

## Could this Happen to You?

Some of you may already know that I teach a class called “Working Safely in Your Woodlands.” The class covers the fundamentals of planning, mental preparation, communications, and proper equipment to help you safely operate equipment in the woodlands. Let’s just summarize the key aspects in preparing for a day’s work in your woods:

- **Preparation**—What is your plan of attack? Does the work - plan allow you to pace yourself and reflect your physical capabilities and condition? Will you be doing the project by yourself? This is not preferred, but sometimes can’t be helped. Do you have the required personal gear and equipment to complete the task?
- **Attitude**—Is your mind in the game? Are you distracted by personal issues; a sick loved one, doctor’s appointment, work projects, or financial concerns?
- **Focus**—Once you start the work, can you stay focused on that task? Don’t start day-dreaming! Try to avoid interruptions, neighbors dropping by, going for more tools, etc. It happens to all of us, but before you resume work, regain your focus.
- **Communications**—Tell someone where you will be working and what tasks you will be doing. Even if you

are not working alone, have a line of communication available; cell phone or radio. **Make sure they operate where you are working.**

Above all, don’t be in a hurry—hurry can hurt

Recently, I had an experience that drove home the importance of the above points. At breakfast, my wife and I discussed my plans for the day. Because it was supposed to rain I planned to work in the shop and had on my tenny-runners. Looking out the window I realized it had not yet started raining and as I was looking across the creek, I could see the d\*\*\* dandelions, growing along the driveway to my family’s other property. My plans changed; I would, for the fourth time, put the brush-hog mower on my tractor and cut the grass along the driveway, the roadsides of both properties, and the shop/barn area. This was not foremost on the list of things I wanted to do.

I took the tractor from the machine shed and began mounting the mower. I reached for the 2x4 that I use to shift equipment around, but it was not setting against the post. Who moved it? I finally got the hitch on, but couldn’t move the mower enough to properly hook up the sway bar. Instead of taking time to adjust the sway bar and

mount it, I decided to let the end drag on the ground until I got to the driveway. The drive has a gentle slope to it and as I needed to be able to shift the mower around to mount the sway bar, I left it in the raised position. I flipped up the brake lock keeper with my right toe and compressed the brake *some*. Normally I put my full weight on it when I stand to get off, but I was in a hurry. I swung down to the ground right in front of the left rear tire. *Do you see it?*

The tractor started rolling, because I hadn’t properly set the brakes, and I knew that I wasn’t going to be able to swing back on to the running board. I dove head first to the left to try and clear the wheel. I was, as they say, “a day late and a dollar short” and didn’t go fast enough nor far enough to get clear. The lugs on the tractor caught the heel of the tennis shoe and rolled up the side and back of my toe just above the knee and stopped. There was too much of me for the tractor to keep going. As I lay there, face down on the ground, I kept hoping that it would roll off my leg. I didn’t care if it ran through the fence.

With a 6,000 pound tractor and mower setting on my leg, I “weighed” my options. I could lie there until someone found me or I could locate my cell phone, in the pouch, on my belt on the right side. After much contortion and fumbling, I was able to find and pull out my phone and call for help. Have you ever tried to dial a cell phone, with sweat and tears in your eyes, while your hands are shaking? It took me three tries to reach my brother-in-law, who arrived in jeans, a tee shirt, and stocking feet 10 minutes later.

By this time, I knew that I didn't want him to drive forward off the leg. It felt like my hip was being pulled from its socket. The surgeons later said we did right in backing off the leg. The hip would have been dislocated or broken going forward.

He was able to slowly back off the leg without taking too much of the skin off the calf muscle. After a quick trip to the ER, followed by numerous x-rays and ultra-sounds the word came down—broken fibula, cracked ankle bones, crushed and compartmented calf muscle, a partially torn tendon, four metatarsals cracked or broken, and some stretched and crushed ligaments. They dug gravel and grass out of the cuts and made incisions to drain fluids from the muscle. This was followed by a splint, and I was on my way home in about six hours. Surgery was two weeks later and I now have some more metal components added to those that are already part of my body. Recovery, through wheel chair, hard cast, snow-bunny boot, crutches, and a cane took four months. I needed to learn how to walk with that leg all over again and physical therapy added another two months. I am now working on exercises to get it back in shape; which, I am told, will probably not be a complete recovery due to my advanced years.

What went wrong? Well, if you read the first part of the article slowly, you will see that I violated three of the four key aspects needed when you prepare to work with equipment around the woodlands.

1. I was not doing what I had planned and was not properly equipped. I had on tennis shoes instead of my heavy soled boots. The surgeons said "With heavy soled and steel toed boots, the damage to the ankle and foot would have been lessened." Tennis shoes are so comfortable, but they folded like tinfoil.

2. I didn't want to do this task that day or do it again for the fourth time.

I become frustrated when things didn't go as planned. If I had taken time to look at the 2x4 that had fallen behind a stack of fence posts, and I was in a hurry to get done before it rained. Anger, I've learned to control, but I don't deal with frustration well.

3. I definitely was not focused. I was still thinking my way through the projects in the shop. I would lose part of a day, and I had other plans for the next day.

4. I did have my cell phone—about the only thing I did right that day. People going by on the road couldn't see me and the locals are used to seeing equipment standing all over the farms. I could have laid there for three hours before anyone found me and that could have cost me the use of my leg from the knee down.

Merrily Enquist asked if I was going to use this incident as the opening example of my class, I told her I didn't think so...but I did. I have been driving tractors of all types since I was six years old; including things like D-8 size crawlers, self-propelled combines, and track-hoes, etc. This was my first accident. I have been humiliated a few times, humbled, "Oh Yah," but if this is embarrassment then it's a first for me.

Following the first segment of my class, I've had people ask, "If I take all that time getting ready, I will be out of the mood to work. If you think them (safety practices), practice them. It takes minutes. It becomes a way of life and what's a few minutes anyway? DON'T DO AS I DO—DO AS I SAY—BE CAREFUL OUT THERE!

—*Jim Schreiber*