feeling for all of us. Brad began to look relatively normal other than an understandable twinge of fear in his eyes.

"So, John, does it look like the arm is broken?" he asked hesitantly. I told him no, that it looked like it was only the tendons that were messed up. I don't have x-ray eyes and I wasn't going to let my conjecture of a broken arm scare him even more. I checked the rest of the arm and shoulder and told him that other than the elbow, everything looked perfectly normal.

Now we had a chance to take a deep breath.

"What sort of ETA do we have for the search and rescue guys?" I yelled up at Sam.

"Thirty minutes" he replied. Serving with Southern Arizona search and rescue, I was familiar with just how long it took to get things organized but it didn't make me any less antsy to have some help.

"What do you want to do now?" he asked.

I wanted to move Brad into a prone position and get that back stabilized and so I told Sam to send down some help. But after a moment's thought, I realized that I would rather wait for trained help rather than risking the spine. So after Tracy came down, I

told him to not send anyone else. Sam I especially wanted on top because he was calm and incredibly helpful; anticipating every need and fulfilling it as quickly as possible. With Tracy to help hold Brad in position, I made him more comfortable by putting a blanket on him (for shock) and placing our last shirt over Robin's bare torso.

"Getting hugged by two gorgeous women" Robin remarked, "this is your lucky day Brad." He tried to laugh but was not yet so sure of his recovery that he could fully enjoy the humor.

Another check of the pulse revealed that it was still at 104. I'll take a steady pulse any day of the week, especially since everything else looked so good. I checked Brad's circulation and sensation in his extremities again. The hurt arm had a very weak pulse. I told Brad everything was looking very good but that I needed to re-adjust the bandage on his arm. He told me it was feeling numb and that further justified my decision to loosen the bandage. But when I loosened it up, the blood began to flow steadily. Damn, why didn't I keep that Ace bandage when I had the change. I yelled up to Sam, but this time the chubby bearded face of a sheriff responded to my call.

"How is he doing?" the officer wanted to know.

"Brad's stable but I need a backboard and a roller bandage with some gauze." I yelled up, "The roller bandage and gauze ASAP, I can't control the bleeding in his arm without it". But the officer didn't know who I was and preferred to wait for trained EMT's to apply any fancy bandages so I just had to wait and keep playing with my shoddy t-shirt effort. At this point it became a waiting game. The helicopter and search and rescue team were both on their way but would take thirty minutes or more to reach us. I reassured Brad again that things were looking good and then we all began to talk, trying to pass the time and forget the horror of what had just happened. Brad's pulse finally began to creep back into the 90's and he still had good reflexes everywhere except in the hurt arm. We talked about how we would decorate the cast and Robin complained with a smile that Brad wouldn't be in to help her at work on Monday.

Finally, Brad asked if I could loosen the bandage on his arm. He said it really hurt. I tried to re-tie it with long slings but I just couldn't get the bleeding to stop. I yelled to the top of the cliff again and told the sheriff that I had a REAL problem down here with this arm and that I needed a roller bandage and gauze. A doctor had driven by and been corralled over to help us. When I yelled up a brief summary of Brad's condition, the doctor said Brad would be OK and told the sheriff to give me my bandages.

About this time we heard the sweet sounds of a helicopter approaching our canyon. Woof, woof, woof, it came closer. Finally, I had to cover Brad's face to keep the debris from getting in his eyes as the chopper buzzed us twice. Once he had sized up the situation, the pilot disappeared to find a suitable spot to land. About the same time, I heard a yell from above and down flew my roller bandage and gauze. Finally. I quickly stripped the blood soaked bandage from Brad's injured elbow and got another look at the wound. Ugly but I couldn't see any bone fragments so I applied the sterile gauze and then put a roller bandage on top of the gauze to hold it in place. A roller bandage is fantastic because it applies even pressure across the entire wound so that I didn't have to cut off circulation to the hand to stop the bleeding of the arm. By this time, Brad's elbow had gotten extremely sensitive so that any movement made him wince. I used the last bit of roller bandage to re-affix the pack stay split and checked his circulation to the hand.

"Much better" he told me and my observations of the distal pulse bore this out.

So we all settled back down to wait. “You get to ride in a helicopter, you lucky dog” we told Brad. “Yah, that should be cool.” he replied. By this time he was feeling better so he would nod in response to questions. “NO!” I exclaimed the first time, wanting to avoid any risk to a possibly injured spine. But afterwards I just kept admonishing him in a joking way so that he wouldn’t get all tense. People often become as injured as they believe they should be and I didn’t want any psychosomatic paralysis. Sort of silly I guess, but I was taking no chances.

“Woof, woof, woof” came the helicopter again. We all tensed up and looked at each other because we knew something was finally going to happen after three hours of waiting. Brad had been our charge and we had all built an emotional bond that was about to be shattered. I held onto Brad’s head while Robin slipped into a t-shirt. Three hours she had held his neck steady without a shirt, laying in the dirt, on rocks, with a bush scratching her shoulders. That was our last non-blood soaked item, so I stood there bare-chested in the fading afternoon light and watched the helicopter move to hover as close to us as he could get. Amazingly, he dropped below the lip of the canyon walls with one of his skids nearly touching a tree-top. Sam later told me that the people on top thought he was going to hit the wall itself he was so close. It was very late in the day and so gusts of wind would periodically buffet the chopper as the air cooled in the valley bottom but the pilot held it steady. We watched with a bit of awe at his skill as the door opened and someone began lowering equipment. First a back board (finally!), and then a large orange bag. Finally, the occupant began to repel down the rope himself, dodging the aspen trees that completely dominate the valley floor.

It was like a dream or a movie, watching silently while this figure gathered his gear together under the roar of the helicopter and then labored up the boulder-strewn slope, coming to take Brad from our protective embrace. Then he was here – assembling a backboard, setting (some cheap looking) head blocks to hold the neck in place, and laying out a huge red body bag that was to be Brad’s flight suit.

I offered some preliminary comments on Brad’s condition but this guy didn’t really care. Scoop-em and run is the general M.O. for paramedics and that was how this guy was operating. Of course for us, after three hours, I would have preferred to have taken a bit more time and done everything with greater care. So, I was a bit disenchanted as I help lift Brad onto the backboard and strap him into its security. But the important thing was that he was finally heading to the hospital so that all of my guesses about his condition could be validated or dismissed.

In a fifteen minute blur, Brad was gone. Darkness was descending, we had no flashlights or ropes to get out, only climbing shoes to wear for the long walk, and the hospital was going to be over an hour and a half drive. But Brad would live to climb another day and we had all done our best to help him. All of the inconveniences faded into insignificance because when I and Robin and Sam and Tracy had been tested, we kept our cool and helped a friend. That sort of self-affirmation doesn’t come around in ordinary life and so I felt a sort of warm glow as we gathered the scattered equipment and began the long hike out.