Winching 101 - Part 3

Well, now that you're all set up with the right winch, the right accessories, and a good battery, let's go winching, right? Well, not yet. There's one accessory I didn't mention last month - a cable weight. Whenever you winch, you want to have something draped over the cable - preferably something with a little heft. If a cable snaps with a cable weight holding it down, it's less likely to fly back and smash stuff. Im not saying it can't happen, but it is less likely to. You can use a jacket, or a tarp, or just about anything that'll help hold the cable down. There is a company that makes cable weights, too. These weigh about ten pounds, I think, and lie over the cable with five pounds of sand on each side. I don't have one, but the pictures I've seen make them look pretty durable. (It's on my wish list.)

Another thing to think about is what kind of cable you want to use. Winches usually come with steel cable (they call it "wire rope") of varying thicknesses, depending on your winch's rated capacity. For example, a 12,000-lb winch has a thicker (and necessarily shorter) cable than an 8,000-lb winch. Harold Cauthen has replaced his wire rope with a specially-designed nylon (I think) cable. It's lighter and more flexible than the steel rope, and much less likely to cut you if it frays. It also doesn't rust, but I don't know how it's been treated for UV degradation. I've read it's also less likely to whip back on you if it breaks. A possible disadvantage is that it might fray more easily when it's drawn across rough surfaces (like the ground), so in that respect it needs more TLC than a steel cable.

Whenever you winch, you want to keep Murphy's Law in mind: Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. A good corollary to this is, Of multiple things that can go wrong, the one that will is the one that will cause the most damage. Therefore, it always pays you to think ahead. I can't discuss everything that can go wrong when winching, but here and in the next couple of installments I'll touch on some things that are easily preventable.

First, let's think about damaged cables. Yes, even steel cables (and sometimes especially steel cables) can become damaged. One easy way to damage a cable is by dragging it along the ground under tension. The typical scene is this: the winching truck is at the top of a hill, and the winched truck is somewhere down the side. Between the two is a good, solid rock that the cable is going to grind on as the winched truck moves up the hill. How do you avoid damage here? You pad the rock with something soft, like a tarp or a ground cloth.

Another way to damage your cable is by not reeling it in under tension. Remember in Part 1 I mentioned preparing your winch before you ever use it? Well, you should also rewind it cleanly (straight wraps, under tension) after every use (e.g., when you get home). Doing this will help ensure it's ready the next time you need it. If you don't rewind it under tension, the wraps will "float" on the drum, leaving spaces and gaps that can collapse when you're winching for real. (I call this a rat's nest.) As the cable grinds over itself in such a situation, it will fray and kink. Both of these situations lead to a weakened cable that is more likely to snap just when you need it most. A rat's nest also creates jerky, uneven winching as the cable pops and snaps and collapses the voids.

Even if you do reel it in under tension, the winching situation itself can lead to "bunching," particularly when the pull is at an angle. In this situation, the cable will roll up on one end of the drum instead of spanning the whole spool. If you get enough bunched up, it can jam between the drum and the winch mount, again leading to frays, kinks, and/or breakage (been there done that got the shirt to prove it). So, if it's possible to do so, you should take the time during an angled pull to straighten the cable on your drum.

Lastly, never ever EVER hook your cable to itself. That is one of the fastest and best ways to put a permanent kink in it. Kinks are nothing more than sharply-bent wire strands that will never straighten out. Every time you use your winch after that, the strands will flex at the bend, growing weaker. Eventually the strands will break at the bend, due to metal fatigue. When enough strands break, the cable is too weak to do its job and will snap the next time you use it.

In future articles, I plan to cover such topics as where (and how) to hook your winch to other objects, winch control (it's like spotting), safety precautions, and more. If you have ideas, suggestions, or questions, please let me know. Call 298-5641 or email gonzodave@yahoo.com.

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