

**Headline in newspaper we don't want to see:
"Man's head squashed wrestling with Jeep"
By Bill Burke (2/18/03)**

I am incensed (:to arouse the wrath of...) and appalled (:to fill with horror)! I witnessed a very stupid incident the other day (February 2003) and decided to write about it so perhaps in the future I may be able to help save life and limb of those who are reading this.

I had just finished leading a group of "students" through Lower Helldorado (Moab, Utah) for an advanced session on spotting and difficult terrain negotiation. While they followed the rest of the Strike Ravine route up and around, I walked back down the wash to eventually meet back up with them.

There was another group of about 5 rigs coming up Lower Helldorado as I was walking back. I noticed right off that the trail leader was doing what I call "casual spotting," which is used for an "experienced" driver who, theoretically, knows how to negotiate difficult obstacles with a well set-up rig. CASUAL SPOTTING is, at best, waving one hand around and yelling over the engine! Not what I consider good form.

**Note: If you are wasting the drivers time by casual spotting,
JUST LET THEM DRIVE THE OBSTACLE ON THEIR OWN!**

As the rig worked into a tight squeeze, the driver's side rear tire dropped a bit, causing the passenger side front tire to climb into the air a rather large distance. What we normally call a "torque wheelie" occurred. Very common in this type of rock crawling 4-wheeling; expected and actually anticipated for those cool photos you can brag to your office mates about.

What happened next though is what "incensed" me.

The "trail-leader" (I know this because of the satin jacket with name embroidered on it) then jumped and clung on to the front bumper, wrapping his arms around it, and inserting his foot into the leaf spring near the front shackle. I suppose this was to try to ballast the rig – foolishly, especially when it just came down smoothly on its own without his body weight, or without spotting, for that matter!

Let's see: 3500 pound vehicle VS. 180 pound man which could lead to:

**HEADLINE IN NEWSPAPER:
"Man's head squashed wrestling with Jeep.
Friends mourn, build memorial on trail."**

It wasn't my place to step in and reprimand him, although I really had to fight the urge. I basically wanted to yell out: "What the hell are you doing, fool? Get away from that vehicle!" I wanted to "whack his pee-pee."

If the driver had had a moment of panic or slipped a foot on one of the pedals, the rig could have come down and killed or at least seriously maimed the "trail leader." Either way the repercussions could have been devastating for all involved.

The major problem was that even though this person was a "selected" trail-leader by a highly regarded club, he had NO UNDERSTANDING OF THE VEHICLE DYNAMICS of the rigs for which he was responsible.

Given the situation, the rig was stable, the driver safe and the spotter just needed to continue to work the rig through the rocks. Three more inches of forward movement and the rig settled down and drove out of the predicament with only a slider scraped.

CALCULATED RISK is what it is called when we begin to follow a route that is considered "hard-core" rock crawling. We know going in that vehicle damage, scratches on wheels and painted surfaces, rollover and yes, even injury could occur!

Jumping on to a moving vehicle is **FOOLHARDY and DANGEROUS**. The driver is belted in (hopefully), the vehicle has a cage and good protection. In most incidents, the damage is minimal to the rig unless it is a violent rollover. This situation was not even close!!

The sad thing was that the group was all laughing and screaming while taking photos and videos, not realizing just how close the spotter was to serious injury and how stable the rig really was. It was an "accepted" fact; this type of KNEE-JERK reaction has become commonplace and expected.

Good trail-leaders will not readily touch a vehicle. I very rarely will reach out to ballast a rig. Sometimes just placing a hand will allow tire contact enough to move the rig forward.

NEVER, NEVER, NEVER jump on a vehicle.

Good spotting, even with a bad driver, and clear understanding of the vehicle's dynamics will get the vehicle through the obstacle safely.

If the vehicle rolls or gets damaged, that is the calculated risk accepted as one enters the trail head.

Spot the rig with two hands, thumbs in. Use cross body index finger pointing to signal the driver to turn. It is very confusing to be waving your hands around, fingers splayed. Take each spotting section seriously.

Yes, we are having fun. It is our recreation, but be safe. It's all fun and games 'til somebody gets poked in the eye!! Above all, keep clear of the moving vehicle.

See you on the road.

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