

Winching 101 - Part 6

The question came up: Where do you place the cable weight? You know, that jacket or carpet scrap or whatever it is you use to help reduce the chance of a flying cable if something breaks. Well, in a perfect world, you would have something along the entire length of the cable, from the hook to the fairlead. That's not practical, though, so the next best thing is to center the weight as much as possible. Why in the middle and not at the hook? You want to minimize the length of undampened cable. Let's take a couple of extreme cases as examples. In each example, the cable has been spooled out 100 feet.

Case 1: The weight is at the hook end; the break occurs at the fairlead. A typical jacket will cover about 2 feet of cable, leaving 98 feet to whip around freely. That much cable flying loose can do a lot of damage.

Case 2: The weight is again at the hook end. This time the break also occurs at the hook. The tension in the cable is probably going to pull the broken end right out from under the weight, so again you have almost the full length whipping around.

Case 3: The weight is in the middle. No matter where the break occurs, no more than 50 feet of cable will be undampened. This is still very dangerous, but the danger radius is half of what it was in the first 2 cases. Plus, the cable will only weigh half of what it might have in the first 2 examples, so there is less kinetic energy.

Okay, enough of that. What's the proper sequence of events when you are recovering a vehicle? The first thing to do is stabilize it. This can be done with winches, recovery straps, rope, or whatever is available to anchor it and prevent it from moving until it's supposed to move. Then you want to get the occupants out. Practice proper first-aid techniques, because someone might be hurt. Be especially careful if you suspect any back or neck injuries.

After the vehicle is stabilized and the occupants are out (or braced if they can't be removed), you can plan the recovery. At this point, the worst thing you can do is rush. Take your time and think each step through, and plan as far ahead as you can. For example, if you're winching a rig back up a hill to a trail, and the trail is narrow, how are you going to get the rig turned so it's sitting on the trail and not across it? What will happen if you pull the rig sideways? Will tires pop? Is it acceptable if they do? And on and on. As I mentioned in a previous article, one person should be in charge. Everyone may have good ideas, but unless everyone knows what's supposed to be done, by whom, and when, there will be unintended consequences. Remember Murphy's Law? Have a backup plan (or two or three) in case the first plan doesn't work.

After the plan has been agreed on, *then* it's time to recover the vehicle. Again, don't rush. Chances are that neither the wincher nor the winchee vehicles will behave as you thought they would. Winch a little bit and look. Winch and look. Make sure things are going according to plan – if they aren't, reassess the situation. It might be time for Plan B.

A self-recovery situation can range from "you're the only one out there and you have to do it all yourself" to "yeah, you're the only vehicle with a winch, but you've got other vehicles around for stabilization and anchoring and such." The most difficult situation is a solo self-recovery. There is typically very little margin for error, especially if your rig isn't stable. Working around a truck that might move unpredictably is very dangerous, so it's imperative that you take extra precautions. Murphy's Law just loves to attack when you least expect it.

In the final article next month, I will talk about cleaning up afterwards. I'll also include some miscellaneous items that I haven't touched on yet. If you have ideas, suggestions, or questions, please let me know. Call 298-5641 or email gonzodave@yahoo.com. I'm still planning a "Winching 101" run, for which suggestions are welcome.

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