

Winching 101 - Part 7 – The Wrap-Up

Have you ever wondered why firemen spend so much time cleaning their equipment? They do it for the same reason you should clean yours – so they know its condition for the next use. You can't get a much closer visual inspection of your stuff than when you are cleaning it up. So, after you use your winch and accessories, you should always make the time as soon as possible to inspect, clean, repair and/or replace whatever got used.

Two items that always need to be cleaned after they're used are recovery straps and tree-saver straps. No matter how careful you are, they will drag in the [mud, dirt, rocks, water, tree sap] and get dirty, wet, sticky and/or muddy. If you don't clean that stuff off your straps when you get home, the grit will start wearing the strapping and weaken it. What I do with mine is lay them out on my driveway (I have a concrete driveway, so I can do this) and hose them down on both sides. Then I hang them over my garage door rails until they're dry, after which I roll them up and put them away.

By the way, never NEVER use a tow strap with metal hooks as an off-road recovery strap. Use a strap with sewn loops at each end. Straps with metal hooks are not designed for shock loads, and it is possible that a hook could break or slip off its mounting point at the worst possible moment. Remember what I said about broken winch cables and hooks? Straps with sewn loops are typically called "recovery" or "snatch" straps and are designed to take the kinds of loads we give them when we try to jerk a stuck truck out.

Another thing you always need to do when you clean up is to respool your cable. Remember how you spooled it under tension when you first bought the winch (in Part 1)? Well, you need to do that after you use it, too, and for the same reasons. First, it gives you a chance to inspect the cable for frays or kinks. Second, it gives you the chance to lay the cable wraps neatly on the drum to reduce the chances of tangles, jams, frays, and kinks the next time you use it. At the same time, you will be setting yourself up for easily paying out the cable the next time – you won't be fighting previous tangles. (I know – I've been there and done that. That's part of why I have my own cowbell.) I know I mentioned this before, in Part 3, but it's important enough to mention again.

Oh, yes – another tidbit: When you are unspooling your cable to use it, don't use the winch motor to unwind it. Disengage the winch clutch and pull the cable out by hand. Pulling it out by hand will keep the wraps on the drum under enough tension that they won't loosen and tangle. If you use your motor to unwind the cable, I can practically guarantee that you will be setting yourself up for a rat's nest on the drum. I've done that, too, and that's also part of why I have my own cowbell.

Any other equipment that you have used (clevis, snatch block, chain, Hi-Lift jack, etc.) should also be inspected and cleaned when you get home. After all, you want the stuff to be usable the next time. It could mean the difference between getting the stuck truck out and not. Also clean your gloves off – they'll be more comfortable the next time if they're not all dirty or muddy.

A couple of words about planned winching: There are trails, such as Surprise Canyon in California and Miner's Revenge (I think, anyway) where winching is required. In a situation like this, you have the luxury of deciding how you want to attack the obstacle without the urgency of having first to stabilize a vehicle. Take your time. Set your cable as straight in front of you as you can – you'll get pulled along the cable anyway, so you should anchor the cable in the direction you want to go (duh!). Again, plan for Murphy's Law – what happens if the cable snaps or comes off the anchor point? What if your winch motor burns out? Have you ever winched down an obstacle (I haven't!)? Just things to think about...

I hope this series of articles has been useful. I've enjoyed writing them. I'm still planning a "Winching 101" run, but it will probably have to wait until after the monsoon season comes – all my potential run locations are currently closed due to the extreme fire danger. As always, comments, questions and suggestions are welcome. You can call me at 298-5641 or email me at gonzodave@yahoo.com.

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