

Reflecting on Advanced Skills and Standards Workshop

Advanced Skills and Standards (ASAS) was an exciting and fast paced workshop. The lessons taught at ASAS covered introductory exercises, warm ups, games, low and high challenge course operating procedures, and thorough technical training on knots, equipment, construction, rescue procedures and risk management aspects of challenge course operation. Demonstration performance and small group problem solving were the primary means of teaching the technical portions of the workshop. The skills learned in the ASAS workshop are vital for maintaining safety on a challenge course. The ability to employ those skills when and where needed, provide course operators the ability to instill the high level of trust required for our participants to overcome the personal trepidation associated with challenge initiatives. The belay and rescue portions of the ASAS workshop were particularly instrumental to my personal ASAS experience.

Belaying Skills

Beyond the primary knowledge of common hardware and knots used on a challenge course comes the primary means of maintaining climber safety for high initiatives, *belaying*. I had learned belay techniques in a previous Technical Skills course. However, several of the techniques were foreign to me at the time. Upon attending the Technical Skills course, my only previous experience was on the job training at [my school's] Adventure Based Learning (ABL) course. The ABL course, which I now operate, primarily uses what would best be described as a Nut Eye Bolt version of a Just-Rite Descender in which the Nut Eye Bolts are staggered in the belay bench and are the belay system for all but one of my high events. When the different belay techniques were incorporated into various scenarios at ASAS, I began to really understand the situational uses for all of the techniques. For instance, a 1 person belay would be used for a competent belayer in a situation such as course maintenance or in a rescue scenario where the

only other people available have limited belaying skills. The 2 person belay adds a measure of safety. The back-up belayer is a second set of eyes on the climber, can keep the rope out of the way, and can be used to build belay competency for the primary belayer. The 2 person belay is also useful for traversing belays. The back-up belayer can manage the rope, keeping it clean and out of the way, and allows the primary belayer to keep his/her full attention on the climber. A third person can be added as an anchor for the primary belayer to keep the primary belayer from being lifted off the ground in a situation where the climber is heavier than the belayer.

Australian and other forms of team belays are great belays for groups, taught easily, require a minimum of equipment, and incorporate trust, communication, and teamwork. The next challenges posed were situations requiring a person to remove himself from a belay.

Belay Escapes

Belay escapes were completely new to me prior to the ASAS workshop. The first rule of a belay escape was to keep it simple. There were a handful of experienced climbers and challenge course operators in my group and keeping it simple was initially hard to follow. One of the great learning points was not to overlook the obvious. I believe that our desire to use our technical skills to save the day often leads us to over-complication. In the first few challenges posed to the group, the tendency was to overlook the obvious for more lengthy and complex solutions. Surveying the situation and thinking the solution process through before acting was the key to avoiding over-complication.

My personal experience with belay escapes since the ASAS workshop have all been centered on course maintenance. More than once I have found myself at height and in need of a tool or hardware. The best solutions have been for either the belayer or climber to tie off (escape the belay) in order for someone on the ground to retrieve the needed equipment. This also happened to me during the ASAS workshop. I was on belay and some members of my group

needed my assistance for a moment. I was able to tie off a sherriff by running the brake side of the rope through the locking carabiner and tie it off back to the climber's side of the sherriff with a backed up half hitch, and attach a releasable load prusik to an anchor in a very short amount of time. Now that's experiential learning! As a result of my training, my facilitators and I always carry extra carabiners and slings in order to be prepared for belay escape and rescue scenarios.

Rescues

The rescue portion of the workshop was a great experience full of important information and challenges that may arise during high ropes events. The overarching themes were, to remain calm, to think the entire process through, and to keep the process simple. The most common experiences group participants and staff shared were instances that involved jammed clothing or hair in belay devices. Two preventative measures to avoid these types of jams from occurring are (1) to brief participants to secure loose clothing and hair before entering the challenge course and (2) to employ some type of device, a sling/cordalette/or SAFER lanyard positioning ring to move the belay device away from the body to help avoid objects from being entangled. When items do get caught in belay devices, performing a rescue may be the next step.

