

QMD Walks

Confidence Roping: A view on (NOT an instructional document!)

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When in the mountains people sometimes use a technique known as confidence roping on steep slopes and crags. Confidence roping is a form of short roping, which is an essential Alpine skill. However, in the UK confidence roping is distinguished from short roping. Confidence roping in the UK is defined as unplanned rope work where the consequences of a slip are minimal and will not result in a fall. Short roping, by contrast, is planned rope work.

One of the unanswered questions is: how much rope should be between the leader and the client when confidence roping? There has been little research done on this, but as ever there is a wealth of assumed expert opinion. What research has been done has been in relation to short roping, and includes confidence roping. It is this research I draw on in this tiny weeny post (see below), as well as Langmuir. I refer only to confidence roping in the context of the MLS award here. Of course, inevitably someone will make the argument that this reference is not relevant. I think it is. I have, however, tried to balance this by referring also to Langmuir (2014).

First, confidence roping can take place uphill, downhill, and while traversing either up or down. Second, the risk of both parties falling if one party slides or falls is high. Third, the length of rope between parties is variable and there is no set distance that is either better or safer, although when traversing as short a rope as possible is recommended. In sum, there is no right or best length of rope between ML and client, only suggestions and recommendations. This is open to further debate but also depends very much on the clarity of understanding of confidence roping. Within the MLS context confidence roping is almost always applied to descending.

Langmuir provides excellent clarity of confidence roping in the ML context. ‘This is a technique normally used descending steep vegetated or mixed ground...[as opposed to steep rocky ground]...where the leader has evaluated that there is no risk of a substantial fall should a slip occur and that they personally will be secure...The leader should be as close to their charge as practicable so as to ease communication and minimise complications and stretch in the rope – as distance of about a metre is normally fine...with the leader staying in a braced position at all times as they move...The minute the leader feels uncertain of their ability to hold a slip because of the terrain they are on then consideration should be given to using the rope to belay members of the party.’ (pg. 168)

The purpose of confidence roping in the UK for Mountain Leaders is for confidence, as much as to prevent a slip or fall. As such, it is appropriate to try and direct the client to the easiest route with the least risk of a slip rather than attempting a route where a slip is highly likely. For the sort of ground MLs cover most of these risks can usually be managed. Thus, as noted above, the rope is primarily for confidence. Within the MLS context it does seem to make sense to keep a short distance of around one metre as long as the ML has secure footing and as long as the descent is neither too steep nor too complicated and the risk of slipping is small. I will now consider the three scenarios in turn.

Traversing

You can traverse, zig zag, up or downhill. Traversing reduces the gradient and increases footing. When traversing the ML should, in principle, always be above the client and keep as short a rope as possible. What the ML does is to parallel the client on the traverse. However, this is not always possible on steep/rocky slopes and, indeed, on some rocky slopes is probably the wrong thing to do.

How short 'as short as possible' means is open to question. As ever it means that the ML and client are able to move independently of one another and yet the client feels safe. A rope that is too short allows for no recovery or adjustment time and in that situation if one goes both go. By too short I mean the one person literally cannot move without the other person moving, although there may be situations where even this is the most appropriate thing to do.

Uphill

When travelling uphill, and not traversing, it may be possible to keep a very short rope between ML and client (around 1 metre). The ML works the pace to suit the client and they go uphill together. Again, with a rope this short if one goes both go and the ML needs to be keenly aware of their client's movement.

Downhill

Supporting a client downhill without traversing is perhaps the trickiest aspect of confidence roping. In an ideal world you would always traverse, but this not always an option. One key aspect of downhill confidence roping is to guide the client around obstacles and to avoid areas and features where a slip is likely.

It is common sense to realise that if the ML cannot brace their footing they have no chance of preventing a slip by the client. Thus if an obstacle, such as a particularly steep section of a small bit of rock, is unavoidable the ML should remain above the obstacle while the client descends and only then follow the client down. In order to do this you clearly need not only a good length of rope between you but also to be able to pay out more rope if needs be.

General Guidelines

- Confidence roping is used in the ML context to instil confidence as much as it is to prevent, or manage, a slip.
- Secure footing for the ML is everything in confidence roping. If the ML is not secure in their footing they cannot keep any tension on the rope and if the client slips, trips, or stumbles that the ML is likely to follow suit.
- The principle behind confidence roping is the help the client find secure footing and to avoid any unnecessary obstacles.
- The length of rope between ML and client varies depending on the situation and the type of ground. There is no one set best or right distance. There are only suggested and recommended distances. A commonly agreed distance is around one meter assuming there is free movement across the ground and the ML has secure footing.
- Keeping a short distance between ML and client is generally advised for going uphill and/or traversing. However, if traversing a boulder field or scree slope, for example, it may be appropriate to have a longer rope between ML and client.

- When traversing on a steep slope the ML can be above the client as long as their footing is secure. On rocky ground you should not at any time have one person directly above another.
- When confidence roping downhill it is at times a good idea for the ML to have additional coils of rope in hand so that they can play it out to allow the client to avoid unnecessary obstacles.
- Recommended distances for confidence roping seem to vary from between one metre to around three metres depending on the situation and the ground.

Conclusion

Overall there is not one right or best length of rope to have between ML and client during confidence roping. It depends on the ground, the situation, and whether or not you are going uphill, traversing, or descending. It seems that between one and three meters is usually recommended, but more distance may be appropriate in some situations. For any confidence roping the ML needs to have firm and secure footing at all times. If the client actually falls or slides the ML is almost certainly going to go with them so the point is to prevent this in the first place. This is achieved by keeping the correct degree of tension on the rope to provide some stability and security for the client. One of the key considerations is to avoid unnecessary obstacles rather than to assume the rope will provide protection for the client on the obstacle. If actual protection from a rope is required then you will need to anchor and belay and that is the next step after confidence roping.

NOTE: As an addition someone commented that a common problem with confidence roping is how tight to have the rope between the roped parties. That was not the question I set out to address, as noted at the start. However, it is an interesting question and there are all sorts of recommendations and variations on how to hold the rope, whether or not to secure the rope to the leader and if so in what way, and so on. Langmuir goes into this. But what is interesting is the Alpinism paper goes into it by saying, with regard to the amount of tension required on the rope, the rope should be ‘gently tight’ at all times.

ADDITIONAL NOTE: Following further discussion about how taught/tight the rope should be I refer further to Langmuir, the rope should be kept, ‘...taught at all times...the arm [holding the rope] should be kept bent and the body in a flexed position...with the leader staying in a braced position at all times whilst they move, using the bend of their arm to lengthen and shorten the distance between them...’ (pg. 167). However, when you look at the evidence presented in the Short Roping paper you will see that while, in translation, confidence roping may be suitable to prevent, or manage, a minor slip on steep ground where there is no significant risk it provides no guarantee. The Short Roping paper gives consideration to advantages and disadvantages of various techniques and while this goes beyond what most MLs will work with it does highlight the risk of assuming confidence roping will ‘prevent’ a slip from occurring per se. It may indeed help but the fact remains that if either party actually slips and goes both parties are likely to go.

References

Langmuir, E. (2013). Mountaincraft and Leadership. Mountain Training England and Mountain Training Scotland.

Short Roping. Gottlieb Braun-Elwert. http://alpineskills.com/pdf_forms/ShortRoping.pdf