While learning and performing the various rescue procedures I encountered 3 particular learning moments. The first 2 were during my self-lower cut away rescue. While preparing to perform my first rescue, I inspected the rescue bag and noticed that the steel carabiner that connected my rescue figure eight to the belay line was a very old, perfectly symmetrical, screw gate, oval carabiner. All of the steel carabiners in the rescue bags at my facility are 2 stage auto-locking HMS type. Having noticed the difference, I deliberately positioned that particular carabiner so that when I clipped into the belay cable, it would be oriented with the gate opening down, allowing me to screw the gate closed in the down position after connecting it. Somewhere in the belay transfer process the steel oval carabiner had flipped over, changing the orientation to

the gate opening in the up position. Under the stress of a rescue I failed to notice the carabiner had flipped and I reached up and screwed the gate down, thinking I was securing it in the locked position when in fact, I was unlocking the gate. I had failed to perform a gate check before proceeding onto the cable. A ground observer caught the mistake right away and it was fortunate the incident happened on the practice course. While it was not life threatening, the experience left a strong impression.

The second challenge on the same rescue occurred as I was lowering myself to the rescue victim. The rescue scissors lanyard was attached to my side gear loop with a non-locking carabiner. As I was approaching the rescue victim, my body twisted from the twist in the rope and the rescue scissors carabiner clipped itself to the rescue victim's rope. The incident only slowed me down for a short period, but it did create an unwanted distraction. Two of Project Adventure's senior staff members were on site at the time and agreed that they had never seen and an accidental clip in happen in the past. This incident was another great lesson to have had on the practice course. The final lesson during the rescue portion of ASAS was not one learned, but one I taught.

As I observed the instructor demonstrate a 3 person zip-line rescue, I realized that a 3 person, 2 rope zip-line rescue may unnecessary. The rescuer's belay line could be utilized for getting the rescuer to the victim and the rescue lower, negating the need to involve another rope and belay system. With some reservation, the instructor agreed to try out my idea and it worked. The reason the suggestion worked is because there is a great deal more friction in the rescue figure 8 than in the zip-line pulley. The instructor had reservations about the viability of the new technique due to the potential inability for the rescuer to be lifted if he were inadvertently lowered below the victim's level. I performed 4 tests of my new zip-line rescue system at my [school's] course. We performed 2 lowers using a pulley on the zip-wire and 2 tests using a steel

carabiner on the zip-wire. Two of the results using the steel carabiner without the cable pulley, showed minimal lowering of the rescuer, 6” and 8” respectively. Any unwanted lowering of the rescuer was overcome by the rescuer holding onto the break side of the rescue line while traversing out to the victim. On the second attempt, the rescuer held the belay side of the rescue rope with one hand; and found that one hand was sufficient to avoid unwanted creep in the rescue line. The rescue portion of the ASAS workshop was particularly productive for me.

Conclusion

Attending the ASAS workshop has improved my ability to provide a safe and meaningful experience to my customers. According to Project Adventure's *Advanced Skills and Standards Workshop Manual*, "The ASAS workshop design provides learning at two levels, one as a participant and the other as a teacher/facilitator of an Adventure program" (Project Adventure, 2005). Being a participant in the ASAS workshop has helped me to empathize with my challenge course participants, and understand the processes that groups experience as they attend my home course. As a facilitator, the knowledge and confidence I gained from this training is reflected in my facilitation skills and technical knowledge. With that knowledge, participants are free to expand their personal height and trust envelope. After attending Project Adventure's Advanced Skills and Standards workshop, I know that I can handle an emergency situation in a safe and efficient manner and that I have the skills necessary to operate and maintain a first-class challenge course.

References

Project Adventure, Inc. (2005). *Advanced Skills and Standards: Workshop Manual*.

Beverly, MA.